

AN AWAY NOVEL

TEMPTED

away



SIENA SLOANE

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Tempted Away.

An Away Novel

Siena Sloane

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*To Meaghan and Emma. I love you to the moon and back
Now and Forever*

TEMPT: The presenting of an attraction so strong that it overcomes the restraints of conscience or better judgment.

AWAY: Something slowly disappears, becomes less significant, or changes so that it is no longer the same.

CHAPTER ONE

BAILEY

WALKING INTO our apartment, I'm not surprised to find it empty. Over the last year, it's become the routine. Now, it's not a question of whether Quinn will be home, it's a question of whether he will be home before I go to bed. Opening the fridge, I stare at the contents, not really seeing anything. I'm tired of coming home to an empty apartment. I'm tired of cooking for one. I'm tired of having to pick something to watch by myself. I'm tired of falling asleep on my own.

Sometimes, I feel like a ghost in my own life, haunting the confines of these four walls.

I have tried to talk to Quinn about it, but when I see the stress lines around his mouth, I feel guilty. He's worked hard to get where he is—sacrificed so much and complaining makes me feel ungrateful. But I miss him; I miss us. I miss how spontaneous and adventurous we used to be. I can't remember the last time we packed a bag and just drove, the wind in our hair, singing along to our favorite music. We'd drive with no destination in mind, only stopping when we'd reach somewhere that grabbed our fancy. We'd find a B&B, motel, hotel, or anything available and cheap. All we cared about was being together. I know that people grow up and that life and responsibilities take over, but I can't help but feel that, somehow, we've lost our way to being us.

Sighing, I grab my phone and pop him a quick text, hoping to at least get a response tonight.

Me: Are you eating at home tonight?

It takes about a minute before my phone chimes.

Quinn: Still at the office. Will order something.

That's it. No, *sorry, babe, I'm caught up at the office but will be home by ten.* No nicknames, no *I love you's*. When did that stop?

The thought makes me uncomfortable, so instead, I focus on my to-do list while heating some leftovers from last night. I didn't hear from Quinn at all last night, so I cooked for two just in case he came home at a reasonable hour. By ten, I gave up the fight and put the leftover Alfredo away. I was so mad that my first instinct was to empty his plate into the trash, but now I'm glad I didn't. At least now I don't have to cook.

Grabbing the food and a glass of wine, I bypass our little dining table and settle in front of the TV. It feels sad to sit at a table by myself, so the couch it is. Flicking through the channels, I settle on an old rerun of *The Office*, hoping it will make me laugh at least. After dinner, I pour myself a bath, filling it with lavender-scented bubble bath. Relaxing back with a full glass of wine, I get lost in the pages of a new book.

It's late by the time I'm done and getting ready for bed, and there's still no sign of Quinn. Checking my phone, I scoff at the absence of messages. Stupid me, thinking he'd at least let me know when he'd be home. Annoyed, I call him, but it rings through and goes to voicemail.

I'm so annoyed that I can't fall asleep—tossing and turning—all kinds of thoughts chasing each other round and round. Things can't keep going the way they've been. More and more, I've been feeling as if we're roommates sharing the same space at best or strangers passing each other like ships in the night. I know I need to talk to him; communication in a marriage is important, and we haven't been doing a lot of that lately.

But I'm hesitant, and I don't know why. I mean, I've known Quinn practically my whole life. We were neighbors, became best friends at seven, spent holidays together on his Grandfather's blueberry farm, started dating at fifteen, and been married for eight years. If there's anyone I can talk to, it's Quinn.

Determination fills me. I'm going to get out of my comfort zone and start by forcing him to make time for us, then put my foot down and demand that we have a conversation. No job or money is worth hurting our relationship. Finally feeling confident, my mind manages to settle, and I fall asleep.

“ARE YOU STILL grumpy with me?” I take a deep breath of the fresh evening air as the door to McCullen's closes behind me, cutting off the sounds of voices and music.

“No. This was a good idea,” Quinn says, chuckling. “I didn't realize I needed this so much.”

I did. So, armed with my determination to force him to make time for us, I marched into his office, declaring that enough is enough, that I've made plans, and he's taking the rest of the night off. He was annoyed and grumbled the whole way to the McCullen's, but soon, he was laughing along with the crowd at the jokes of the comedians on stage. Little by little, the combination of alcohol and laughter released the tenseness that's taken up permanent residence in his back and shoulders, relaxing them. I wanted to break out a bottle of champagne at his first belly laugh. It's been so long since I've heard that, and I missed it.

Best idea ever.

He hooks his arm in mine, and we wander down the cobblestone street, taking in the displays in the shop fronts, not at all in a hurry to get home.

“We should do this once a month.”

“Yes.” His sigh is wistful as if doing something as simple as enjoying an evening out is comparable to an all-expenses paid holiday to some far-off exotic location. Something that might happen once in a lifetime.

He turns to me, and I sigh in satisfaction when he snakes his arms around my waist and pulls me closer to him. In a move I've done a thousand times before, I wind my arms around his neck, my fingertips playing with the short honey-brown hairs at the nape of his neck. His eyes are soft as they

wander over my face, deep blue pools I've often found myself lost in. He presses a soft kiss to my lips before resting his forehead against mine with a deep sigh. So many sighs tonight.

Reaching out, I cup his cheeks and softly sweep my thumbs over the fine lines outlining the corners of his eyes. They weren't there a year ago, and it's a testament to the stress he's under.

"You work too hard," I murmur.

"Bailey..." He pulls his head back, his voice colored in censure and also a tiny hint of aggravation.

I've said these words to him in some variation many times this last year, and I don't want to spoil this evening, but it's so hard not to be concerned for him.

"Quinn, I know. I know. I understand why you're working so hard. I really do, and I appreciate it. I truly appreciate you, Quinn. But I love you, and it's because I love you so much that I'm worried about you. I want you to be happy, and I don't know if this is truly making you happy. Is it? Are you happy?"

I'm peering into his eyes, searching for signs that can help me understand feelings that he keeps buried deep down beneath the surface.

"I don't ever want to feel helpless again."

His statement is not an answer, but I get what he's saying. I know that more than anyone. When his dad sold the farm, it broke me having to watch Quinn go through that. I watched him beg his father, tears streaming down his face, completely humiliating himself, not to do it. I watched him marching into the bank, begging them to give a loan to a seventeen-year-old who owned nothing. Who had nothing to his name. I saw him collapse in defeat when the sale went through. I had to watch him mourn his best memories and grapple with the loss of his passion and the future he had dreamt about.

I, more than anyone, understood the helplessness he was feeling. So I understand this drive of his. I'm just scared he will destroy himself in the process.

“You’re not. You’re not that seventeen-year-old boy anymore. Your dad has no more sway in your life.”

His face twists with bitterness, no doubt thinking the same as me. It’s twelve years too late. If his grandpa had only held on, Quinn’s life might have been so different.

I despair that that betrayal is a wound that will never heal. He’ll never admit it, but in some corner of his mind, he blames his grandfather. Not for his death but for not seeing the downward spiral Quinn’s father was on after his wife’s death. But how could he? None of us knew of the gambling debts he accrued on his path to self-destruction.

So, at his death, the farm was bequeathed to Quinn’s dad, with the understanding that it would go to Quinn when he was old enough. Unfortunately, words with no actual proof to back them up do not hold up in a court of law.

A heavy breath moves his shoulders. “I don’t want to think about that right now,” he says, his voice clipped.

He never does, and over the years, I’ve tried to get him to talk about it, but he clams up faster than a rogue toupee caught up in a hurricane. He’s already under so much stress and pressure I do what I always do—say nothing. *You can take a horse to the water, but you can’t force him to drink*, Grandma’s voice echoes in my head. Grandpa was as stubborn as they came. If he believed the sky was red, you had no hope of convincing him otherwise.

We resume our walk, and I lean my head against his shoulder, breathing in the familiar, comforting scent that’s all his. Maybe it’s better not to talk about it. I just want to stay in this moment, where I’m happy and content.

I’M HUMMING WHILE I unpack the latest delivery of notebooks we received. Moving their display closer to the till was a genius idea. They’ve been selling like hotcakes. Who can resist a pretty notebook while staring at them when standing in line to pay? I know I can’t. I’ve got at least ten at home.

When I inherited this bookstore from my grandparents, it was faltering. These days, everything is electronic. It's so much easier and cheaper to download and read an ebook. So, for the survival of Chantler and Cook, I had to make drastic changes.

I took out a small loan and converted one side into a coffee shop. It wasn't big and only had about three tables and chairs, but I scrimped and saved, and every time I had enough money, I added an extra one.

One of the first things I did was expand my inventory. Now we don't only sell books. We sell notebooks, journals, board games, novelty pens, and bookmarks.

I then started hosting events. The number of authors I contacted offering to host them for an evening of readings and book signing was crazy, and for every ten I contacted, I was lucky if I got two.

I started running workshops. Workshops on the craft of writing. Workshops on the publishing process of books. Anything and everything to do with books. Those are a huge success. It's amazing how many aspiring authors are out there.

It's all paid off, and now I make a tidy profit.

I'm still riding a high from last night. Getting to spend some quality time with Quinn was...everything. And then after, when we got back home? I shiver, remembering the feel of his body sliding against mine. The heat of his lips moving over my body, our moans in the quiet of our apartment.

But it was his whispered words in the dark of the night, the ones that said he'll pull back at work, that he'll prioritize us, that has me smiling. That has me hopeful that we can get back to us.

There's a soft knock on the door, and Olivia sticks her head in.

"Are you going tonight?"

"To what?"

"Scarlett's farewell party."

My scowl is instant. “No. I’ve already said my goodbyes. Are you?”

Olivia shakes her head. “We’re meeting up for coffee next week.”

I felt awful for Scarlett when she had to close up shop, but it wasn’t unexpected. The shop was huge, way bigger than what she needed, which meant she had to sell a boatload of soap and bath products just to cover the rental. Her products were good, and if the shop was smaller, I’m sure she would have been successful. I tried to help where I could—a cupboard full of soap at home testimony to that— but it wasn’t enough. Luckily for me, my grandparents had owned this shop, so when I inherited it, paying rent wasn’t something I had to do.

“It’s tacky.”

There are many good reasons to throw a farewell party—retirement, relocating, or finding a better opportunity somewhere else. But because your business tanked and being forced to close up shop? Not so much. There’s not much worse than facing a roomful of your former peers, seeing their pitying looks, and having to field questions like “So, what are you going to do now?” I should be surprised that Addie organized this, but I’m not.

“Addie means well, but she’s clueless.”

I frown at Olivia. “You’re way too nice.”

What I actually mean is she’s way too naive. Addie has this sweet side that she portrays to everyone, but it didn’t take me long to figure out she’s one of those people who will smile at you while she holds a knife behind her back, ready to stab you if she could benefit from it in any way. Addie eats girls like Olivia for breakfast. I met Olivia when she marched in here, cv in hand, shoulders squared, asking if I had any vacancies. I had been thinking about employing someone to help out. I had Shelley, who ran the coffee shop orders and did the washing up, but I needed someone who could take over for me. Someone who could open or close the store the times I

couldn't. But it was a vague thought in the back of my mind, not something I had put much thought into.

But there was something about Olivia that pulled at my heartstrings. She tried to appear confident, but her hands were trembling. She had this vulnerable air about her that immediately made me feel protective over her. I didn't know her at all, but I had this feeling that life hadn't been easy for her.

I decided to take a chance on her, and I'm glad I did. She's worth her weight in gold. Never complains and is always willing to do everything I ask. And she caught on quickly.

“Just watch your back around her.”

CHAPTER TWO

QUINN

I KNOCK on Phillip's door. It's unusual for me to be summoned to his office, but I'm not worried. I haven't been able to do anything wrong since I snagged the Bidlife account. I've made sure to stay on top of every detail, micromanaging the shit out of everything.

"Ah, Quinn, come in."

He's smiling, and it immediately puts me at ease. I step inside, casting my eyes around his office. *One day*, I promise myself. One day, I'll be on the third floor, in an office twice the size of mine, with a dedicated personal assistant sitting just outside my door. One day, I'll be able to go golfing for the day, networking with potential clients. I just need to keep doing what I'm doing, and all this will be mine.

"I'd like you to meet Justine. She's starting her internship with us today."

What the hell? I keep my smile in place, trying to hide my surprise. Not once in the six years I've worked here have we employed an intern.

I want to ask why, but the question dies on my lips when she turns around. Crystal blue eyes, a shade darker than mine, widen slightly when our eyes connect. Her lips, a plump pink, part when she takes me in. Hair so black, I'd bet money on it shining blue in the sun, is twisted up into some kind of complicated twist.

Phillip drones on, but I'm not hearing anything he's saying, completely lost in the vision in front of me. I take

another step forward and stick out my hand, giving hers a quick shake. A jolt of something—something I don't care to examine closely—shoots through me at the contact, and I take a deep breath. Her smell hits my tongue, coating my mouth. I don't know shit about flowers, but I'm guessing it's something like that—light and floral.

Phillip clears his throat, and I drag my eyes from her. He has a small frown on his face. A frowning Phillip is never a good thing.

“Sorry, Phillip. I zoned out for a minute. I have a meeting with John Sr, I'm preparing for.”

I swallow my relief when he turns to Justine, his smile back.

“See what I mean? You can't find a more dedicated employee than Quinn. You'll be in good hands. I know we don't normally employ interns,” he says, turning back to me, “but Justine is my niece. I've assigned her to your team. I couldn't think of anyone better to mentor her.”

A brief flare of annoyance shoots through me. Nepotism at its finest. Fuck, it must be nice to be the boss. So nice to be able to spring this on me without discussing it with me. I'm already so damn busy I don't have the time to babysit anyone. But there's no way I can refuse someone related to my boss, so I suck it up and plaster on one of my most charming smiles. It could have been worse. At least she's pretty. If she sucks, I can stick her with filing duties.

“Nice to meet you, Justine.”

“Hi,” she says, her smile a bit nervous, and immediately, I want to put her at ease.

“I know you're busy, but you'll find Justine a valuable asset. She's as smart as a whip.”

Phillip smiles fondly at Justine, and I swallow heavily. If he knew of the visions running through my head, smiling would be the last thing he'd be doing.

“Okay,” he says, clapping his hands and turning to his computer screen. “I've assigned her your old desk. If you can

show her the way and get her down to HR, that'd be great.”

Yeah, my still empty desk because they haven't bothered to replace me, expecting me to take up the slack. Stingy bastards.

It's a clear dismissal, so I stand aside, waiting for her to exit before following. It's because I'm such a fucking gentleman. Definitely not because I want an unobstructed view of her ass in that tight skirt she's wearing. If she's going to make my life harder, there might as well be a perk for me.

We walk into the open office, and voices quieten, eyes following us.

I lean towards Justine, lowering my voice. “Don't mind them. It's not often we get new faces around here.”

Her smile is a bit shaky, but thankful nonetheless. “So this was your desk?” she asks, putting her bag on the chair.

“It was.”

“And now you have your own office.”

I nod. “I was lucky.”

There was no luck involved at all. It's an office I deserve after busting my balls for six years. It's not as big and opulent as the offices on the third floor, but it's still a step up from sitting in the open plan with all the other chumps.

But it's always good to act humble. You never know what might get back to the bosses.

“I don't think it's that at all. I've heard your name a few times before today.”

Her words send a thrill through me. He's spoken about me outside the office? The idea has a sense of validation spreading through me, settling deep into my bones.

Maybe this won't be such a bad thing. If I play this right, it could be another way to show my worth to him.

I take her on a quick tour of the floor, pointing out the important places, trying not to breathe too deeply. Her smell is

taunting me, inviting me to bury my nose against her neck to see if it's perfume or the scent of her skin.

Once our tour is done, I point her in HR's direction, and with a slight wave, she heads off in that direction.

"Who the hell is that?" Nick says, strolling up to me and watching Justine's retreating form.

"Our new intern," I mumble, not liking the way his eyes are focused on her ass.

"Hot damn," he mutters, his head tilted.

I swallow heavily. Hot fucking damn, indeed.

There's a tap on my office door, and I look up to find Justine standing in the doorway.

"Sorry to bother you, but I'm done with HR and was wanting to know if you have anything for me to do."

I want to ask her if this is a paid internship, but I don't. It's none of my business.

"Come in, have a seat." I motion to one of the two visitors' chairs on the other side of my desk. My office is nothing to sneeze at. It's a decent size, has a big desk, and a couch and coffee table in the corner. But I don't have a view. My couch isn't leather, and I don't have a minibar.

I sit back and take her in while she settles across from me. She can't be too old. She's dressed professionally in a business suit and heels, with her hair stylishly done, but she has a fresh-faced look about her. One that most people have when just starting their working career. The look you lose along the way when you become jaded from the never-ending demands of a stressful job.

"I'm sorry. Phillip sort of sprung this on me. How long will you be interning for?"

"Six months." She keeps twisting and untwisting her fingers—a nervous habit, no doubt—and I have to clench my

hand to stop myself from putting mine over hers to stop the fidgeting.

“Don’t be nervous,” I say, shooting her a reassuring smile. “Have you worked in this industry before?”

She shakes her head. “I finished college last year, and I was debating either HR or Marketing, then Uncle Phillip suggested I give this a try.”

I have to suppress my sigh. No experience in anything.

“What did you study?”

“Social Science.”

So, young like I thought. She’s about twenty—two, twenty-three, tops. Not that I’m old by any means. My big three-oh is coming up, and last time I checked, that’s still relatively young. It’s just that some days I feel much, much older than that.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” I say, sitting forward and folding my hands on my desk. “I wasn’t prepared for this, and I have a lot on my plate. I work extremely long hours, and occasionally, I might expect the same from you.”

Why the hell did I just say that? I don’t expect any of my team to work the same kind of hours as me unless they have a deadline.

She’s nodding, her eyes wide, her body leaning forward. “I’m prepared for anything you want me to do. My uncle had only good things to say about you, and I’m looking forward to everything you can teach me.”

I nod in satisfaction. Really not a bad thing, indeed.

“This is going to be an adjustment for both of us, but with that attitude, I’m sure we’ll both benefit.”

The smile that takes over her face has me swallowing heavily. She’s truly a stunning woman, and I have the overwhelming need to ask if she’s got someone in her life. I can’t, though. It’s not professional, and I’m married, for fuck’s sake. A woman’s relationship status is the last thing that should be on my mind.

But the way she's looking at me has me wondering if there's more than just admiration for my work ethic in her eyes. I'm no stranger to receiving admiring looks from women, not gonna lie. It's a stroke to the ego, but that's all that it's ever been. I love Bailey. So why are these thoughts popping into my head? Why is it a struggle not to let my eyes wander lower than her face?

BAILEY

MY OFFICE door bangs open, making my heart jump.

“Quinn!” I press my hand against my racing heart. “What are you doing here?”

“We're going home. Now.”

His voice is deep, his eyes smoky as he takes a step closer to me setting off a huge flock of birds flapping wildly in my stomach. I know that look. I lick my lips, and his eyes follow the motion.

“Why is that?” I murmur.

“Because I need to feel the heat of my wife's sweet, sweet pussy.” In two strides, he reaches me, pulling me from my chair and against him. I can feel the evidence of exactly what he wants pressing into me, weakening my knees. “What I want more than anything is to hear your moans when I make you come.”

The last he whispers into my ear, and magically, the flock of birds morphs into a herd of wild horses, galloping, twisting and turning, churning up my insides with wild abandon and igniting a hunger for my husband.

“Quinn, it's not closing time yet.” My protest is half-hearted at best.

“Hmm, you're the boss. You can take off whenever you want.”

He grabs my hand, his fingers, a warm and comforting presence intertwining with mine, and then he's pulling me. All I have time for is a quick, “Olivia, please lock up,” before

we're out of the store, rushing home, adrenaline pumping through me, lengthening my steps so that I have no problem keeping up with his almost frantic stride.

Inside the apartment, there's not even a second of hesitation. We're a frenzy of hands, lips, and teeth. His hands tunnel under my skirt, grabbing and dragging my underwear down my legs. While I'm kicking them off, he's unbuttoning his pants. His hands are rough, grabbing and squeezing my ass, grinding his fully erect cock against my stomach. He's hard and ready, and the next moment, he lifts me, my back up against the door, my legs winding around his waist, clamping and pulling him as close as he can get. I have a second to feel him nudging me, and then he's driving inside me. The force of his invasion is almost painful, but it's the best kind of pain. He buries his face in my neck and then starts thrusting, pulling out almost all the way, then slamming back in, a grunt torn from his throat with each thrust. It's rough, it's hard, and all I can do is hold on for all that I'm worth.

I don't care that my back's hitting the door with every thrust or that the neighbors might hear the thumping of the door. I've never felt this wild, uncontained side from Quinn, and it's making me feel like a goddess.

I arch my back, grinding my pelvis against him. The wave inside me is building, but I need that little extra to get me there, to push me over the edge.

"Please Quinn..." I whimper, begging for his fingers, but before I articulate what I need, his lips take mine in a bruising kiss. I'm breathless by the time his lips leave mine.

"Just..." He shudders. "Hold on, I'm almost there."

Two more thrusts, and then his body stiffens, and he's exploding, his thrusts becoming jerky and his body shuddering.

My head thumps back against the door in frustration. I was so damn close.

It seems like his strength leaves his body because he slumps down, taking me with him. He's breathless; his chest is

rising up and down at an almost alarming rate.

I'm lying on the floor, the wood hard against my back, Quinn's come sliding down my leg. I haven't come. I'm still wearing most of my clothes, but despite that, I'm happy.

“What was that?”

“I'm sorry, I couldn't hold on.” He's not meeting my eyes, so I turn on my side and stroke his cheek, reassuring him that we're good. We're more than good. I haven't felt this much passion, this desperate need he has for me in so long. I press a kiss to his mouth, trailing my fingers down the slope of his nose, his cheek, outlining his lips.

“Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. That was amazing. If at any time you feel you can't wait, you have my full permission to drag me home like a caveman.”

CHAPTER THREE

KALLAN

I'VE NEVER been the type of person who believed in love at first sight—the type that when you first lay eyes on someone, everything falls in place, and you just know.

Perfect example—Heath, one of my friends from school. We were at a party when he saw Elena. For days, all he could talk about was that she was going to be the mother of his children. That was before he even said a word to her. Creepy as fuck. A month and one date later, he bumped into Lana at a different party and declared she was his soul mate. A month later it was Jenna, then Alice, and so on. I might be getting their names and the order of them wrong, but there were so many it's not surprising. A parade of girls who were all some kind of variation of “the one” filled our High School life.

It was lust, not love, and he fell fast and hard, but it fizzled out just as fast. By the time he graduated, he was single and surprisingly STD-free. So no, I've never believed in any of that crap. Sure, you meet someone, and there's attraction, but it's surface deep. It takes time to get to know someone, to see if their crooked pieces fit your crooked pieces like a puzzle that slots together.

And this is why I'm standing here, like a grade-A idiot, my ability to speak a thing of the past, feeling like someone has punched me in the gut. Surely somewhere out there, Heath is cackling like the idiot I always said he was, telling me payback is a bitch.

“Are you okay?”

I close my eyes, a slight shudder moving through my body. Her voice sounds like an aged whiskey, smooth and full, and all I want is to take another sip. *Speak, you idiot!* Some tiny part of my brain must still be functional because it's screaming at me, trying to save me from looking like a complete and utter fool. *Apologize for not watching where you're going and almost plowing her over;* it carries on, and I know that's what I should do. My eyes snap open, meeting her concerned ones, and that's a mistake. All thoughts of apologies fly out of my head. Green, pale green. If I were fancy, I would use poetic words to describe it, but I'm not, and that makes me frown because eyes like hers deserve better than just green or pale.

I smooth my features quickly when she takes a step back. *Don't scare the lady with the whiskey voice and beautiful eyes!* Heath mocks me. Fuck my life. Seems like I'm channeling him.

"All right then," she says, taking another step back.

I'm at war with myself. *Reach out and stop her, so you can hear her speak again,* the tiny, sane part of my brain tells me, while the biggest part is yelling, *Reach out, grab her, and drag her home where she belongs.* Instead, I do nothing but watch her retreating back as she enters the store I was planning to enter a few moments ago. I'm torn as I stand there like an idiot, dragging my hand down my face. Do I go in there and try for a redo? One where I don't come across as a complete and utter dickhead, or do I retreat and lick my wounds? At this point, I'm not sure how I can salvage my pride, but if I don't try at least, I might never see her again. And that's not acceptable. There's no way I can let the mother of my children just walk away.

What. The. Fuck. When did I allow Heath to take over my body? The door opens, and a customer exits, allowing me a brief glimpse inside, and that's enough to make up my mind. Whiskey girl is standing behind the counter, and her nervous pale green eyes meet mine. My heart sinks because it's obvious I've freaked her out, but then it perks up because she's standing *behind* the counter. So, instead of going in there, I'll retreat to my shop, where I can lick my wounds and devise a

plan where I come across as the functioning human being I claim to be.

“That was fast. Didn’t find what you were looking for?” Andrew doesn’t look up from where he’s sitting behind the counter, scribbling away at something. When I don’t answer, he looks up, frowning. “You okay?”

Why the hell do I keep getting asked that? Maybe it’s because I’m standing in the middle of the shop, like a frigging idiot, wondering what the fuck just happened.

“I’m fine,” I mumble and make my way to the back office. Throwing myself in my chair, I lean my head back, closing my eyes. God, I acted like a schoolboy confronted by his first crush. No, worse. At least back then, I managed to squeak something inane. Not even when I met Josie did I feel this way. My heart clenches with a pang of grief or guilt—I’m not entirely sure which—at that thought. An image of long, dark brown hair and pale green eyes fills my mind, and I press my palms against my eyes, trying to erase it or lock it in—once again, not sure which. How the hell can it be that I’ve lived here for two years and never met her? I don’t even know her name, but I sure as hell am going to find out.

“Andrew!” I holler, and I hear his heavy tread before he sticks his head inside the door.

“Yes, boss?”

“Have you been to the store across the road?”

He scoffs as if the idea of going inside a bookstore is ridiculous. With information available at the touch of a few buttons for many, it is. “No.”

“It’s not just a bookstore, dumb ass. It’s a book cafe. So you haven’t met the owner?”

“Can’t say I have. Why? Did something happen to make you storm in here like you had a bunch of Piranhas up your ass?”

I look at him blankly.

“Yeah, you know, those fish that can devour you in like fifteen seconds.” His hand comes up, and his wiggling fingers imitate what exactly I’m not sure, but it’s something. “I saw this documentary on—”

“I know what a damn Piranha is. And no, nothing happened.” Besides totally revoking my masculinity and potentially blowing it with someone I would really, really like to get to know.

The bell jingles, and Andrew straightens with a gleam in his eyes. When I took him under my wing about a year ago, he was heading down a path that would have severely limited his life expectancy. In the beginning, it was tough, and many times I had to clench my jaw against the urge to beat the snot out of him, but as I taught him all the skills I knew, he changed into the type of person I knew he could be.

Fifteen minutes later, he’s back, beaming from ear to ear. “Pay up, old man. You owe me fifty bucks.” He’s practically crowing with delight.

“Not even ten years older than you, and I’m an ‘old man’,” I grumble. “What did you sell?”

“The jewelry box.”

My eyebrows rise. I thought for sure his carved trinket boxes would go first.

“You sure you didn’t stuff mine under the counter?”

“Nope. Didn’t even give yours a second glance.”

Pulling out my wallet, I hand him the cash. A deal’s a deal. He grabs it, making a big production of sniffing it.

He turns to leave. “Next time you wanna bet against me, just let me know.”

“Fuck off,” I grumble again, but I can’t stop my smile at the sound of his laughter echoing back to me.

Sighing, I sit back in my chair, running a hand through my hair. Shit, it’s gotten too long. I’ll need to have it cut before I introduce myself. I consider calling Andrew again, but the sound of voices stops me, so I get up instead. When I get to

the front, he's leaning against the counter, chatting with a woman. Her attention focuses on me, and her eyes sweep down my body before coming to rest on my face. The spark of interest shining in her eyes is undeniable. Objectively, she's pretty, in the PTA mom kind of way, not a strand of her blond hair out of place, and her face made up perfectly. But her eyes aren't green, and her voice is too high to sound like an aged whiskey. I can't be rude to customers, so I smile politely before dismissing her and turning to Andrew.

"What's the name of that barbershop on 10th?"

"Above... something or the other," he says

"It's A Cut Above," PTA lady supplies, sticking out her hand. "I'm Adelaide, but everyone calls me Addie."

Grudgingly, I take it, giving a quick shake before letting go. The silence stretches while she stares at me.

Andrew clears his throat, and my eyes shoot to him. He's got that look on his face, and I know that whatever comes out of his mouth next is going to suck. For me.

He leans forward, and his voice drops, his face painted in mock sympathy. "His name is Kallan. You have to forgive him. He doesn't talk much, and on top of that, he's extremely socially awkward. That's why I run the store. He doesn't do well with strangers."

I narrow my eyes at him, a million ways to make him pay running through my mind.

"Oh, never mind that," she says, reaching her hand out and resting it on my arm in sympathy. "Nobody stays a stranger here for long. I own The Bakery Box on 11th and wanted to personally welcome you into the fold. I head up the Westhill Business Owner Committee, and we hold monthly meetings. Our next one is in two weeks. I can introduce you to everyone."

I frown because that's the first I heard of it. "A committee?"

"Well, it's not an official committee. It's more like a monthly get-together for small business owners aimed at

fostering a tight-knit community. We discuss issues we might be experiencing.”

“What kind of issues?”

“You know, littering, shopfront appeal. That kind of thing. But you don’t have to worry about that,” she says, looking around. Your place is lovely.”

Ah, so basically, it’s a monthly bitching session. It sounds perfect.

“That sounds perfect.”

“It does?” Andrew asks, startled. He knows that’s the kind of shit I would go to great lengths to avoid.

“It does. Remember you telling me the other day how much you want to get involved in the community? This would be perfect for you.”

He narrows his eyes at my smirk. We both know he would rather stick a pencil in his eye than attend, but he’s a little fucker, and revenge is sweet. Socially awkward, my ass. I’m just very selective about who I let into my social circle.

“Oh. It’s just for shop owners,” she says hesitantly, looking between me and Andrew.

I pull my eyes from him and give her my most charming smile. I can be damn charming when I want to.

“Andrew is like a younger brother to me. Without him, this place wouldn’t be possible.” I’m laying it on thick because there’s no way in hell I’m planning on attending those events.

“I guess,” she says, trying to hide her disappointment. “You’re both welcome to attend. If you give me your email, I’ll forward you the minutes and the details of the next meeting.”

“No problem.” I reach under the counter and hand her one of Andrew’s business cards—ones he insisted on having. He looks positively green when I hand it to her, clenching my teeth to prevent my laugh from escaping.

As soon as she's outside, he levels a glare at me. "What the fuck, man?" he grumbles. "Why would you do that?"

"As you said, I don't do well with strangers, and meetings like that would be hell for my social awkwardness. You owe it to my mental health. Besides, you were giving her your bedroom eyes, so I thought I'd do you a solid."

"I had to say something! She was waiting for you to introduce yourself, and you were staring at her like you were about to beat her up for her lunch money. And that wasn't freaking bedroom eyes. That was my sales face."

I shrug my shoulders as I head to the back to collect my wallet and phone. I'm feeling a lot lighter than I did earlier, and it's a sunny day, so I think I'll take a walk to the barber, and if I'm lucky, they'll be able to slot me in without an appointment. Back in the front, Andrew's slumped over, his head resting on the counter.

"Minutes, man. They have minutes," he moans, thumping his hand on the counter a few times. So damn dramatic.

"Payback's a bitch," I mutter, my eyes on the shop across the road, hoping for a glimpse.

"Where are you going?" he calls after my retreating back.

"Haircut."

"For twenty bucks I'll do it for you."

"No freaking way I'm allowing you to butcher my hair."

BAILEY

"DID YOU get everything done?" Olivia asks, sliding up next to me.

The bell on the door jingles, and I look up, seeing the man still standing where I left him, staring at me. I was in a rush to get back and, admittedly, wasn't looking where I was going, but he came out of nowhere. At first, I was concerned that I hurt him, but then I got a good look at him and realized I was being ridiculous. He could have stepped from the cover of one

of the romance novels in my store. Maybe the mafia section. He certainly hits all the requirements, being all dark and tempting with his dark eyes, darker hair, and tanned skin.

But that doesn't quite fit. Mafia guys are usually groomed to perfection, their auras exuding confidence and intimidation. This guy with his slightly longer, tousled hair, stubble-covered face, jeans, and T-shirt screams casual, telling me he doesn't feel the need to impress people. That he's comfortable with who he is. And if you add to that the half-moon scar curving down from the corner of his eye, I would peg him as the bad boy type.

But then he silently glowered at me, ignoring my apology, and he shot straight through all the categories and landed firmly in the grumpy and broody category.

At that point, my concern quickly turned to apprehension, so I beat a hasty retreat.

“Bailey?”

Shrugging off the weirdness of my encounter, I can't help the smile that takes over my face. Nothing can burst this cloud of euphoria I've been on since yesterday. It's not often your husband drags you home from work just so he can fuck you. In fact, it's the first time I can recall Quinn doing that. And to top off that, I still can't believe what I found in Second Hand Treasures earlier. It's so tempting to open my bag and check that it's still there. That it's real and not just some figment of my imagination. I don't know how I'm going to be able to keep this to myself till our anniversary, but I'm going to try.

“Yes, I got the perfect dress and a couple of decent books.”

Olivia grabs the bag containing the books I bought, inspecting them. Once a month, I go to the second-hand shop and browse through the books they have. A few months ago, I designated a corner of the shop for second-hand books, and it's been quite popular, especially with the older generation.

“This one looks good,” She mutters, paging through a dog-eared copy of Peter Pan.

“It’s a 2002 edition, so not very valuable, but it still deserves some love.” I gently take it from her and put it back in the bag. Olivia can be scatterbrained sometimes, and I need to add it to the inventory before it goes on the shelf.

“And the dress?” she asks, reaching for the second bag. So damn nosy. I feel a bit guilty for spending so much on it. Years and years of living on a budget and funneling every spare cent I had back into my business have made me quite frugal when it comes to luxuries, but when I saw this dress, I couldn’t resist. Our anniversary dinner is coming up, and I want to feel sexy and beautiful.

We’ve always had a healthy sex life, but with his work hours, things have slowed down considerably. Then the way he stormed in here yesterday and dragged me home and the feral way he took me up against the door? So frigging hot. Okay, the fact that I didn’t get to come was disappointing, but the thought that his need for me was so overwhelming he couldn’t last means everything. Means that the connection between us is still there.

I’ve been feeling as if it’s been so long since Quinn’s truly looked at me—really seen me—so I want to go all out. Keep yesterday’s momentum going. I want him to find me irresistible. I want him to be unable to keep his eyes and hands off me.

I bite my lip as she unfolds it but relax at the sound of appreciation she makes. Quinn’s favorite color is blue, and this is a vibrant blue, which is a much bolder color than what I would normally pick for myself. I was hesitant to try it on, but the sales lady assured me that it would contrast perfectly with my brunette hair, and she was right.

The A-line accentuates my curves, and the dress falls to just above my knees, showing just the right amount of leg. I love the halter neck, but the deep V back finally sold it. It made me feel sexy and a little daring. The dress makes me feel like a princess, so I’m hoping it will do the trick. That it will bring the spark back into my marriage.

“It’s so beautiful.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. You’re going to knock Quinn on his ass when he sees you. Don’t be surprised if there’s a repeat performance, and he drags you out of there before the main course,” she teases.

“I hope so,” I mutter as I take the dress, folding it up carefully and putting it back under the counter. Yesterday was so good, and I want more of it.

“Good morning, dear.” I look up and don’t stop my smile when my eyes land on Fiona.

“Morning, Fiona. Your hair looks amazing.”

“Thank you,” she says, her grin adding more creases to her already creased face. She once told me she doesn’t regret a single one of them. That each and every one of them represents a memory of a time in her life that was either happy or sad, and a life without memories wouldn’t be a life worth living. I can only hope that one day, I’ll be able to accept the loss of my youth with such grace. She’s a tiny woman, but I’m sure the saying “dynamite comes in small packages” was coined specifically for her. “Heather is a magician with those scissors of hers,” she continues, cupping her hand and gently patting the curls on the back of her head.

“Well, I’m glad you like her. What can I do for you today?”

“Can you recommend something along the lines of the last book I got?”

“Sure. What was it again?”

“The Highlander’s trophy bride,” she says, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Ah, now I remember. The eighties body ripper. She looked scandalized and insisted I bag it before walking out of the shop.

Rounding the counter, I lead her to the appropriate shelves. After about thirty minutes, she’s back with two books clutched

close to her chest. I ring it up and bag it without asking this time.

“When you’re done reading them, return them, and I’ll give you a credit towards your next purchases.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. Ruth’s reading it, and after that, Agnes is going to give it a spin. Not sure I’m ever getting it back,” she mutters.

“So they’re a hit, huh?” I ask, trying to hide my smile.

She leans forward, grabbing the bag, a cheeky smile on her face. “You know what they say, there may be snow on the rooftop, but there is a fire in the furnace.”

I’m still chuckling as she walks out of the shop, a spring in her step. “As it should be, Fiona, as it should be.”

CHAPTER FOUR

KALLAN

TAKING A deep breath, I open the door to Chantler and Cook, determined not to make an ass of myself like yesterday. I took a bit longer to get ready this morning. It's the usual jeans and T-shirt, but instead of grabbing the first clean ones, I took my time deciding what to wear. The fact that my shirt is a pale green and closely resembles the color of her eyes is totally accidental. At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

It took me about ten minutes—and a handful of the product I bought from the barber yesterday—to tame my normally unruly hair. I was impatient to get going, and Andrew must have seen that because he scrambled the last few steps and jumped into the truck faster than normal. I completely ignored the side-eye he gave me when he finally got in, and he wisely kept silent. But his eyes were on me most of the way to the shop, his silence brimming with questions. We were early, but I loitered in the front, arranging and rearranging our displays, keeping an eye out for whiskey girl. I really needed to find out her name. Maybe then, I would feel less like a stalker.

By the time 8:30 rolled around, I finally spotted her. Everything around me stilled as my eyes zeroed in on her. She was wearing jeans that molded to her curves, and her long hair was a shock of liquid chocolate against the white, flowy top with long sleeves and a v-neck with buttons down the front. I watched as she unlocked the door and felt a strange sense of loss when it closed behind her.

Andrew's muttered "light bulb" drew my attention away, and I turned, finding his eyes zeroed in on me. He opened his

mouth, no doubt ready to spout some more shit, but I cut him off before he could.

“Not a word,” I said, pointing at him, hoping for once my scowl would be enough to deter any unwanted questions or opinions. I should have known better.

He waited for a few beats—just long enough to make sure I was out of striking range—as I walked to the back before shouting, “It’s about time, old man.”

Forcing my hand from running through my hair, I scratch my cheek instead while taking a moment to take in the place as if a feel of it will give me a feel of her. It’s bigger than I thought it would be. The cafe part is on the left-hand side, with one of those industrial coffee machines and under-counter bakery-style display cases showcasing pastries and sandwiches. The right side is lined with shelves filled with books. In fact, every available space is filled with shelves, ceiling-height ones lining the walls, and waist-high ones forming barriers between the wooden bistro tables and chairs scattered around the store.

Right at the back is the counter with the cash register, and that’s where my eyes stay because she’s standing behind it, staring at me with a slight frown. It’s wrong. I don’t want her to frown when she sees me. I want her to smile, so I fix a smile on my face, push down my heart racing in my chest, and walk up to her with all the confidence I can muster.

“Hi.” My smile falters slightly at the crack in my voice. *Fuck, Kallan, don’t mess up a second time.* “We bumped into each other yesterday, and I wanted to come and introduce myself.”

“Yes, hi,” she says, her head cocked slightly and her eyes narrowed on me.

“I own the shop across the road, The Wood Room.” Her eyes follow my arm to where I’m vaguely gesturing behind me, not willing to let my eyes leave her.

“Ah, so you’re my new neighbor.” I feel a bit of relief as the tightness around her eyes lessens. There’s still hope that I

can salvage a bit of this situation.

“Yeah. I wanted to come to apologize for almost plowing you over yesterday. I was on my way over to grab a coffee and was in a rush, so I wasn’t looking where I was going. I’m sorry for being a bit of an ass. The opening has been hectic, and too few hours of sleep and not enough coffee has been kicking my ass. I’m not usually such an idiot.”

I watch in fascination as the last of the tightness around her eyes disappears, and her lips tip up in a smile that reaches all the way up and takes residence in her eyes. Fuck, the way they sparkle almost knocks me on my ass.

“No apology needed. As you can see, no bodily harm was incurred in our derailment. I’m Bailey.” She sticks out her hand, and I envelop it in my much larger one. It feels small and fragile, and I have to force my thumb to keep still. Seems it has a mind of its own and is determined to find out if her honey skin is as soft as it looks. But that would be just creepy.

“Pleased to meet you, Bailey. I’m Kallan, Kallan Reed.” I say, rolling her name around in my head. It fits her.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kallan Reed. So, the Wood Room? Is it safe to assume that wood is a main ingredient in your business?”

“Yes, ma’am. We sell a variety of unique handcrafted pieces.”

Damn, now I’m directly quoting off my website. I have absolutely no game when it comes to this woman.

“As you can see, I sell a variety of uniquely handcrafted books. And pastries and sandwiches. And don’t forget the coffee. Have you tried it yet?”

Her words could come off as mocking, but the slight smile and the way her eyes sparkles tells me she’s teasing.

“Can’t say I have.”

“You should definitely try it. I’ve heard from reliable sources that it’s the best in the business. In fact, I think I’ll personally make you a cup.”

She rounds the counter, and I'm helpless but to follow her. She indicates a stool behind the coffee counter, and I watch in fascination as she hesitates at a shelf before selecting a mug.

She turns to me and stares, her eyes assessing. "Let me guess," she says, tapping her lip. "Macchiato?" It's framed as a question but sounds more like a statement.

"I'm impressed. How did you guess?"

She shrugs, turning to the coffee machine. "You don't strike me as the type of guy who'd stand in line for a Quad Venti White Mocha Frappuccino with two pumps of peppermint sauce."

"I don't even know what that is." I rub my neck, eying her curiously, wondering what type of man she thinks I am.

"No nonsense, straightforward, and right to the point. Just like a Macchiato," she says with a slight smile, answering my unasked question.

"You take your coffee seriously."

"I do. To quote the great Jackie Chan, coffee is a language in itself. It took me forever to select the right blend, but once I tasted this one, I was sold on it. It's well-balanced, full-bodied, with notes of honey, almond, and dried fruit."

Damn, and here I thought coffee was just coffee.

She places the cup in front of me, and a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth when I see the shape in the foam.

"It's a crescent moon. It means to grow and increase and symbolizes new beginnings and the making of dreams into reality. Perfect for the start of your new venture, don't you think?"

"It is. Thank you." I'm completely charmed by her thoughtfulness and the eager expression in her eyes as I pick up the mug and take a sip. I take my time savoring the taste, affording it the gravity she views it with.

I'm trying my damndest to pick up the honey, almond, and dried fruit she was talking about, but all I taste is...coffee.

“So?”

“It’s damn good,” is all my eloquent ass can come up with. It must be good enough because her smile widens, her eyes beaming at me.

“It’s imported from Jamaica. The beans are cultivated at very high altitudes and then hand-picked from the mountainside. They say the volcanic soil and high altitudes all contribute to the flavor. A bit pricey, but worth it.”

“Impressive.” I don’t know about all that but what I do know, is that it’s a damn good coffee.

A voice calls her name, and she nods, turning back to me.

“Well, Kallan Reed. I have customers waiting for me, But seriously, welcome to the neighborhood. I’ll have to come by your shop and have a look.”

She lifts her hand and brushes a strand of hair behind her ear. That’s when I see it. A ring sparkling on her ring finger.

It’s like a slap to the face—a cold dose of reality. What the hell was I thinking anyway, expecting a woman like her to be single?

My gut reeling with disappointment, I reach for my back pocket to grab my wallet.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing. I don’t charge neighbors. And take the mug with you. It’s yours now. Every time you want a refill, bring it.”

I’m still wallowing in my self-pity when I walk into my shop.

“Dude, seriously?” Andrew chuckles when he sees me.

“What?” I take a sip of my coffee, my eyes narrowing on him.

“Blow me...I’m hot.”

What the hell? His chuckles turn into full-blown laughter. “Your mug,” he gasps, then dissolves into another fit of

laughter, laughing like a hyena on crack when my eyes widen when I see the message on the mug.

Damn. She might be married and off-limits, but at least she thinks I'm hot.

BAILEY

Tucking the month's event schedule back into its sleeve, I look up to find Olivia and Shelley's eyes on me.

"What?"

"Who's that guy you were talking to?" Shelley says, leaning over the counter, an eager look on her face.

"He's hot, and you gave him the mug," Olivia adds, highly amused.

My heart drops. I did, didn't I? The mug has been collecting dust on that shelf for years. My love for books and coffee isn't my only kryptonite. If I see a mug with a message that appeals to me, I can't stop myself from buying it. That's why I have a whole shelf of them, with all kinds of messages, ranging from funny, dirty, cute to inspirational. I don't use them for customers but keep them in the shop for when friends or family come in for coffee. I originally bought it for Quinn, but I can't remember the last time he came in long enough to stay for a cup of coffee.

I won't deny that Kallan Reed is hot. Being married doesn't make me blind. I can still acknowledge and appreciate a good-looking man. He has that dark, broody thing going for him, with his just-woken, messy black hair and stubble-covered jaw. I can picture him as a sixteenth-century blacksmith. Just with better teeth. He looks like a man who doesn't smile often, so I was hoping the mug would score one for me. Not that it did. I don't think he even noticed it.

"It's the owner of the shop across the road. He came to introduce himself." I bite my lip, suddenly worried. "He looked like he was having a bad day, so I was trying to make him smile."

“If it’s a smile you were looking for, you should have given him the ‘coffee makes me poop’ mug.” Shelley snickers.

“Yeah, that mug says something entirely different.”

“Shit. I messed up. What if he has a girlfriend?” I can’t believe I did that. If he’s a man who doesn’t smile much, why was I thinking giving him that one was a good idea? “Crap, he’s going to think I’m an idiot. It was stupid.”

“No, he’s going to think you’re lusting after him.”

“Don’t you have tables to look after?” I glare at Shelley, not liking how she’s making me feel more insecure.

“Nah, they’re all good for now. But seriously. Do us all a favor and find out if he’s single.”

“YOU’RE UP EARLY,” I say, putting the spatula down and turning to Quinn. “Busy day?”

“Yeah, the marketing team on that new account I brought in has the most ridiculous ideas. It’s stressing me out.” He grumbles, scrubbing his hand over his face. “I’m going to have to spend most of the day convincing them we don’t live in the nineties anymore.”

Taking his phone from his hand, I put it on the counter, grab his arms, and pull them around my waist.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

A corner of his mouth lifts up in a slight grin. “A contact for a contract killer would help. Their head of marketing should have been put out to pasture about a decade ago.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about that, but why don’t you leave early tonight, and we go for a few drinks? Cut loose for a bit.”

He sighs, his thumb stroking my hip. “Wish I could, but I can’t see it happening tonight.”

His phone dings with a message, and I see an unfamiliar name pop up.

“Who’s Justine?”

“A new intern that started with the company.”

“Since when does your company employ interns?”

“Since she’s related to Phillip, who obviously thinks I’m not busy enough,” he mutters while his fingers fly across his phone. He sends a message and pockets his phone.

“Rain check?” He says, dropping a peck on my lips, and before I can answer, he’s striding out the door, briefcase in hand.

That damn coffee cup bugged me all night. That’s why I find myself walking into The Wood Room at a few minutes past nine with two muffins—blueberry and chocolate—and a new mug in hand. It took me forever to pick the right one. First, I grabbed the one with the sombrero that said “Nacho Average neighbor,” but then, annoyed with myself, put it back. It could be construed in kinda the same way as the previous one. I finally settled on a simple “Welcome to the Neighborhood” one.

It’s the smell that hits me first. A mixture of wood and fragrant oils or waxes, mingling together, smelling warm, earthy, and reassuring. Piper once told me that smell is the only sense directly connected to the brain. When you smell something, your brain uses the same areas it would use to process emotions and memories to process it. She said that the memories associated with smells tend to be older and thought about less often, meaning the recollection is very vivid when it happens. That must be why I’m just standing at the entrance, each deep breath layering my tongue with a woody fragrance while being transported to my childhood and running around on the farm, surrounded by the fresh scent of pine trees.

“Can I help you?”

The masculine voice startles me from my impromptu trip down memory lane, reminding me that I’m actually here for a purpose.

“Yes, sorry. I got lost there for a moment. I’m Bailey from across the road.”

I walk up to the counter, taking in the man lounging behind it. He blinks at me, the sandpaper and disk of wood in his hands forgotten.

I stick my hand out, and he quickly wipes his on his jeans before taking it.

“Andrew.”

Even though he’s seated behind the counter, I can tell he’s tall. I take him in, trying to figure out if he’s related to Kallan, but there’s no resemblance. Kallan’s all dark and broody with his black hair and dark brown eyes, whereas Andrew is blond with eyes the color of a freshly minted dime.

“What is that?”

“This,” he says, running his hand over the wood, “is going to be a Lazy Susan. I’m smoothing the surface before sealing it.”

“So, you work for Kallan?”

“Sort of.”

“Is he here?”

“He sure is,” he says, eyeing the muffins in my hand. “I think he’s hiding in the back. I’ll go get him for you.”

While he’s gone, I take my time to look around the shop. There are shelves and display tables filled with all kinds of items. Photo frames, trinket boxes, ring boxes, walking sticks, chopping boards, cheese boards. Anything you can think of that can be made of wood. Just like Kallan said. But it’s the crib standing in the corner that takes my breath away. I put the mug and muffins on the counter and walk over to it. It’s a beautiful dark red color, polished to a high shine. The front and back have solid sides, while the sides have thick, carved slats. I’m so tempted to whip out my phone and take a photo so I can put it on my Pinterest board.

I smell him before I see him. He smells like his store as if the scent of wood has infused itself into his pores.

“I had someone order it as a surprise for his wife, only to find out later that baby wasn’t his.”

“Ouch. That’s horrible.”

“Yeah. Felt sorry for the guy, so I wasn’t all that mad when he canceled the order. I was already halfway, so it would have been a waste not to finish it.”

“You did all this yourself?” I run my fingers over the moons and stars carved on the slats, catching his nod out of the corner of my eye.

“It’s the most beautiful crib I’ve ever seen. The kind of thing that you pass down through generations.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean it.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he says, rubbing his neck, two spots of color sitting high on his cheekbones.

“So...” He follows me back to the counter. “I brought you some muffins...and a new mug.”

“What’s wrong with the one from yesterday?”

“I gave you the wrong one. I’ve come to replace it.” I grab the new mug and practically shove it against his chest.

He looks at the mug before looking back at me. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why is it the wrong mug?”

“I umm...we just met, and I was joking, and then, after you left, I thought about it and thought maybe...”

“So you don’t think I’m hot?” he interrupts me, his face serious, but as I peer at his eyes, I swear I can see a smile lurking in them.

I blow out a breath and run my fingers through my hair.

“I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that about ninety percent of the female population would find you attractive.” I widen my eyes at him to emphasize my point. “I just thought it might not be appropriate, seeing that we’re practically

strangers. I wanted to apologize if you maybe took offense, and I'd be happy to swap it."

When did one crappy mug become such an issue in my life?

"No offense taken. It actually made me smile."

Internally, I do a fist pump. I knew I'd be able to get a smile out of him. I just wish I was there to see it. Amelia's always called me a people pleaser, and by my reaction, I guess I am.

"I'm quite happy to keep it, but if you insist, I'll give it back."

"No, that's okay. If you don't feel offended, you can keep it."

He nods. "Good. I'm keeping it."

A muffled laugh catches my attention, and my eyes narrow on Andrew standing in the doorway to the back. I have a feeling he's a lot of trouble.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring you coffee, but you can pop over any time, and I'll make you one."

"Do I also get my own mug?"

I nod. "Of course. And I think I've got the perfect one for you."

His eyes dance with amusement while he rubs his hands. "Can't wait."

"Okay, now that that's out of the way, I have to get back. Enjoy your muffins."

As I'm walking out, Andrew calls out, "Just for the record, so you do find Kallan hot?"

I throw my hand up, but I walk back to my store with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER FIVE

BAILEY

I WAKE up tired and so damn tempted to close my eyes and go back to sleep. Next to me, Quinn is still asleep, sprawled out on his back and, as usual, taking up most of the bed. I turn on my side, propping my head on my hand, and take him in. After all this time, his features are as familiar as my own. His face is relaxed, the stress lines that have taken residence around his mouth and eyes these past months smoothed out by sleep. His mouth is slightly open, his chest rising and falling with his deep breaths. I want to reach out and touch him, run my fingers across the stubble peppering his face, hoping that he'll wake up.

I'm starved for him. Starved for physical affection and intimacy, for more than a quick kiss in passing. The last time we had sex was a little bit lacking in the intimacy department. I want to feel his arms around me, his mouth on mine, his body moving against mine. I want to look in his eyes while he makes love to me.

With a jolt, I realize that it's been weeks since the last time we've been intimate. How did we let this happen? We've never gone this long without sex. But instead of waking him, I get up with a sigh. I was asleep when he got home, so I'm sure it was late, and he needs his sleep. It's still early enough, so I head to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

The apartment is small enough that I can hear when Quinn gets up and takes a shower. It doesn't take long before he's done and striding into the kitchen. My greedy eyes take him in. Dressed in a crisp suit, he's a far cry from the boy I fell in love with. The gangly boy that wore shorts, his hair

perpetually messy, his face streaked with dirt and skinned knees.

“Good morning,” I smile over my shoulder while plating the scrambled eggs and bacon.

“Morning,” he grumbles, reaching over me for a to-go cup.

Lifting up on my toes, I curve my hand around his neck, pulling his head down for a kiss. His lips are warm against mine, but all too soon to my liking, he pulls away. Disappointment fills me at the feel of the smoothness against my fingertips as they trail over his cheek. Lately, he’s always so polished, never leaving the house without shaving, and his hair gelled to perfection, not a strand out of place. I miss the scruffiness that comes with a few days’ worth of stubble. I would rub my face all over his, joking that I was scent-marking him. He’d roll his eyes, but the gleam in his eyes told me he loved it.

“I didn’t hear you come in. Was it very late?”

He turns his back on me, filling his cup with coffee. “Around midnight or so,” he says, speaking directly to the coffee maker.

“I made some breakfast.”

He turns back to me, and the guilty look crossing his face tells me what he’s going to say before his mouth opens.

“Ten minutes, Quinn.”

“It’s ten minutes I can’t spare. If I do, I’ll be late for a meeting.”

“Since when has work become so important that you can’t even spare ten minutes to have breakfast with your wife.”

“Please don’t start. I’m tired, late, and I don’t have time for nagging.”

My head rears back as if he’s slapped me. Nagging? How can he accuse me of nagging? I’ve always, always been supportive of his work, never complaining about his hours.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Nagging. Is that what it’s called when your wife wants to spend some time with you?”

He blows out a breath. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.” He steps up to me and folds me into a hug. I take a deep breath, trying to the familiar scent of him calm me down, but it’s not working.

“I’ll make it up to you. How about we go out for breakfast on Sunday?” His chest rumbles against my ear with his words, but instead of those words making me feel better, it makes my muscles tighten and my jaw clench. I don’t want him “making up” anything to me, and I don’t want him humoring me either. I want my husband back the way we were before.

I pull back, stepping out of his embrace.

“Fine.”

Grabbing both plates, I throw them in the sink. I watch in satisfaction as pieces of egg fly everywhere.

“Come on, Bailey, don’t be like that.”

Not sparing him another look, I turn to our bedroom.

“You’d better hurry. You’re going to be late for that meeting.”

I almost hope that he’ll follow me, that we don’t part like this, but he heaves another sigh, and a minute later, the slam of the front door echoes through the apartment.

QUINN

THERE’S A soft tap on my door. Looking up, Justine’s standing in the doorway, smiling.

“Hey,” I murmur, sitting back and returning her smile.

“I’ve gone over the marketing material. I’ve highlighted a few areas that you may need to take a look at, but it mostly looks good. It’s in your inbox.”

“Thank you. They’ve finally decided to play ball.”

I don't have to fake the appreciation in my voice because she has been an asset to me. She's smart, she's driven, and always eager for a challenge.

“Is there anything else you need me to do?”

I need you to sit on my lap, is what I want to say, but I don't. Instead, I pat the couch where I'm sitting, papers spread out on the coffee table in front of me.

“Come sit. You deserve a break.”

It's late. We're the only two left, and the office is quiet. Over the last few weeks, it's become the norm.

My cock twitches as I watch her walk towards me, mesmerized by the way her silky blue blouse molds against her tits. The way her hips sway in the black skirt that skims the swell of her hips. The way her heels make her already long legs look sinful and accentuate the curve of her calves.

Many long nights of working together have brought a sense of familiarity and comfort, and she sits next to me with no hesitation.

Pulling my eyes away from her tits is a lesson in self-control. The top two buttons that are undone are taunting me, providing me a small glimpse of those soft, creamy slopes, and it's not nearly enough. I want to slowly undo each and every button, take my time unwrapping her tits like a much-anticipated present before I dive in and feast on them. I want to touch her skin—feel if it's as soft and silky as it looks while I'm sliding my hands up her thighs, inching up her skirt. Then I want her toned legs wrapped around me while I lose myself in the feel of her.

My balls ache, and my cock has gone from a twitch to a jerk. Fuck. If I don't get a taste of her, I'm going to explode. *Soon*, I promise myself.

I shift sideways so I'm facing her.

“I'll level with you. When you were assigned to shadow me, I was pissed. Most of the time, I'm already so snowed under I feel like I can't breathe. But now I can honestly say you're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time.

You've helped relieve so much of my burden. I can't believe how indispensable you've become to me in such a short time."

Her face glows with pleasure.

"I'm glad I can help," she says, biting her lip. "The amount of pressure they're putting you under is insane."

"You're a natural. If you continue like this, you'll have a bright future in this industry. You're not only incredibly smart, but you're also able to put up with my grouchy ass."

"You're not grouchy." I jerk when she pokes me in the side, and I grab her hand, keeping hold of it. "Just extremely stressed."

The way her voice drops with those last three words tells me I'm not the only one who feels this electric charge between us.

It's all in the subtle signs you pick up on when you're looking. And fuck, have I been looking. I didn't miss how her eyes widened just a fraction when we were introduced and shook hands. I noticed how her eyes would drop when I caught her staring and how she played with her hair or licked her lips when I stood next to her, explaining something.

And if that wasn't enough, it was how her face fell when she saw my wedding ring.

I'm not fooling myself. What I'm feeling is an insane attraction, not the start of some great love. She's new and different, and I do want to get to know her more, but every time I close my eyes, it's not talking to her that I picture. Fucking her on my desk, sitting in my office chair, my legs spread wide while she's on her knees, swallowing me as far as I'll go. Those are the things I see. And I've given up the fight with myself weeks ago. At first, I tried. I really did. I tried to lose myself in Bailey, hoping that reawakening our sex life would make this lust, this undeniable chemistry that I feel for Justine fade away. But it hasn't.

Day by day, watching her plump lips move when she talked, or how her teeth nibbled on a pen while concentrating, or how she'd brush loose hairs from her neck got me more and

more fired up. I lost count of how many times I was forced into a bathroom stall where I'd savagely take care of myself while biting down hard to keep the groans inside. Who the fuck knew a neck could be so erotic?

I don't know what it is about her, but everything she does makes my blood boil. The way she admires me makes me feel like a king, and it's a siren's call I can't resist. Everything about her is a bright neon flashing light begging me to fuck her. It's intoxicating, and I'm tired of fighting it. Not even the fact that she's Phillip's niece and how he dotes on her can deter me at this stage.

The day I took off my wedding ring before walking into work was the day I conceded defeat. That was the day I took the first step into territory I never thought I'd find myself in.

My second step? Confiding in her late one night that I was getting a divorce. That little seed of hope I saw in her eyes chartered my course for me, and I'm steaming ahead at full speed.

I lean in a fraction, and satisfaction curls through me when her eyes drop to my lips. I'm done waiting.

"I want to kiss you." I keep my voice soft, my eyes trained on hers so I can take in every detail. I don't want to push this. I can't fuck it up.

"You don't think it's too soon?" Her voice is hesitant, but it's not a no. I know she's talking about my marriage and looking for reassurance. Reaching out, I stroke her cheek gently.

"My marriage has been a sham for years. Bailey and I got married way too young, and we were too young to know what we wanted. We mistook friendship for love, and by the time we both realized it, we had gotten too comfortable to do anything about it."

She's hanging on to every word I say, that seed of hope sprouting and growing before my eyes. I should feel guilty. I should, but I can't. This raw, animalistic desire burning in my veins is too strong.

“It took you walking into my life to realize that I wanted more. That I want you.”

My fingers trail a path down her cheek, then her neck, and my pulse starts pounding when I dip them under her collar. I let them rest there, gently stroking. She shudders, and it lights me up like a firecracker.

I watch the battle play out in her eyes, her want for me warring with her uncertainty.

“What about the no fraternization policy?” she says, swallowing heavily. I know she loves Phillip and wouldn’t want to disappoint him, so she’s not likely to run to him and confess she’s fucking one of his employees. It makes it a helluva lot easier to do this. She’s guaranteed to be discreet.

“I’m willing to take a chance on us if you are.” I lean forward and nuzzle my cheek against hers. “I’m willing to do anything to explore this thing between us.” I pull back slightly. “Or am I wrong? Am I the only one who feels this connection between us?”

“No, you’re not wrong.” She shakes her head, her voice slightly breathless with her denial.

That’s the only permission I need to lean in and press my lips against hers. They’re just as plump and soft as I imagined they’d be. I take my time exploring and learning their shape. Soft little kisses meant to reassure. Tiny little nips to inflame. Cupping her cheek, I tunnel my fingers into her hair and apply a bit more pressure to her lips, and like the gates of heaven, they open, allowing me to delve in deeper, to explore more.

I’ve only ever had Bailey’s lips like this, and the feel and taste of hers is like a shot of adrenalin straight to the heart.

Her breathy little moan and the way she twists the front of my shirt in her restless fingers assure me that she’s just as into this as I am.

Time has no meaning as I savor her flavor on my tongue. As I swallow her little gasps. She grows a little bolder, her hands sliding up my chest, over my shoulders, tangling in my hair.

I want to move her, shift her so that she's straddling me. I want to see her skirt bunch up around her waist and grind my cock up against her pussy, but I restrain myself—barely. Going too fast now will ruin everything.

It takes more than I knew I had in me to pull back, but somehow, I manage to sit back with a groan, running a shaky hand through my hair.

“I think it's best if we leave now.”

“Why? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, fuck no. That kiss...” I shake my head, taking a deep breath. “That kiss was everything and more I knew it would be, and if we don't stop now, I'll explode if I don't make love to you.”

Her pupils dilate, and I groan again. “Don't look at me like that.”

“What if I don't want you to stop?” she murmurs, her fingers playing with my tie.

“We have to. Our first time will be special, not something quick and dirty on my office couch.”

“I don't mind quick and dirty.”

“I do. You deserve more.”

I can't help it. I press my mouth against hers again, gliding my lips against hers. “I want to take you out on a date. I want to wine and dine you, treat you like the treasure you are,” I murmur between kisses. “Can I do that?” I pull away, gazing at her.

“Yes,” she breathes, her cheeks red, her eyes blazing with desire.

THE APARTMENT IS dark and quiet when I let myself in. My cock is still raging, desperate for release. Jumping in the shower, I briefly contemplate taking care of it, but I'm tired of fucking my own hand. So I finish my shower in record time, and still naked, slide in behind my sleeping wife.

“Quinn?” Bailey’s voice is soft and sleepy when I press up against her.

“Yes, baby.” I press a kiss to her shoulder, my fingers slipping under the edge of her panties and stroking the way I know she likes.

“What time is it?” she moans as I stroke faster, nudging my hips against her ass.

“Very late. You should be sleeping.”

“I was.” Her voice is soft and drowsy, her body soft and pliant.

“Sorry I woke you,” I whisper, pressing a kiss against her shoulder. “I need you, baby.”

“You do?” She tries to look at me, but I press my face into the nape of her neck.

I feel a pang of guilt at the surprise in her voice. The last time we had sex was the day Justine started working for me, and I was so worked up that I couldn’t hang on long enough for her to reach her peak.

But it’s very fleeting, leaving as soon as it arrives.

Her hand reaches out to switch on the lamp, but I grab it and roll us so that she’s on her stomach and I’m resting on her back.

“Let me take care of you. I’ll do all the work.”

“Quinn, I...”

“Shh, baby. Don’t talk.”

All it takes is a quick tug of her panties, and I’m inside her warm heat. We both groan at the sensation, and it takes willpower not to press down on her head, to muffle her groans in the pillow. I want to get lost in a pair of blue eyes. I want a pair of plump lips moving against mine, our tongues tangling and exploring. I want more of her taste. There’s nothing wrong with fantasies, is there? We all have them. And right now, I want to pretend I’m somewhere else, with someone else.

My thrusts start slow, but then I think of how turned on Justine was by my kiss. How her nipples peaked and pressed against the silk of her blouse. Her skin's paler than Bailey's so I bet they're a light, rosy pink, perfectly made to suck on. How she'd look naked, every last bit of her smooth skin exposed for my hungry eyes, her mouth moving against mine, her body writhing in pleasure as I lick and suck her. I can't wait to find out if her pussy tastes as sweet as her mouth. A bolt of lust—a mixture of ecstasy and agony—slams through me, and my thrusts grow uncontrollable; every grunt ripped from my chest with every slam of my hips.

I wonder if Justine will moan like Bailey's moaning?

When I come, it's to a vision of Justine's back arching, her feet resting on my shoulders, screaming my name while I empty all I have in her pussy.

I fall to the side and roll on my back, throwing my arm over my eyes, trying to regain my breath. The silence stretches, and when I turn my head, I see the glimmer of Bailey's eyes focused on me in the darkness. The look in them makes me uncomfortable, forcing my eyes to the ceiling. A soft rustle and the slight dip in the mattress tell me she's left the bed. Most probably to clean up.

Now that my lust is sated, that pang of guilt hits me in full force. What the fuck am I doing? I love Bailey. I've always loved Bailey. She's my wife and my best friend. She's been a constant my whole life and doesn't deserve this. I'm a piece of shit for using her the way I did tonight.

All I need to do is put some boundaries in place to stop things from going any further with Justine.

Tell her the kiss was a mistake and it can't happen again. I can still come back from this.

My mind made up, I turn to Bailey when she gets back in bed, determined to take her in my arms and tell her how much I love her. She snuggles closer to me, resting her head on my shoulder and tracing her fingers up and down my chest.

"I love you, Quinn."

Her voice is so soft I have to strain to hear her, even in the nighttime quiet of the apartment.

“I love you, too.” The sincerity in my voice is real. I do love her. I’d be lost without her.

“Do you remember that time we went to New York for a weekend?”

It was a few years back, just after I started my current job. I had to attend a conference, and Bailey accompanied me. We took an extra day and made a long weekend of it. It was our first time in such a big city.

“It was an eye-opener for sure.”

It looked like everyone on the streets was hustling to get to their next destination, faces drawn, looking down, and avoiding eye contact with people around them.

“Remember how stressed everyone looked? We said we’d never get like that. We’d never forget to take the time to just breathe. To never forget what was important and enjoy life.”

I tighten my arms around her and bury my face in her hair, the memory filling me with sadness. It was us against the world, and we were filled with excitement for the endless opportunities stretched out in front of us. It’s only been a few years, but I feel like I’ve aged so much in that time. I have to get us back to that.

CHAPTER SIX

BAILEY

“WHY DO I get the feeling you’re not listening to me?”

“I am.”

Placing the last magazine on the rack, I turn my back on that damn distracting picture of winding streets and quaint cafes, banishing the image I conjured of Quinn and me sipping champagne in the City of Love, and focus on Amelia’s voice.

“As I was saying, I called for a reason. I bumped into Charlene the other day, and she told me she’s pregnant with their third.”

“Who’s Charlene again?”

“I don’t think you’ve met. They live three houses down from us.”

“Okay, that’s good news for her. Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m telling you,” I grin at the annoyance in her voice. Being a younger sibling doesn’t come with many perks, so the few I have I utilize often. “because they’re moving. They need a bigger house and will be putting theirs on the market. Properties get snapped up quickly in this area, and I know how much you love this neighborhood.”

That has my grin dropping. She’s right. I would jump at the chance to live there. It’s close to schools, the park, and a few minutes walk from the beach. A bonus would be that I’d get to see my niece and nephew more often.

“What time frame are they looking at?”

“She mentioned the next couple of months. They’ve just started looking. I could tell her you’d be interested to come have a look. I think it would be perfect for you and Quinn. It’s not big, but from what I can see, perfectly maintained.”

I bite my lip, my mind working furiously. The timing couldn’t be more perfect. Our lease is coming up for renewal in a few months, and we did plan on not renewing it. But Quinn is so busy with work at the moment I’m hesitant to even mention it.

“I’d have to talk to Quinn.”

“Discuss it with him and let me know. There’s still time, but don’t take too long.”

After hanging up, I turn back to the magazine rack, eyeing the picture of the Eiffel Tower. I thought the last time Quinn and I had sex, we’d turned a corner. It was more than how out of control he was. It was how he held me in his arms, clinging to me as if he needed me like his next breath, that filled a void that I hadn’t even realized was there.

Now it’s a week later, and he’s been late every single night except for the weekend. I guess I should be thankful for weekends. If it wasn’t for those, I’d hardly see him. But even those don’t feel right anymore. Our conversations have become choppy, and our silences longer. If he’s not on his phone replying to some or other work email, he’s leaving the room to take a call. Those especially make me feel unsettled, so on Sunday, I did something I would never have considered doing before. I tiptoed to the door and eavesdropped. Who even does that?

I was relieved to hear him discussing some or other account, and then I was angry at myself for doubting him. In all our years together, he has never given me any reason to doubt. Yes, there’s a distance between us that’s never been there before, but it’s because he works so damn hard.

I used to think I was the most important thing in his life, but now I feel I’m not even a close second to work. The whole situation makes me feel helpless, and some days, I don’t even

recognize myself anymore. It's like our life has fallen into a pattern I don't like, and I don't know how to get out of it.

“Good morning.”

I take a deep breath, plastering a smile on my face before turning to Kallan.

“Morning, neighbor. I see you've finally come for a refill,” I say, eyeing his mug in his hand. “You've had me worried that you don't like my coffee.”

The morning after I went to his shop, I waited for him to come in, but by ten, I sent Shelley over with a mug for him and Andrew.

“I thought I'd spare Shelley the trip.” He rubs the back of his neck. “You sure it's okay? I mean, giving away coffee every day is not really a good business practice.”

“It's more than okay. I meant it when I said you're welcome to come get your daily fix. A few free mugs of coffee a month won't break the bank. And not everybody gets free coffee. Only friends and certain neighbors.”

I watch in satisfaction as his mouth hitches up in one corner, a ghost of a smile flirting with his lips. I have a feeling that seeing them tilt up in a full-blown smile is as scarce as hens' teeth.

“If you're sure.”

“I'm sure. And Shelley doesn't mind.”

She did mind the first time, but when she came back, she had stars in her eyes and couldn't stop talking about Andrew. She even had Olivia curious.

“I like your sign.”

My gaze follows his to the wooden sign hanging over the door, shaped like a book, proudly displaying the name of the store.

“My grandpa made it. The way he told it, it took him a good few tries to get it right, but they were young and sunk

everything they had into this store. They had to pinch pennies wherever they could.”

“Well, he did a good job.”

“He would have liked to hear you say that. Especially from someone that’s so good at what they do. They always talked about getting a bench for out here but never got round to it.” I sigh, nostalgia settling heavily on my shoulders. I miss them and would give anything just for some extra time with them. “One day, I’ll get one.” I turn back to Kallan and catch a glimmer of something in his eyes. Sadness? Wistfulness? Or maybe it’s nothing, and I’m just imagining it. “Anyway, let’s go get you that coffee.”

Two mugs of coffee and one dirty look from Shelley later, Kallan’s seated behind the counter, watching me as I turn his mug so the arrow in the foam is pointing at me.

“It’s an arrow, in case you forget again where my store is,” I answer his brow lift.

The smile on his lips is just a flick of a thing, but it lingers longer in his eyes while he picks up his mug and takes a sip.

Leaning on the counter, I set my chin in my hand and take him in. I don’t usually let my curiosity get the better of me, but with him, I can’t help it. I don’t know what it is about him, but he looks like a man with a story to tell, and for some reason, I want to hear whatever that story is.

“What?” he says, licking off the bit of foam stuck to his top lip.

“Do you live around here?”

He nods. “Over by Lake Hanson.”

“It’s beautiful out there.” I sigh, remembering the time last year we did one of the hiking trails out there.

“And quiet,” he says, taking another sip of his coffee.

“It’s weird that I’ve never seen you around.” I would have remembered if I did. Kallan isn’t the type of guy that blends

into the crowd.

“I don’t shop much. When I have to, I usually go to the mall. A quick in and out.”

I try to bite back a smile to hide the dirty place my mind just went to, but judging by the little quirk of his lips, I’ve failed. Our eyes connect, and my stomach gives a little flip, a spark of electricity sizzling in the air between us. Straightening, I clear my throat, dragging my eyes from his and dropping them to his hands. What the hell was that? I take a deep breath, trying to regain my composure.

“You don’t like crowded places?” I say, trying to sound casual despite my racing heart.

“Can’t say I’m a fan.”

Exhaling harshly, he gets up, and my heart falls at the carefully blank look on his face.

“Best I get back. Andrew’s bound to send out a search party for me soon.”

I nod, unable to muster up a response, and watch his retreating back.

It’s late when I lock up. Today’s been busy, and I’m tired, but I’m not relishing the idea of going home to an empty apartment yet again. I need to see Quinn, to look into his eyes and feel his arms around me. I need him to rid me of the turmoil that’s been racing through my mind all afternoon. The attraction I felt towards Kallan has put me on edge, and while I know there’s nothing wrong with finding other people attractive, this felt different. I can’t remember ever feeling such an intense attraction to anyone. Not even Quinn. What we have is a love that was born in friendship and familiarity and slowly developed over the years. He wasn’t someone I spotted in a crowd that took my breath away. My love for him has just always been there. So this is wrong. My heart shouldn’t give a lurch when wondering what Kallan’s kiss would feel like. Wondering what his lips would feel like. Would they be soft and coaxing, or would they move with

intensity? Would the kiss be deep and hungry or slow and sensual?

I know he felt it, too. I saw it in the heat in his eyes when he looked at me. Even now, hours later, it sends a shiver down my spine. And then there was the way he clenched his cup, his knuckles stark against the purple. The fact that he also felt it makes it even more wrong somehow.

I yelp when a hand lands on my shoulder, whirling around to find the object of my musings standing behind me.

“Gosh, you scared me,” I say, placing my hand over my racing heart.

“Sorry.” His hand drops from my shoulder, the quirk of his lips somehow conveying sheepishness. “In my defense, I called your name a few times.”

Realizing I’ve been staring unseeing at the darkness of my store, fantasizing about kissing him, I’m suddenly overcome with shyness. I look away, embarrassment heating my cheeks.

“Uh, sorry, my mind was miles away.”

“Penny for your thoughts?”

I shake my head so hard I have a feeling I’ll need to wear a neck brace tomorrow. “It’s nothing. Just business.”

Nodding, he gives me a searching look, a corner of his mouth curling upwards. “Are you on your way home?”

I nod, grateful for the change of subject. “Yes, finally. It felt like today would never end.”

“Where’s your car?” he says, looking at the mostly deserted street.

“At home.”

“Then how are you getting home?”

Shrugging, I drop the store keys that I’m still clutching in my bag. “I walk.”

He stares at me, his jaw hardening. “You walk alone in the dark?” he finally says, his eyes narrowing, getting kind of

squinty. The condemnation oozing from him has my back straightening.

“It’s not far, and I enjoy the walk.”

“It’s not safe.”

“I’ve been doing it for years without a problem.” My tone is a bit snappish but it’s more at myself for feeling defensive than at him.

He shakes his head, a muscle in his jaw ticking, staring at me for a few beats of silence. “I’ll walk you.”

“What? No.”

“Yes,” he clips, the finality in his voice telling me it’s pointless to argue, but I do anyway.

“Kallan, it’s really not necessary. There are always people out on the streets, so it’s perfectly safe.”

“All it takes is one dark alley and one person with bad intentions.” He grits his teeth. “Trust me, I know.”

His words give me pause, and we stare at each other. I blow out a breath, and his body relaxes, the tension in his shoulders easing. Without another word, I start walking and he moves around me, striding between me and the road.

“I’m not comfortable with this, you know. Instead of going home after a long day, you’re babysitting me.”

He shrugs. “Nothing to feel bad about. I’m not giving you a choice.”

Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I take a deep breath of the cool evening air. We walk in silence for a bit, my mind racing for something to say. Anything to replace this awkwardness that seems to be between us now. Wondering if it’s just me feeling this way, I glance at him, but his face is a fortress, giving nothing away.

“Why do you walk?” he asks after a few more minutes of silence.

I shrug. “I could drive, but like I said, I enjoy it. Besides, this town’s quite safe.”

“Where I lived, it wasn’t safe for women to walk alone after dark.”

“And where is that?”

“Vegas.”

“Isn’t Vegas like a city that never sleeps?”

“Some parts, yes. Like the strip. Other parts, not so much.”

“Maine is a helluva way from Vegas.”

A door to a bar opens, the sounds of music and laughter spilling out on the street. We watch in silence as a couple exits, arms wrapped around each other as they take off down the street. I bite my lip against the sudden ache at the memory of me and Quinn at the comedy club not so long ago. Shaking my head, I push it down and focus on Kallan.

“What made you move here? Do you have family here?”

He’s silent for so long, that I think he’s not going to answer, but then mutters, “No, no family. I guess I wanted a fresh start.”

My eyes cut to his, and I take in the slight bend of his shoulders and his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. I want to ask him why he needed a fresh start and why he needed to move thousands of miles to get it. But with a sigh, I bite back all the questions lingering on my tongue, swallowing them down. I have to stop. I have no business feeling this need to know everything about him. It’s not healthy.

“Not too long now, and it will be time to pull out the winter coats. I bet Vegas didn’t prepare you for a Maine winter.”

I grin at the look he gives me. It’s a mixture of surprise and relief as if he was expecting to be given the third degree.

“I don’t think anything could have prepared me.”

Kallan had deposited me safely to the entrance of our apartment block, silently waiting until I had entered the foyer before turning and striding away. I watched him retreat until

the darkness swallowed him up before heading up. Determined to wait up for Quinn, I sat on the couch, some show I wasn't watching playing on the TV while I replayed the day.

By the time I hear Quinn's key rattling in the lock, it's almost midnight. I'm in a state and I don't know why. I haven't done anything wrong, but it somehow feels like I have.

He barely has enough time to put his briefcase down before I launch myself at him. I need to feel his body, his warmth against mine. I need his arms around me to reassure me that he is mine and I am his.

"Whoa, what's this?" he says, his hands gripping my hips. I want him to pull me in, to press myself against him, but instead of pulling, he pushes slightly, creating a bit of space between us.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?"

I blink quickly, trying to keep the moisture at bay. I want to shout, *No, I'm not okay. Everything feels off, and I don't know why.*

Instead, I blink again, cup his cheeks, and whisper, "Nothing, I just missed you."

I lean up, pressing my lips against his, but instead of the scorching kiss I'm desperate for, he drops a peck before pulling back.

"You had me worried there for a minute," he chuckles, stepping back and working on the knot of his tie. "Why are you up this late?"

Wrapping my arms around me, I watch as he shrugs off his jacket and sits on the couch.

"I told you, I missed you."

The seconds tick by while I wait for something from him, anything, but there's nothing, the TV taking up his attention while he's flicking through the channels. Dropping my arms, I walk to our room, stopping in the doorway.

"Are you coming to bed?"

“I need to unwind first. You go on ahead. I’ll be there in a bit,” he mutters, his eyes glued to the screen.

Our bed is cold when I get in, the faint sounds of the TV playing in the next room echoing through the room, making me feel lonelier than I’m already feeling. Exhausted, I close my eyes, hoping that sleep will pull me under, but instead, a replay of our life, of things I’ve taken for granted, plays behind my closed lids. Mundane things. Getting ready for bed together. Brushing our teeth side by side. Conversations while I applied my body cream and Quinn trimmed his nails. Getting into bed and snuggling while we whispered in the dark.

I can’t bear it, so I open my eyes, willing the thoughts away. I’m not sure how long I spend staring at the ceiling before I finally fall asleep, but when I wake up the bed next to me is still cold and untouched. A quick look confirms Quinn sprawled on the couch, his feet hanging over the edge. I leave him to sleep and get in the shower, hoping the warm water will warm up this coldness that’s taken root inside me. When I get out of the shower, I hear a cupboard door close in the kitchen, so I know he’s up. A glimmer of blue catches my eye while I’m debating what to wear, and my breath catches on a sob. I was so excited when I bought the dress, but now defeat is a crushing weight dragging me down till I feel like I’m drowning. Are we even still going to celebrate our anniversary?

CHAPTER SEVEN

BAILEY

“THAT’S IT,” Hannah grumbles, throwing her book down in disgust. “You’re not allowed to pick ever again.”

“Come on. It was good.” Rose’s grin is so wide she looks like a grim reaper who’s gotten her weekly quota in one day. I would bet money that she chose this book specifically to wind Hannah up.

“No. There was nothing good about this, and you know it.” She levels her with a glare. “It was depressing, rage-inducing, and stupidly pointless. Rick was a piece of shit excuse for a human being. His wife was a doormat that’s too stupid to live and deserved everything she got, and let’s not talk about the sister. She deserves to die a horrible, horrible death.”

“How can you say that? Nobody deserves what Rick and Julia put her through.”

“Oh, come on. Annie knew Rick was in love with her sister. She took advantage of him when he was drunk and got pregnant on purpose. And Rick, being the spineless douche that he was, married her despite being in love with Julia. Newsflash. We don’t live in the fifties. Nobody gets married because of an unplanned pregnancy.”

“I get that, but she still didn’t deserve what they did to her. I mean, for her sister to sleep with her husband for the duration of her marriage is just cruel. It takes cruel to a whole different level.”

“I think Julia is the actual heroine of this book,” Piper’s dry voice cuts into Hannah and Rose’s argument.

“How so?” Grabbing a chip, I scoop up some of the homemade dip I begged Hannah to bring. I was only kinda joking when she accused me of only being friends with her because of the dip, and I denied it.

“She met Rick first, and she loved him first. Then, while she’s on an overseas assignment, her sister whispers all these lies about her into Rick’s ear and seduces him while he’s drunk. That right there is when she stops being my sister, and I cut all ties with her.”

“But she didn’t cut ties with her. She slept with her husband. That’s so messed up.”

“I would do exactly the same.” Piper shrugs, taking a sip of her wine. “Revenge is a dish best-served ice cold.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Hannah laughs.

“She totally would,” Maya says, sharing a look with Piper that smacks of a shared story.

“Anyway,” Hannah says, getting up. “Julia should have just cut her losses and walked away. She should have left them stewing in their own misery and found herself somebody worthy of her. Being happy and living a good life would have been revenge enough.”

“You’re up next. Have you decided on a book yet?” I ask Aspen.

“I was actually thinking. Let’s ditch the books next time and go out. I’m in the mood for some shots and dancing.”

Once a month, Quinn and all the guys in our friend group get together for what they jokingly call “male bonding and getting their balls back” while we girls have our book club here at my shop. It’s not always book club, though. Sometimes, we’d go out to dinner or whatever we felt like. In the beginning, it was just Hannah, Rose, and me, but it didn’t take long for Maya and Piper to join. Aspen is our latest addition. She joined not long after she started dating Ryan, Rose’s brother, and slotted in with us perfectly.

“And you think my brother will be okay with that?”

“Ryan knows he can trust me.”

“It’s not you, he doesn’t trust. It’s everyone else,” Rose says, rolling her eyes.

“I like the way you think. I’m in,” Maya says, Piper echoing her.

“Sounds good.” Leaving them to discuss where they’d like to go, I join Hannah at the door.

“Are you alright?”

She sighs, gesturing across the road. “The Wood Room.”

“Yeah. They sell handcrafted wood products. *Unique* handcrafted pieces,” I add, smiling at how Kallan Reid introduced himself.

Her shoulders sag a bit. “I’m glad it’s not another salon. I’m not feeling up to any competition right now. I hope it does better than Scarlett’s shop did.”

“Even if it were a salon, you’d have nothing to worry about. Your clients all love you. They’d stay loyal to you.”

“You never know,” she mutters, biting her lip. There’s a note of tension in her voice, and for the first time tonight, I really take her in. Her brows are slightly drawn down, and lines bracket her mouth.

“Is everything okay?” I ask again.

“Ask me again next month,” she sighs, pulling me in for a quick hug.

I’ve known Hannah since I was eight, but we only became friends much later. The start of our friendship was a bit rocky. She liked Barbies and playing dress up, and I liked sword fights and climbing trees. One day, she saw me reading a book and asked what it was about. We got to talking and bonded over our love for books. That bond eventually expanded to include boys, and we’ve been inseparable ever since. I was her bridesmaid when she married one of Quinn’s friends, Aidan, and she was my bridesmaid when I married Quinn. We are godparents to their twins, and when Quinn and I have children, they will be their godparents.

“I wish it was a sex shop. I’m tired of driving a town over to get what I need,” Rose says when we join them again.

Aspen laughs as she stands up, gathering the empty glasses and walking to the counter. “There’s this nifty thing called online shopping. You should try it.”

Her lips purse. “I did that once. Just after I moved out. I set my parent’s address for delivery out of habit. We have the same initials, so Mom thought it was for her. Never again,” she says with a slight shudder.

“Did she keep it?”

“Yup. I was looking for a spare charger in her bedside drawer, and there it was. It wasn’t in its packaging anymore.”

“Good for her,” Hannah laughs.

“I’m going to tell Ryan. He’ll freak.”

“Don’t you dare. What’s said in book club stays in book club.” Rose shoots Aspen a glare. “Ryan will find a way to out me to Mom, and she’ll insist on giving it back to me. Can you imagine?”

We all gag a little, and this time there’s nothing slight about her shudder.

Hanna’s phone chimes, and after a glance, she gets up and stretches.

“Aidan’s on his way to pick up the kids. I think I’m going to call it a night. I’ve been on my feet since seven this morning, and I’m beat. Text me the details when you decide where to go.”

Glancing at the time on my cell phone, I’m surprised it’s already after ten. Aspen doesn’t linger long—no doubt in a hurry to get home to Ryan—and leaves not long after Hannah does. The three single girls in our little group take their time, and I have to curb my impatience. I love our get-togethers, but I need to get home.

Finally, everyone leaves, and I follow them out of the store, locking up behind me. I’ll come in a bit earlier to do the clean-up.

Quinn should be home by now, and I need to see him. I've been doing a lot of thinking today, and I've made up my mind to not let defeat get the better of me. I want to sit him down and have a talk. If I have to drag him kicking and screaming through this bad patch we're having, that's what I'll do. But I'm not going to allow it to carry on. It can't.

I usually love the walk home, but tonight I miss my car. The ten-minute walk feels endless and lonely. Unbidden, the memory of Kallan walking next to me, his shoulders slightly hunched, his hands in his pockets, springs to mind, but I ruthlessly shove it down. Tonight, it's about Quinn and me. Kallan has no place in my thoughts.

I have plans for tonight. Quinn should be relaxed from spending time with the boys. I want to pour us a glass of wine and then sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk. I want him to tell me what's going on with him. I know it's more than work stress.

The last time we made love was good, and I loved how we cuddled after, but it left me with a niggling of worry in the back of my mind. I know he's under a huge amount of pressure, and if he needs me to help him ease some of it, I'm more than willing. But he felt detached somehow. Not once did he look me in the eye, and I felt more like an object than someone he loves. I didn't like it. It left me feeling hollow and empty. I want to reestablish the intimacy that's been lacking the last two times we had sex. I want us to shower together, wet, soapy hands, taking the time to explore each other's bodies. Then by the time the hot water runs out, I want us to move to our bed, where I can feel his naked body pressed up against me. I want to feel his mouth on mine. I want him to taste me. I want to taste him. I want to look into his eyes while we move together, and I want to feel the way his body tightens and see the look of pleasure on his face when he comes.

There's so much I want, and it's all centered around him.

QUINN

I DON'T know what it is. When I'm with Bailey, determination fills me to put a stop to this thing brewing between me and Justine. But then I look at Justine, and all my promises to myself fly out the window.

I have time to stop it, to come up with one or other inane excuse before I walk down a path I absolutely should not. Before things progress further than a kiss.

I tried. I really did. I've said those words before, but it seems that when it comes to Justine denial is a pointless exercise.

The morning after the kiss, I went into the office, determined to keep things professional. I wasn't prepared for her. The hesitant girl from the night before had disappeared, leaving in her wake someone who left my knees weak with desire. The small, discreet touches made my stomach clench. The way she'd trail her fingers slowly down the valley between her breasts had my hands clenching. Every smoldering promise her eyes kept giving me had me erect all morning. The last straw was when she whispered how she made herself come while thinking of me when she got home. I was lost. My willpower crumbled, blowing away like dust in the wind.

More late nights led to more make-out sessions, each one going a tiny step further, only driving the anticipation higher.

Last night we were practically dry-humping each other on my couch, and I'm so fucking done with waiting. I'm so fucking done with this back-and-forth of what's right versus what I want, and now that I'm giving in, I'm relieved.

That's why I find myself outside her apartment instead of meeting the guys for a game of basketball. Exhaling, I feel the tension seeping out, and my next breath is filled with anticipation and excitement.

If not for being held up after work, I would have been here an hour ago. Fucking Phillip wanted an impromptu performance review on Justine. I sang her praises, of course. Everything I said was true. What I didn't say was what had me smiling at him. Picturing what he'd look like if I told him I'm

about to fuck his niece had me almost chuckling. I'm playing a dangerous game, and it's...exhilarating.

The whole day has been an exercise in self-control, knowing what was coming tonight, and I'm done fighting it.

If I played my cards right and kept things safe, Bailey would never have to find out. I could let this infatuation and lust run its course.

The thought of Bailey makes me hesitate, the magnitude of what I'm about to do sinking in, the irrevocability of it, but then the door opens, and our eyes meet.

"You came," she breathes, and the tension that's been building between us explodes, and every thought gets driven out of my mind.

I take two steps inside, barely having the presence of mind to slam the door behind me before dragging her into my arms.

Our lips clash, her frantic hands pushing my jacket off my shoulders while I'm yanking her blouse from her skirt. Her arms lift long enough for me to jerk it over her head, tossing it to the ground before they're back, undoing the buttons of my shirt. My need is a pulsing, beating entity, its force driving every coherent thought from my mind. My shirt joins my tie on the floor, her bra not long after. I want to take a moment to look at her tits, see if they look as good as they feel, but it can wait. My dick is the one driving the show right now, and he's desperate to stake his claim on her pussy. I'll look at them later. Worship them.

I'm still pulling off my shoes and socks, hopping from one foot to another while she tugs me into her room. Then we're on the bed, a heap of tangled limbs. My heart's galloping like a racehorse, the illicitness of it all just as intoxicating as the feel of her bare skin against mine.

I'm out of my mind when I drive into her, my lips on hers, our open mouths absorbing our moans. Everything about her is different. The pitch of her moans, the smell of her, the taste of her. The way she moves her body against mine. Even the way

her pussy grips my cock. It's all I dreamed it would be and more.

It nearly fucking kills me, but I hold on to my restraint, waiting for her to come on my dick before I finally allow myself to surrender myself to my climax, my body shuddering against hers.

Rolling off her, I pull her close and bury my face in her neck, breathing her in. I'm spent and exhausted, feeling at peace for the first time in a long time. There's a certain kind of freedom in letting go of what's right and what's wrong and just surrendering.

Finally pulling back, I trail my fingers down her nose, across her cheek.

“We didn't use a condom.”

I don't like them—I never have—and the last time I used one was over ten years ago before Bailey went on the pill. I'm hoping like hell that she's on some form of birth control, and if she's not, I'll have to use it until we can get her on something. Now that I've fucked her, I can't see myself stopping, but I also don't want to take the chance of a pregnancy. Just the thought of it is like being plunged into a bucket of cold water in the middle of winter.

“I'm on the pill,” she says, and the relief her words bring is almost tangible. “And I haven't been with anyone since my college boyfriend and I broke up.”

Growling, I roll on top of her, snagging both her hands with mine. “While we're in this bed, there will be no talk about other men. Dropping my head, I take her lips with mine, plunging my tongue into her mouth. This night is not over. Not by a long shot.

BAILEY

SURPRISED TO find our apartment empty, I check my phone for a message, but my screen is blank. It's been a while since the boy's night ended, so he should be home. Biting my lip, I call him, but it rings through and goes to voicemail.

Tapping my phone against my lip, I ponder my options. My knee-jerk reaction is to get mad, but this is not what I want tonight to be about. So, moving on to Plan B.

I'm in and out of the shower in record time, and after a brief hesitation, I put on the negligee that I wore on our wedding night. Might just as well go for broke. Desperate times and all that.

I strategically position several of Scarlett's candles throughout the lounge and light them. After making a few small tweaks, I settle onto the couch, pleased with the mood it creates.

And then I wait. And wait. A glance at my phone shows still no messages from Quinn. Aidan texted Hannah at least an hour ago. He should be home by now.

I'm about ready to blow out the candles and admit defeat when Quinn walks in. He hesitates at the door, his eyes taking in the room before landing on me.

"What's all this?"

I think it's obvious what it is, so I don't answer him. I don't want to demand where he's been or ask why he's walking in hours after boy's night ended. But I'm pissed. Pissed beyond comprehension that once again I'm in a position where I have to ask. And suddenly I'm tired. So damn tired of feeling this way. So I don't say a thing. I get up to blow out the candles, suddenly feeling ridiculous in this negligee.

I feel his eyes on me as I blow out the last candle. When I turn to look at him, he hasn't moved from his spot at the door.

"I'm not your keeper, Quinn. I can't force you to come home. I don't want to force you to come home to me. Tell me, do you even still love me?"

"You know I do. Why would you ask such a thing?"

"Because I *don't* know. Most days it doesn't feel like you do." My sigh feels like it comes from the deepest part of me. "I don't know anything anymore."

The silence between us lengthens, thickens, and when it becomes unbearable, I turn and head to our bedroom. I swap out my negligee for a set of my everyday pj's and crawl into bed. Not long after, Quinn comes in and steps into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Seems that's a new thing. Closed doors between us.

I'm staring at the ceiling when he finally slides in next to me. It's dark, and I'm glad. I don't want him to see the sorrow welling in my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Bails," he whispers. He doesn't move closer to me. In fact, he doesn't touch me at all. He lies on his back, staring at the ceiling, mirroring me. The open space between us feels as vast as an ocean. "I bumped into Craig from college. He wanted to go for a drink to catch up, and I lost track of time."

He's silent for a few beats, no doubt waiting for me to offer him absolution, but I don't. "If I knew you had something special planned, I would have been here earlier."

"It's fine, Quinn." I turn on my side, facing the wall. Anything is better than having to look at him.

It's amazing how much a sigh can convey. Annoyance, irritation, displeasure, aggravation. His sigh as he rolls to his side conveys all of those.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KALLAN

BAILEY'S BEEN unusually quiet tonight. Our evening walks have become the highlight of my day—some days, the only thing I look forward to. Fucking pathetic, and it's got me thinking that maybe it's time to reevaluate my life. I was comfortable and content in the monotony of everyday life, but since meeting her, bit by bit, dissatisfaction has crept in, making me wish for something different for the first time in a long time.

Sighing, I cut my eyes to her. "Penny for your thoughts?"

Her smile is a barely there thing, and my concern for her deepens. When we first met, when she smiled, her eyes smiled too. Now, just like my dissatisfaction, there's a heaviness that's crept into her eyes, dimming their usual sparkle.

"Sorry, I'm not good company tonight," she sighs.

Our talks on these walks are never about anything serious, but they give me glimpses—little windows—into who Bailey is, and the more I see, the more I want to know.

It's foolish because she's forbidden, and it can never go anywhere, but it doesn't stop my chest from tightening at the thought that I'm walking her home to her husband.

"We all have days like that," I say, trying to ignore the burning want to know what's making her so upset. We've become friends of a sort in the short time we've known each other—a friend that's wiggled her way under my skin more than a mere friend should do. I don't want to push her or pry too much. I want her to see me as a safe space, somebody she

feels comfortable with. If she decides to talk to me, it's because she wants to, not because she feels pressured into it.

"You don't look like the type of person that has many days like that," she says, her eyes coasting across people walking the street.

"Not so much now, but there was a time."

I feel her curious eyes burning against my cheek, but we round the corner, her apartment block coming into view.

"Story for another day," I say, smiling slightly.

My gaze finds her when we stop in front of her building. The fifteen minutes it takes to get to her apartment is not nearly long enough, and I don't want to let her go. Not yet. The way she's lingering, her hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans, she doesn't seem to be in a rush, either. I fist my hands at my sides, the urge to grab her, take her home, and never let her go bubbling in my veins like lava. I take a deep breath, viscously shoving down the impulse. I've done a few fucked up things in life, but never kidnapping.

"This is me," she says, her smile sad while staring at her apartment building.

It's on the tip of my tongue to suggest we go somewhere, have a drink or something, but then she sighs again, and I rein in the impulse.

I desperately cast around for something to say, anything to prolong the few precious minutes I have with her.

"Andrew was asking about Olivia today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it seems he was quite taken with her when he went to grab a coffee."

Finally, a semblance of Bailey's breathtaking smile makes its appearance, and I want to pump my fist in victory.

"What was he asking?"

"If I knew anything about her relationship status."

I smile at the memory. I gave him so much shit for it.

“I don’t think she’s seeing someone, but I’m not too sure,” she says, a little frown wrinkling her forehead. “Olivia’s not too...forthcoming about her private life.”

“That’s not going to stop Andrew if he sets his mind to it.”

When I look at wood, what I see is potential. I can lose myself in my workshop for hours, focusing on whatever I’m creating and forgetting about the outside world. I’m not the type of person who analyzes things and picks them apart. You could go crazy doing that, so I prefer to live my life accepting things for what they are. The *whys* and the *what-ifs* don’t matter. It’s the *what-is* that counts. But lately, my mind’s been spinning, so when I got home, I headed straight to my workshop, hoping that working on my special project for a couple of hours would quieten my mind.

It didn’t work. So I did the next best thing. I grabbed my guitar and a beer and settled on my porch.

Resigned that my thoughts are determined to haunt me tonight, I let my mind wander while strumming my guitar.

I wanted Josie, and I did have her. But then I lost her.

It was impossible not to love Josie. Her courage and optimism in the face of the cards she was dealt was something that drew me in when I was at the lowest point of my life. And it was how she lived her life, so full of life and joy for every day she was granted, that kept me with her. I knew what I signed up for. I knew there was an expiry date, but I did it anyway, and it’s something I will never regret. She taught me so much. About life and how precious it was. About the man I wanted to be and the man I could be.

I have many regrets when it comes to Josie, but loving her is not one of them.

I want Bailey, but I can’t have her.

Seeing her every day, knowing that she’s not for me, is a special kind of hell. The instant attraction I felt when bumping

into her hasn't dimmed with time at all. It has only grown despite the frequent talks I give myself. Being surrounded by her scent is torture. Every time her tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip, I ache for a taste. I know if I had to kiss her, it would be explosive. It's a knowing deep in my gut that I don't even bother to refute. It's crushing that I'll never get to experience that.

Ten years ago, I would have taken what I wanted, not giving a shit about any consequences. I would have seen that she was vulnerable, and I would have found a way to take advantage of that.

But I'm not that man anymore. My stealing days are long past.

What is it about me that wants what I can't have? Did my past screw me up so badly? Am I broken?

"I knew I'd find you out here," Andrew says, stepping onto the porch.

"There's this concept called knocking. You should try it."

"If you were entertaining, I would, but you're not," Andrew says, throwing himself down on one of the chairs. I ignore him and keep on strumming my guitar.

"Why is that?"

"Why what?"

"Why don't you bring anyone home? I haven't seen you do that since I've known you."

"You haven't known me that long."

"It's been a year."

"A year too long."

I sigh, putting my guitar down, resigning myself to the interruption. Sitting back, I sip my beer, staring out at the lake. There's no breeze, the surface lying undisturbed and calm, its stillness reflecting the faint rays of the moon in silvery ribbons. Being out on the porch, surrounded by woods and the lake in front of me is my happy place where I depend on the

beauty and stillness to recharge me. But that restlessness from earlier is still scratching at my soul, and tonight it feels... empty.

I can feel Andrew's eyes on me, studying me, and I know I give him shit, but I'm grateful for his unannounced visit. Not that I'd ever admit that to him.

"I think it's time you get a new guitar."

He's probably right. It was already old when I stole it twenty years ago, and the years since have left it beaten and battered, looking like it barely survived a few wars. One would think that I'd want to. That I would want to rid myself of a reminder of a time I left behind, of the person I was that I left behind, and yet I never will. Instead, I keep it for exactly those reasons. So that I can remember and make sure I do everything I can to not go back to that. That I'm a better person now with a better life.

"So, besides annoying me, why are you here? And helping yourself to my beer."

"I've been thinking." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "You know I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"I sense a 'but' in there."

"No 'buts'. It's just...I think it might be time to get my own place. Maybe move closer to town. Get out of your hair, you know."

When I met him, he was practically homeless, with no one to give him support. He was doing what he felt he had to just to survive. I saw so much of myself in him, that I offered to take him on as my apprentice—give him a helping hand, the way I was given one. Pay it forward and all that.

"Look at that." I grin at him. "The little chick is ready to spread his wings and leave the nest. Pappa bird is so damn proud."

"Fuck off," he grumbles. "I'm being serious."

“You don’t have to sell it to me. I offered you the flat to help you get on your feet. You’ve come a long way since then, and you’re welcome to stay as long as you want, but if you feel ready to get your own place, go for it.”

There were a couple of conditions for the job and place to stay, like no drugs and no sketchy behavior. He understood that I was immovable on those and took it to heart, turning his life around.

“Yeah?”

I nod. I’ll be sad to see him go, but he’s his own man who needs to live his own life. Silence descends while we’re lost in our thoughts. Not sure what he’s thinking about, but I’m contemplating what it will be like to be alone again. Before Andrew, it didn’t bother me, but now I don’t know so much.

“Why don’t you go visit that bakery lady?”

“Why would I do that?”

He shrugs. “She seemed interested.”

“Not my type.”

“Guys your age can’t afford to have a type.”

The little shit smirks at me, and I want to flip him off, but that would be juvenile.

“Remind me again why I keep you around?”

“Bet it’s because her hair’s blond and not brown.”

“Chocolate.”

His brows pull together. “What?”

“It’s chocolate. Not brown.”

“Same thing.”

Closing my eyes, I rub my temple. “Andrew?”

“Yes?”

“Fuck off,” I say, deadpan.

He jumps up, grabs his beer, and retreats into the house, his laughter echoing behind him.

“And next time, bring your own damn beer,” I holler just before the front door slams.

It doesn't happen often, but maybe Andrew's onto something. Maybe it's time I put myself out there and open myself to meeting new people. He's only saying what I've been thinking. For so long, I thought my ability to feel died along with Josie, but then Bailey came along and blew everything I kept tightly locked up wide open.

I'm tired of being lonely. I miss all the intimacies that come with having someone special in your life. Being able to come home to your partner at the end of the day. Cooking dinner together. Brushing teeth side by side. Sex. Fuck, how I miss sex. Not shallow and empty sex—I can get that anywhere—but sex with someone I want to wake up next to. Falling asleep with someone in your arms.

I want to grow old with someone.

I try to picture that someone, and unbidden, it's Bailey's face I see, taking me by surprise. I can no more stop the stab of desire heating my body and making my dick hard than I can stop the sun from rising. I don't know how, but I need to find a way to get over this insane desire I feel for her. I have to break this cycle of wanting something I can't have.

CHAPTER NINE

BAILEY

SIGHING, I settle on the bench, taking a deep breath of the briny scent of the ocean that hangs in the air. I love everything about the harbor, but my favorite time is early morning or late evening. When you can hear the creaks and groans emanating from moored boats swaying gently with the ebb and flow of the tide and the gentle, rhythmic lapping of waves against the docks. Or the lone cry of a seagull. There's nothing quite like the sound of a seagull to let you know you're at the ocean.

During the day, those gentle sounds are drowned out by harsher sounds. There's the voices of fishermen calling out to each other, mingling with the piercing squaws of now ravenous seagulls looking out for an easy meal. You get the chatter and occasional burst of laughter from groups of people strolling up and down the waterfront, taking photos, or buying food from one of the many food carts dotted along the walkway.

But today, I'm not worried about any of that. I'm focused on the man sitting next to me.

We chew in silence while I sneak glances at him, trying to judge his reaction. But he's wearing his usual Kallan face. Stoic. Eventually, I can't stand it anymore.

“So what do you think?”

“Can I level with you?”

I nod for him to go ahead.

“I hate lobster. I don’t like its smell or taste. Hated it the first time I tried it and still hate it.”

My jaw drops. “Why didn’t you tell me you don’t like it?”

He shrugs. “You wanted me to try it, so I did.”

“So you were just trying to humor me?”

“No. You love it, so I thought not liking it must be a fluke. Now I can definitely say I don’t like it.”

I take my time chewing and swallowing, wiping my mouth before looking at him.

“You know what that means, right?” His brow raises in question. “We can’t be friends anymore.”

“Is that so?” he asks, humor dancing in his eyes. He puts his paper plate on the bench next to him, leaning back and resting his arm on the bench behind me.

“Hmm, hmm. There’s no way anyone who doesn’t like lobster can be trusted.”

“Lobster in Vegas isn’t cheap, so can’t say it fit into my budget. I make a mean trash can burrito, though.”

“You’ll have to make me one sometime.”

Did I just invite myself over to his place? The cool breeze caresses the heat of my cheeks, and I want to close my eyes in mortification. What is it about this man that makes me second-guess everything I say?

“I mean, not that you have to, but if you wanted to, it would be nice. You could always bring it to my shop, or something like that. Or I could come and fetch it.”

Just shut up, Bailey, my brain calls for mercy.

I sigh, squinting at a seagull circling a fisherman’s boat, searching for his next meal. I’d gladly trade places with him.

“You’re cute when you’re embarrassed,” he says, pulling me away from my contemplation of life as a seagull, and when I look back at him, he’s grinning.

I shake my head, finding the seagull again. He's flapping away, a shiny fish caught in his beak. That's me. I'm the fish. A fish out of water.

Desperate to change the subject, I eye his half-eaten lobster roll. Would it be weird to ask if I could have it? It's not like he's going to eat it, and throwing it away would be a crime.

"I feel bad. You must still be hungry."

He came in earlier for a coffee and sandwich, and we got to talking. I was horrified when I heard he'd never tried a lobster roll. So I dragged him down to the harbor to get one from my favorite food cart.

"Guess I owe you a sandwich." I sigh, giving up the fight and grabbing his leftovers.

"I'm a big boy. I'll survive," he says with a bemused expression while watching me scarf down the rest of his roll. I'm sure he's wondering how I can fit in more food because they're huge. But I have absolutely no shame when it comes to lobster rolls, and I've already embarrassed myself. Might as well go for broke.

"But anytime you want a burrito, just say. It can either be a dining-in experience or a takeaway."

I'm not sure when it happened, but I've started to cherish these moments I share with Kallan. Not once has he asked me about Quinn, and not once have I volunteered information about him. It should be weird, but it's refreshing. Everyone in my life is in some way entwined with Quinn. My parents view him as a son—in fact, I've always felt that they love him more than they love me. My siblings see him as a brother. All my friends are his friends. Except for Aspen, we all went to school together, and they've known him as long as they've known me. Sure, some of them are closer to me than they are to him, but we're still viewed as a unit. We're Bailey and Quinn, a single entity.

With Kallan, I'm just me. There's no "and" tacked on behind my name, and with the state of things in my marriage, I

need that right now.

“Do you miss Vegas?”

He’s silent for a while. “Some things, but mostly, no.”

“You don’t have any family living there?”

His eyes darken around the edges, and he pulls his eyes from mine, staring out over the ocean.

“Technically, no.”

“What does that mean?” Either you have family, or you don’t.

He swallows, a muscle in his jaw flexing. “Sharing the same blood doesn’t make you family.”

I want to ask him to explain because he has this way of answering a question without really answering it, and all it does is make me want to ask more questions. In the short time I’ve known him, though, I’ve come to realize that he’s not the kind of man who wears his heart on his sleeve, and it doesn’t seem like he wants to talk about his past, so with a sigh, I let it go. He’ll tell me when he wants to tell me.

“Yeah, family isn’t always what they’re cracked up to be.”

And that’s true for me. At some point in my life, I’ve come to terms with the fact that Mom sees me as a disappointment, and no matter what I do, there’s no changing her opinion. She’s never come out and said it, but it’s there in the words that she doesn’t say. It’s there in the things she does for Amelia, Cody, and Quinn, but not me.

“You mentioned before that you moved here for a fresh start. I admire that. I don’t know if I’d have the guts to move to a place where I didn’t know anyone.”

He shrugs as if it’s nothing when the thought of moving to a strange place and not knowing anyone has me wanting to break out in hives. I’m not sure I could do it. Not even for a fresh start.

“It’s not really that hard. Sometimes, we just have to let go and let life take us where it wants to.”

“That easy, huh?”

“If you don’t fight it, yes.”

He turns to me, and the look in his eyes is intense, tingling my skin.

“It’s like when I start a new project. I already know what I want to make. I choose a piece of wood and mold it into my vision. Usually, that works, but sometimes the wood has other ideas, and my original vision morphs into something completely different. I have two choices when that happens. Either I carry down the path of my original vision and fight the wood all the way, hoping that by the time I’m done, I haven’t destroyed it, or I can change course and trust that it knows better than I do.

Life is a lot like that. We start out with an idea in our head on how it’s supposed to go, but sometimes life has a different idea. It’s up to us to decide if we’re going to fight, cling to the history that shaped us, and struggle to try and subdue it into what we want. Or we can just let go, be flexible, and see where it takes us.”

He sighs. “Either way, we only get this one life. What we do with it is up to us. Somebody might swoop in and take responsibility for it, and it might work for a while, but it’s not sustainable in the long term.”

I’VE ALWAYS THOUGHT our apartment was the perfect size for a couple starting out in life. It’s not big, but it’s big enough for the two of us. Today, though, it feels as if the walls are closing in. Quinn’s at our little dining table, the one we picked up at Ikea, and which took a lot of swearing and throwing around of tools to assemble. He’s tapping away at his laptop, and whatever it is he’s doing must be very entertaining, judging by his smiles and occasional chuckle.

I feel like I’m invisible because he’s hardly said two words to me all morning. I’ve tried talking to him, but I might as well have saved my breath. All I got for my efforts were mumbles and grunts. Not even eye contact.

Eventually, I can't stand it anymore. The atmosphere is heavy and stifling, to the point that I feel I want to scream. Maybe getting out for a bit will help.

"It's a nice day. Winter will be here before we know it. Maybe we should get out while we can."

I wait for him to respond, but a minute ticks by without a flicker of attention.

"Quinn," I say a bit more forcefully.

"What?"

It's because I'm watching him that I see the flash of irritation in his eyes when he looks at me.

"I said, it's a nice day, and we're wasting it inside. Why don't we go out for a bit?"

"I can't. I need to have this proposal done by Monday."

"Can't you finish it when we get back?"

"No, Bailey," he sighs. "I really can't. This is important."

There's a challenge in his eyes as if he's waiting for me to argue with him, but I don't have the energy for that.

"Fine. I'll go then. I don't feel like staring at you working all day," I sigh, shooting off a quick text to Hannah.

"Well, if you're going out, I think I'll head to the office for a bit. All the files I need are there, so it's easier," he says, sitting back and stretching. I know Quinn, and I know most of his expressions. The one he's wearing now at the prospect of having to go in to work on a Sunday, is not one of someone having to go to jail. It's one of someone who's just got a get-out-of-jail-free card. "These chairs suck, anyway," he mumbles, shutting his laptop.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him to at least try to hide his excitement at the prospect of spending another day away from me, but I grab my keys and phone instead, leaving without bothering to say goodbye.

“Where’s Quinn today?” Hannah asks around a mouthful of ice cream.

“At work.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Don’t ask,” I mutter, browsing through the jewelry on display. A silver necklace with a horse pendant catches my eye, and after paying, I slip it into my tote. Darby is going to love it. She’s at the age where her whole world revolves around horses, and it’s driving Amelia insane.

The park is bustling, people out in full force taking advantage of the beautiful summer weather. We walk past a vendor with baskets of blueberries for sale, and my heart clenches, wondering if that would have been us if his dad hadn’t sold the farm. What would our life have been like? We’d obviously be living on the farm, but would we have had children by now? What would have happened with the bookstore? Between all the work a farm requires and the long commute into town every day, would I have kept it? I can’t imagine a world where I would have sold it because it’s such a huge part of my life growing up and my life now.

“You’re not happy,” Hannah says, stopping when we get to the center of the bridge spanning the lake that winds through the park.

I turn and lean against the side, the stone textured and uneven under my arms. It’s a beautiful, cloudless day, sunny but not too warm. The pond that we used to skate on during the winter as kids is smooth and still, not a ripple marring its surface.

I want to deny Hannah’s words, but unfortunately, I can’t. I’m also not sure I want to talk about it.

“What’s going on?” she says, leaning next to me, and I catch her concerned gaze out the corner of my eye.

“Both of us got married very young. Have you ever wondered if you should have maybe waited?”

“Waited for what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe grow up a bit first. Experience life before settling down.”

She stares off into space, her eyes unfocused, giving it serious thought. Eventually, she shakes her head.

“No. Even when Aidan was dating what’s her face, I knew he was the one for me.”

Hannah and Aidan faced a couple of challenges in their early days. Hannah came from a wealthy family, whereas Aidan’s parents had to work hard just to get by. Hannah’s parents are, quite frankly, snobs, and they treated Aidan as if he wasn’t good enough for their daughter. Their attitude towards him messed with Aidan’s head and caused him to dump her and date some other girl. They eventually worked it out, and she once told me she did not regret a single one of their issues. In the end, it made them stronger.

“Talk to me,” she says after the silence stretches too long.

“Quinn’s been pulling away from me, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Pulling away? How?”

“I don’t know. He’s always working or using work as an excuse not to spend time with me. It’s not just work, though. I get this feeling that he doesn’t want to be with me anymore.”

The words burn as they leave my mouth, and I want to grab them and shove them back deep down where they’ll never see the light of day again. I thought confessing something would make you lighter, but the weight of them feels unbearably heavy on my shoulders.

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“You have to see someone to talk to them.” I chuckle but it’s a bitter one. “Talking to him is like bashing your head against a brick wall. He completely shuts down, or he turns everything around on me, making me out to be the bad guy.”

“That doesn’t sound like Quinn at all.”

I can only nod because the Quinn from a year ago was one of the most easy-going, happy-go-lucky guys I’ve ever met.

The type of guy who would go out of his way to help you if you were in trouble.

I swallow heavily, my eyes burning. “I don’t know what to do, Hannah. It’s like we’re just existing together, and if it carries on much longer, I feel like I’m going to explode. I just want my husband back.”

“Come here, babe.” Her arms are warm when she wraps them around me, and I take a few deep breaths to ease the ache in my heart.

“So, enough about me. What’s going on with you? You’ve been quiet.”

“I’m pregnant,” she blurts, and for a second, jealousy stabs through me. I ruthlessly shove it down. The way things are now, a child would be the absolute worst thing to happen to me.

“Congratulations. I didn’t realize you guys were trying.”

She bites her lip. “We weren’t. It just happened.”

“But you’re happy, right? I’m sure Aidan’s hoping for a boy this time.” I chuckle, thinking about all the times Aidan moaned about being outnumbered.

“He doesn’t know yet.”

I look at her in disbelief. “You’ve told me, but you haven’t told him? He’s going to be so pissed.”

“I’m scared to tell him.”

“What the hell for? Has he said or done anything to make you feel that way?”

“No. But... Things have been a bit tough lately. Financially. And you know how expensive babies are.”

“Is the Salon struggling? Is that why you were worried about the new shop?”

She shakes her head. “No, that’s the only thing keeping us afloat right now. The construction business is crazy competitive, and he hasn’t been getting as many jobs as usual.

He lost a huge deal last week, and you know how things die down during winter,” she says glumly.

“So what are you going to do?”

Her smile is a bit sheepish. “Put my big girl panties on and just tell him.” She puts her hand on her stomach. “I know it doesn’t look it, but I’m incredibly happy about this little peanut. The timing just could have been better.”

CHAPTER TEN

BAILEY

TAKING A deep breath, I relax back in my chair. It's a sunny day, and tourist season is in full swing, making us extremely lucky to get a table outside on the deck without a reservation. Our position offers us the perfect view to take in the sights and sounds of the bustling harbor. I'll never get tired of seeing boats gently sway on the water, waves slapping lightly against their hulls, while seagulls float in the air, circling the boats of fishermen unloading their catch of the day. Tearing my eyes away from a happy couple holding hands and boarding one of the luxury yachts offering cruises around the harbor, I turn my attention to Quinn.

He's been so quiet I can almost pretend he's not here. He doesn't look relaxed, and I don't know if he's on edge about something or bored. His fingers are drumming against the table, his phone lying next to him.

I'm starting to hate that thing. It's hard not to resent something that's replaced you in your husband's life. There was a time when Quinn couldn't keep his eyes or hands off me. Now, I'm the second fiddle. No matter what we're doing or talking about, if it even slightly chirps, everything comes to a screeching halt.

My lips turn up at the thought of grabbing it and flinging it into the ocean. I can just imagine the look of horror on his face when it hits the water with a satisfying smack and slowly disappears, giving us a break from the damn thing.

"What are you smiling about?" he asks, a slight frown furrowing his eyebrows.

“Nothing special.” I pick up the menu, perusing the options more out of habit than necessity. I already knew what I was going to order before leaving the apartment.

“What are you getting?” Quinn asks, scanning his menu.

“Pizza. I’ve been craving it something fierce.” Bianco’s is known for their variety of craft beers, signature cocktails named for local landmarks, and enormous lobster rolls. But it’s their wood-fired pizza that’s my downfall. I can’t resist the slightly charred, chewy crust that gives it a smoky flavor without being dry. Add to that garlic sausage, loads of mozzarella, and chili flakes, and I’m in heaven. It’s not like I have to worry about garlic breath when Quinn kisses me. I can’t remember the last time he initiated any kissing beyond a quick peck on the lips. “One would think I’m pregnant,” I joke, but my feeble attempt at humor backfires when Quinn drops his menu, swallowing heavily.

I purse my lips, all my anger and frustration from the last few months bubbling to the surface. “Relax, Quinn. You need to have sex to get pregnant. You do realize it’s been forever since you’ve touched me?”

“Bailey, don’t start. You know it’s—”

“I know, I know. You’ve been busy. You’ve been stressed. You’re tired,” I mutter, not interested in rehashing all the excuses he’s given me a hundred times.

“You know my job is important to me. Important to our future.”

“Our future? What future? One where I hardly see you? One where nothing ever matters but work? One where I’m so damn lonely I either want to scream or cry?”

“Now you’re just being dramatic,” he scoffs, and my temper hits nuclear proportions.

I take a deep breath and look out over the ocean, trying to reel in my emotions. Be calm, Bailey, be smooth. We need to communicate, and fighting is not the right way to do it. When I manage to calm myself a bit, I look back at him.

“Dramatic? I didn’t realize wanting time with my husband was being dramatic. The other day you told me it was nagging. Now I’m being dramatic. When did you become so dismissive of my feelings?” I keep my voice calm, my face neutral. Anyone walking by would think I’m discussing the weather.

“Bailey,” he coaxes, his voice pained. “You know I care about you. That’s why I work the way I do. To give us a better life.”

He’s starting all his sentences with a “You know.” I know nothing anymore at this point, but I keep that thought tucked down deep.

“And I appreciate it. I really do, but I didn’t realize we needed a better life. I’m happy with the way our life is. We were doing well enough between the bookcafe and your salary before your promotion.” Well enough to afford to buy a house and start a family. “It feels as if the more invested you become in work, the less of an ‘us’ there is.”

He exhales harshly. “Getting the promotion wasn’t enough. I still have to prove that their faith in me wasn’t misplaced. Once I’ve cemented my position, things will calm down.”

“For how long, Quinn? Give me some kind of timeline here.” Anything I can hold on to, to make this more bearable. “Our lease is coming up. Are we going to renew it or stick to the plan?”

The plan was to not renew it. To buy a house and start a family. But with the way things are now, I can’t see that happening.

“I don’t know!” He explodes, catching the attention of people seated at a table next to us. “One day, Bailey! All I’m asking for is one day without the constant stress and fighting. I get enough of that at work. I don’t need it at home!”

My cheeks heat with humiliation as more heads swivel in our direction.

“Keep your voice down. You’re causing a scene,” I whisper, reaching out, hoping to try and calm him, to defuse

the situation. The last thing I want is to air our dirty laundry in public or worse, be asked to leave.

His phone rings, and I watch in disbelief as he shakes off my hand and snatches it up.

“Seriously, Quinn? You’re going to answer that right now?”

“Seriously, Bailey,” he sneers. “I might as well, seeing as I can’t do anything right in your eyes.”

I’m taken aback at the venom in his voice and watch in mute disbelief as he leaves the restaurant without a further word to me.

AN HOUR AND three unanswered texts later, it’s clear that Quinn’s not coming back, and my anger has turned into despondency. Tears sting my eyes, but I hold them back. Our conversation feels like ashes on my tongue, lingering, pervading my whole body. I had such high hopes for today. Hope that spending some time together today could get us closer to who we were. Even if it was just a small step, I would have counted that a victory. Instead, the chasm between us is yawning even wider.

My sigh feels like a million pounds weighing on my shoulders when I settle the check and leave the restaurant. We walked here, so at least I’m not stranded. They say that actions speak louder than words, and Quinn keeps saying that he loves me and that things are only temporary. But his actions are saying a whole different thing. It’s his total lack of regard for and his indifferent, ugly attitude that hurts. I’m struggling to reconcile this version of Quinn to the Quinn I have known my whole life.

My heart aches as the last bit of hope I have dies at the sight of the empty apartment. I had hoped that he would have come home. That he would be waiting for me, an apology for leaving me on his tongue, and reassurance that he still loves me in the arms he would wrap around me. Instead, it’s as

usual, the empty apartment a soundtrack to my loneliness while I wait for him to come home.

Time creeps by while I busy myself with the mindless tasks of catching up on cleaning. I've dusted, swept, and mopped. I've done laundry, changed the bedding, and scrubbed the bathroom from top to bottom before hunger drives me to the kitchen. Quinn abandoned me before we ordered, and after, I couldn't stomach the thought of food.

I've just thrown a sandwich together when the door rattles, and he steps inside. He pauses when he catches sight of me, and a flicker of something flashes in his eyes. We stare at each other, an unspoken tension swirling in the air between us, making it hard to breathe.

"Are you hungry?" I ask. There are so many questions I want to ask, but each and every one feels like a minefield I'm not ready to navigate.

"No. I ate earlier."

My stomach drops. Today was supposed to be about us. Spending time together, enjoying a meal and a few drinks together like old times. Instead, he left me and did it somewhere else. Away from me. The thought bruises my battered heart further. Something has to give, and I'm at a loss for what that is. I bite my lip in an effort to stem the hurtful words bubbling in my throat.

"Where were you?"

He drops his gaze and toes off his shoes. "It doesn't matter," he mutters. "I needed space and I took it."

"Quinn, please. It feels like I'm the only one fighting here, and I can't do it alone. It's exhausting, and I'm tired. Talk to me, please."

He closes his eyes briefly and inhales deeply, but when they open again, they're cold and closed off. "Then stop." He shrugs, indifference coating his words.

I rear back in shock, my hands shaking. What does that mean? Stop fighting with him, or stop fighting for us?

“Look, I’m tired. All I want is a shower and some sleep. Anything else can wait.”

For the second time today, I watch his back as he strides away, his callous words and the bomb he just dropped on me floating in his wake.

I wish I was the type of person who could shut down on command. I’m tired, and I need sleep. Instead, my mind is all over the place, refusing to let me succumb to exhaustion.

After Quinn’s shower, he parked himself in front of the TV. I retired to the bedroom, and not even a bath with a glass of wine could relax me. I went to bed without a single word being said between us.

I’m feeling defeated, emptiness sitting cold and heavy where the burning desire to fix things once sat. I can’t fight for someone who doesn’t want me to fight. My body tense when I hear the bedroom door open. I don’t ever close it, but I felt the need to create some kind of barrier between us. I feel the covers move and then the faint sound of his body sliding into bed. I don’t move, expecting that to be the end of it. I’ll wait till his breathing evens out before getting up and making a bed on the couch. Instead, he moves closer till he’s pressed up against my back. His arm snakes over me, taking my hand and tangling his fingers with mine.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said.”

His voice is whisper soft in the darkness, his familiar heat and scent wrapping around me. It should warm me, but all I feel is cold. Words are poisoned thorns that embed themselves so deep you can never get rid of it. It festers until you and everything you thought you knew becomes a warped version of what once was.

He’s waiting for me to say something. He knows I’m not asleep. He knows my breathing patterns as well as I know his, but I can’t answer him. His words and actions from today sliced me to my core, and I don’t have it in me to fight right now. Everything between us feels forced and has for a while

now. I'm scared. I'm scared because it's slowly dawning on me that maybe what's wrong between us can't be fixed.

"I just...I just need you to be patient with me right now. Please tell me you understand."

I don't. I don't understand anything. I don't understand why he can't just tell me what's wrong. We've never had any secrets or lies between us. At least not big ones. Big ones that matter. I haven't changed, so that means that something's changed within himself. And it's something that he can't or won't share with me. But I don't say anything of that. Instead, I squeeze, tightening my fingers around his, hoping that holding on as tight as I can will be enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BAILEY

HOW IS it possible to feel someone before you see them?

The jingle of the bell is faint against the sound of the pounding rain outside, but I know even before I look that it's Kallan.

"I've closed up early," he says, his deep voice rumbling over my skin. I give a little shiver, unsure if it's because of the blast of cold air that accompanied the open door, or something else. Something I don't want to inspect too closely.

"Yeah, not much happening in weather like this." I drag my eyes from him, taking in the sheets of water obscuring everything beyond the faint glow of the streetlamp outside my store. "It sure came out of nowhere."

I don't relish walking home in this, so I called Quinn earlier to ask if he could take off early and pick me up. When he didn't answer, I sent him a text, and I'm still waiting.

He looks around, wiping away stray drops from his cheek.

"Where's Olivia?"

"It's her day off."

Which means we're alone.

"I brought my truck. There's no way we're walking in this."

I bite my lip, hesitating. It's highly unlikely that Quinn will pull himself away from work long enough to come to fetch me, but I hate this feeling of inconveniencing Kallan.

“I can get a ride-share. I’m sure you’re eager to get home in this weather.”

He doesn’t need to say the words. His look screams that I’m being ridiculous.

His truck is warm and smells like him. I take a deep breath, savoring the scent on my tongue. It’s rich and earthy—freshly cut wood with subtle hints of resin and sap.

It only intensifies when he gets in, slamming his door and shutting out the world outside. I try to ignore it, try to ignore how every breath seems to saturate every single part of my body. It’s an exercise in futility because how does one ignore breathing?

Then stop, Quinn’s voice echoes through my mind. Discomfort tightens my throat, and I try to distract myself by buckling my seatbelt.

From the moment Kallan stepped into my store, something felt different. I don’t know if it’s the fight with Quinn or the weather putting me in a melancholy mood, but whatever it is, being alone with Kallan feels dangerous. And I find myself not caring.

“I don’t want to go home.”

My words are my thoughts given wings, flying out of my mouth without my permission, but it takes only a second to decide that even if I could, I would not take them back. I don’t want to face an empty apartment yet again. I don’t want the voices of strangers on the TV to be my only companions. I want to have a meal with someone who doesn’t look at me with a face painted in irritation. I want to have a conversation with someone that really looks at me. Who smiles at me and treats me as if my words are important.

I just want.

I glance at him, taking in his messy hair, damp from the rain, and the scruff lining his jaw, and it suddenly makes me wonder. What does he look like in the morning just as he wakes up? When his eyes are still heavy-lidded with sleep? Is

he one of those people who wakes up quickly, or does he take his time, dragging himself to wakefulness in stages?

“What do you want to do?”

Seconds feel like they drag into minutes when his eyes catch mine, and even the darkness in the truck can't mute the intensity in them. It creeps under my skin, flustering me, so I look away, forcing my gaze to the side. The rain hasn't let up. In fact, it's pouring down even harder, drops ricocheting off the windscreen like bullets, turning the world outside of our little cocoon blurry and chaotic. A true reflection of my life, I muse silently, and I don't need a mirror to see that the smile tugging at my lips is sardonic.

I press my fingertips against the window, the glass cool under my skin, and trace the erratic paths of the raindrops.

The silence in the truck should be heavy and uncomfortable, but when I glance at Kallan, I see none of that. All I see is patience and understanding.

I know my phone screen will be blank, so I have nothing to rush home to.

“I could eat something,” I murmur, wondering if he has anything at home waiting for him. I hold my breath, waiting for his answer. I should want him to apologize and say that he needs to get home. I shouldn't want to spend time with him, but tonight, I need him to take this loneliness away. Even if it's just for an hour. Even if it is selfish.

Instead, he doesn't say anything. He turns the key in the ignition and carefully pulls onto the road.

The restaurant is not too busy when we walk in. I guess most people would think it's crazy to be out in weather like this, but I'm not. I'm just happy to be with someone.

A little voice whispers that it's not just anyone I'm happy to be with. I could have gone to Amelia and soaked up the unconditional love I'd get from Darby and Ethan. I could have gone to Nathan's pub, Frosty Frogs, or any of my friends. I even could have taken dinner to Quinn's work.

Then stop, Quinn's voice echoes through my mind again.

I'm lost in my thoughts, unaware of my surroundings, so my breath catches in my throat when Kallan's hand lands on my hip, a slight pressure pulling me closer to him. The weight of it against me speeds up my pulse, spreading heat through my bloodstream.

"Damn, didn't see you there," a man says, with an apologetic smile before he's on his way.

"Sorry," Kallan says, and he's so close I can feel his breath against my cheek, the warmth of it sending shivers down my neck. His hand trails slightly down my hip, leaving a path of heat in its wake before dropping altogether, and for the tiniest of seconds, I feel bereft. As if I'm mourning something I lost without even knowing I had it in the first place. Disconcerted, I take a step forward, and without thought, my hand rises, and I settle my palm directly over the place his hand had just been.

The waitress leads us to our table, and my mind is all over the place. I've been attracted to Kallan since I met him, but it hasn't been anything like this. Why now? Why does this attraction feel like it's taken on a life of its own?

"It helps to talk about it."

I startle back to my surroundings, annoyed that, once again, I drifted off. Shaking my head, I focus back on Kallan. I need to keep it together.

"Talk about what?"

"Whatever's stolen the smile from your eyes."

"Talking about it feels wrong."

"Why?"

I shrug, feeling uncomfortable. Discussing Quinn and our problems with a man I'm attracted to would make me feel as if I'm betraying Quinn. Even the time we've spent together, no matter how platonic, makes me feel like I'm being disloyal. And I am, in a way. It feels like I'm being reckless by spending time with him. That I'm inching open a door that should stay firmly closed. Except for that one look we shared,

which could have meant anything, Kallan has given me no indication that he sees me as anything other than a friend, but it doesn't matter. It is my thoughts and feelings that matter. I can't admit that to Kallan. It would make things between us awkward, and even though I know it's wrong, I don't want to lose this friendship we're building.

"Look," he says, bending forward and leaning on his crossed arms. "I'd like to think we've become friends," I nod, encouraging him to continue, "and as your friend, I want you to know you can talk to me. Sometimes, it helps to get an outside perspective on things."

His words confirm that our relationship is completely platonic, and I should be relieved because there are a million reasons why that should be a good thing. Instead, my heart squeezes, and I'm battling a lump in my throat. It's stupid, but it just adds to the feeling of rejection that's been squatting in my heart since the last fight I've had with Quinn.

The waitress comes over to take our orders, saving me from having to reply and potentially embarrass myself.

"Does that advice apply to yourself?" I ask once the waitress has left.

"It's not easy, but I try. I used to be of the mindset that everyone is a fortress. It took a very special person to show me that we don't always have to carry our burdens alone."

"Ugh. Talking to you is frustrating," I say, falling back in my chair.

"Why is that?"

"You keep giving me little crumbs about your life. You're here for a fresh start. Blood doesn't make you family. A special person gave you good advice. You know I'm a woman, right? And not knowing stuff is like waving a ball of catnip in front of a cat and saying she can't have it. It's maddening."

He smiles, and I startle. It's not a simple tipping of his lips. It's a full one. One that actually displays teeth.

"Okay, quid pro quo. I'll trade a question for a question. And you can get to go first."

“Just one?”

“Just one,” he confirms with a nod.

We stare at each other while I debate what I want to know the most.

“Why did you need a fresh start?”

“Straight for the throat, huh?”

I shrug, not in the least sorry. If I’m only getting one question, I’m making it count.

He blows out a breath, looking down at the table. When he looks up again, his face is set in a mask.

“Growing up was a bit...I guess you could say challenging. Before I was born, my mom was a chorus girl and did okay for herself. She was quite a looker. One day, some guy rolls into town. You know the kind—a high roller throwing money around and promising her the world. Well, that world consisted of knocking her up and then disappearing on her. She lost her job and had to resort to...other means to provide for us. That was the beginning of the end for her. That kind of lifestyle wears on you, and I think she turned to drugs and booze to cope. I have a few happy memories of the early days, so I think, in the beginning, things weren’t too bad, but as she got older life got tougher, and she lost herself. The more she lost herself, the more I was left to take care of myself. I fell in with a bad crowd and did things—jobs I’m not proud of—to earn some money to keep Mom and I going.”

“How old were you then?”

“Around fourteen, fifteen.”

“That’s so young,” I breathe, struggling to comprehend what that must have been like. I have my issues with my mom, but at least I had a home and food every day.

He shrugs. “When it comes to surviving, age doesn’t matter much. You do what you need to do. When a couple of days go by without any food in your belly, you learn real quick to boot your morals out the door. I’m not proud of what I’d done, but at least it made me understand my mom’s choices

better. She once told me while high that she should have done things differently. That she only kept me because she thought my sperm donor would come back.”

“Damn, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know if she really meant it or if it was the drugs talking. She was fighting a lot of demons. When she was sober, she wasn’t bad.”

I have a feeling that Kallan’s definition of “bad” and mine might be two completely different things, but I don’t voice it. Opening up like this must make him feel very vulnerable, and I suspect that’s not something he does often.

“Where were her parents? Why didn’t they help her?”

“My grandmother was a very devout woman. She didn’t approve of Mom’s choices, so she had no interest in her problems.”

“Was? Is she still around?”

He shrugs. “No idea. And I don’t intend on ever finding out. I have no place in my life for people who can turn their backs on somebody just because they don’t conform to their vision of what that person should be. Anyway, lucky for me, I met someone who helped me straighten myself out. If not for them, I’m not sure where I’d be today. Jail, most probably. Or dead.”

Just the thought of it makes me shudder. I haven’t known Kallan for long, but the thought of him not being in the world, is something I don’t want to think about.

“And your mom? Where is she now?”

“Her lifestyle finally caught up with her. Or maybe she finally just had enough. Came home one day to find her dead. She overdosed.”

I reach out and take his warm hand in mine. I know it all happened in the past, but I still want to give him comfort. I cannot imagine growing up the way he did.

“I’m so sorry all that happened to you.”

He's shaking his head before I've even stopped talking. "Don't be. It was hard, and do I wish my childhood was different? Yes, I do. I wish my mom didn't have to lead the life she did and that her story didn't end the way it did, but it did. No amount of wishing will change things. And at the end of the day, all of that played a part in shaping me into the person I am now. So, to answer your question, my childhood and the memories associated with it are part of why I wanted a fresh start."

"And the other part, does that have—"

"Nope," he says, interrupting me. "That's a different question, and you only get one. Now it's my turn."

I make the most innocent face I'm capable of, hoping he'll let me off the hook and ask something else. Something easy and mundane, like where I went to school or where do I see myself in ten years. However, that last one might be difficult to answer right now.

I should have known better. The side of his mouth quirks into that barely-there smile, but it's enough to tell me he's not falling for it.

"Suddenly, my problems feel so small." I sigh, dropping my eyes to my finger that's tracing squiggly lines on the tablecloth.

"Hey, don't do that," he says, ducking down his head to catch my eye. "Don't compare or minimize what you're feeling. You're entitled to your feelings, no matter how big or small."

Captivated, I stare at him. Who is this normally stoic and quiet man in front of me? Since meeting him, I've felt that he has a story to tell, but it's just now starting to dawn on me that he has so much more depth to him than I thought. Depth that he hides away from the world. Just like his vulnerabilities.

"I didn't realize you were so observant."

"I might not say much, but I see a lot, especially when I'm looking."

What does he mean by that? I peer into his eyes, trying to discern if there's a deeper meaning behind his words. His eyes don't give anything away, his stare steady on me, so I shrug it off, deciding I'm just trying to overcomplicate things—attribute meanings to things that aren't there.

“What's the question again?”

“Why have you stopped smiling?”

“I smile all the time.”

“Stop deflecting. You know what I'm talking about.”

“Things have been a bit difficult at home.”

“With your husband?” he prompts when I don't continue.

I nod, swallowing heavily. “I don't think he loves me anymore.”

This is the second time I've admitted it in the span of a few days, and it hurts just as much as the first time. He's quiet for so long I think he's not going to say anything, and the silence becomes unbearable, ratcheting up my discomfort. We haven't known each other long, and I know he asked, but still, I'm embarrassed that I've unloaded on him.

My smile is stiff. “Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything.”

“No, don't apologize. I insisted. It's just...” His voice tapers off, but I can see his mind working as if he's working through what he wants to say. “I find that extremely hard to believe.”

My boy stiffens at his implication that I'm lying.

“You're beautiful. Smart. Funny. You have a healthy appetite.” His grin is damn cheeky with that last one. “I cannot conceive your husband not loving you.”

“I'm all that?” I say, trying to sound casual despite my racing heart.

His nod is offhand like he's just stating a fact and not giving me a compliment. So simple and casual, but to me, it means everything. When last has someone made me feel like I was any of those things?

“Tell me about him.”

“Quinn?” I ask, stalling. I’ve answered Kallan’s question, and now I find I don’t want to talk about Quinn anymore. I don’t want thoughts or words of him intruding into this moment. It feels as if our current situation is souring every part of my life, and I want to keep this moment for myself.

“How long have you known him?”

“Always,” I say, shrugging. “He’s been in my life for as long as I can remember.”

“And how long have you been together?”

“Always,” I say again, watching his face fold into a frown. “I’ve never been with anyone but Quinn.”

The waitress arrives to deliver the food I’ve completely forgotten we’d ordered, and when she leaves, Kallan’s still frowning.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m just surprised.”

“Well, you look like you have certain thoughts on that,” I say, a bit defensively, remembering my words to Hannah.

“Bailey, I’m not judging. I’m the last person who *has* the right to judge anyone. But I’m not going to lie, if what you said is true—about your husband not loving you—he’s the biggest fool on the planet.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

QUINN

“WHAT ARE you doing here, bro?”

I don't look up as Nathan drops down on the chair across from me. Don't know what I was thinking, coming here. I want to be alone.

“I think it's obvious.” Bringing the glass up to my lips, I take a sip, savoring the taste of the cognac as it slides smoothly down my throat. Cognac is a drink that epitomizes luxury and decadence, and a top-shelf one—like the one that I'm currently swirling around in my glass—that's been aged in French oak barrels for a minimum of four years comes with a hefty price tag. A year ago drinking even one would have been out of my reach. Tonight, I'm on my fourth. The sense of pride and accomplishment that fills me is something I'll never take for granted. I deserve it after pouring my heart and soul into work for so long.

“That's not what I mean. Where's Bailey?”

My scowl is instant. I came here to get away from all of that shit. To quiet my mind for a bit.

“Just because we're married doesn't mean we have to fucking do everything together.”

“Whoa, easy man. What's crawled up your ass?”

I shrug because there's no way I'll tell him. Just because he's my brother doesn't mean he needs to know everything about me.

Frosty Frog is bustling tonight, and I let my eyes roam, avoiding his stare that I can feel burning my face. They settle

on Mya, a couple of tables over, offloading a round of drinks at a table filled with guys, a smile on her face. She's always smiling. Nathan's known her almost as long as I've known Bailey, but whereas Bailey and I dated and got married, they've always only been friends. As far as I know.

"Have you ever tapped that?"

Nathan's gaze follows mine, and I'm just in time to catch the scowl on his face as he watches the guys ogling her ass as she walks away. Objectively I can say she has a nice ass, but it does nothing for me. Once she's disappeared from sight, he looks away from the table. Yeah, there's definitely something there.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just ask that." His eyes are flashing, his mouth set into a tight line.

"That right there is why I ask," I say, pointing my finger at him.

"It's never been like that with us. I'm just...protective over her. And I'm not about to mess up our friendship for a quick roll in the hay."

"Smart man," I hum, taking another sip. The cognac is finally working its magic, curing some of the tension that's taken up permanent residence in my body. There's only one other thing that can make me feel as relaxed as I'm feeling right now, but I cut that thought off immediately. Don't want a boner in the middle of Frosty Frogs. "It's good to play the field. Live large while you can before life ties you down."

"What the hell has gotten into you?"

His question has resentment bubbling, jonesing to be let out. He's had it so damn easy, whereas I lost everything.

"What would you have done if you didn't have this place?"

His eyebrows rise in question.

"If Uncle James,"—I can't hold back the sneer at the mention of his name—"didn't give you all this on a silver platter." A few drops of cognac hit my hand, and I lick it off,

making a mental note to keep the sweeping gestures for the hand not holding my drink. It's a damn waste.

Nathan leans forward in his chair, his scowl intensifying.

“He didn't hand me a damn thing on a silver platter. Summers, while you were off picking blueberries and having the time of your life, I was here, learning how to brew and blend beer. Instead of spending time with my friends, I was working ten hours a day learning the ropes of this business.”

“And then he retired, and you now own it. Like I said, silver platter.”

He shakes his head. “You know I used what Mom left me as a down payment, and I pay a percentage of my profits monthly till the debt is settled.”

He pushes away from the table and stands up.

“I don't know what the hell is up with you, but I'm not going to talk to you if you're like this. When you stop being a dick, come find me.”

Just before the crowd swallows him up, he turns to me. “None of your drinks are on the house tonight.”

Fucker. He got his dream. Bailey got her dream. Me? I got nothing. Those blueberries he was sneering at? They are all I ever wanted. My summers weren't just about picking. It was learning everything about the process. How to prepare the soil, the correct harvesting techniques, and how to dry them. There wasn't anything I didn't know about blueberries. And then Grandpa died, and I lost it all.

Forcing myself not to think about it, I swallow the rest of my drink in one gulp and slam my glass down. The past and all the shit that comes with it have been on my mind a lot lately, and I don't know why. I work hard. I'm successful. I earn a hefty paycheck. I just reeled one of our biggest clients, and Phillip and my colleagues treat me like I walk on water. Phillip outright told me that if I keep it up, I'll have my own office on the third floor. Everyone knows what that means. Only partners get to have an office on that floor.

Who needs fucking blueberries.

I'm done here. Seeing Nathan blew the peace I was looking for out the water so there's no use in staying here. Getting up, I throw a couple of bills onto the table. If it's not enough, sue me. My brother can deal.

The cool air outside is a slap to the face, and I take a deep breath. There was a time when I could sit and listen to the sounds of nature for hours. Now I can't stand quiet. At least most of the time.

It's still early, and I'm feeling wired. I don't want to go home. Once I walk through that door, there will be searching looks, silent recriminations, and questions I don't want to fucking answer.

So instead, I turn left instead of right, the street taking me to a door that I don't have to open. One that will open for me. A door that contains a warm body that I can sink into. One that won't ask questions or say a word about the cognac on my breath and makes me forget who I used to be and who worships the person I've become.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BAILEY

“OKAY, PEOPLE, listen up,” Hannah says, clapping her hands. “We have a few hours till the little savages descend. You all have your tasks. Let’s make every minute count.”

Grabbing as many bags as I can, I head to the spare room. It’s going to take a couple of trips to cart everything. I’m about halfway through hanging up outfits on the kids’ garment rack Hannah rented for the day when she pops her head in the room.

“How’s it going?”

“Good. When I’m done here, I’ll start on the other stuff,” I say, eyeing the shoes, crowns, wands, and foam swords scattered around the room. “How many kids did you say were coming?”

“Fifteen. Remind me again why I’m doing this?” She’s completely frazzled as she sinks down on the bed, running her hand through her hair.

“Because you love Violet and Iris, and you want to see them happy on their birthday.”

She nods. “I do. But it hit me last night. They won’t remember a damn thing about this party next year. I mean, who remembers much from when they were four years old? Is this stress really worth it?”

“True, they might not. But they’ll remember it tomorrow and even next week and next month. And tomorrow morning when you wake up, all this stress will be over, and you’ll have two very happy girls.”

She gets up and smacks a kiss on my cheek. “I knew I kept you around for a reason.”

“We’re a match made in heaven,” I chuckle. “I can’t live without your dip, and you can’t live without my pep talks.”

Hannah walks over to the shoes and starts lining them up. “Don’t forget to change into your outfit.”

“I’m still pissed that Rose got Princess Jasmin, and I’m stuck with Belle.”

She shrugs. “You sell books and Belle loves books.”

“Yeah, but Jasmin’s costume is so much cooler.”

“You’ll get over it,” she teases.

I shouldn’t complain. Being Belle means Quinn’s outfit is the Beast, and it fits in perfectly with his grumpy attitude lately.

“So, why do you have so many outfits here? There must be at least thirty.”

“Try forty,” she mumbles. “Kids can be ruthless. I didn’t want any Black Friday rumbles breaking out over an outfit. Have you heard from Quinn yet?”

I shake my head and busy myself hanging up a little prince costume. It’s so damn cute and tiny. I’m trying my best to keep my annoyance with him under wraps. We committed to helping Hannah and Aidan with Violet and Iris’ birthday party months ago, but once again, work trumps everything. He promised me he wouldn’t be long when he sprung it on me that he had to go in to work for a bit. I’m trying to stay positive and believe he’ll stick to his word, but it’s hard. I’ve steadily been losing faith in his word.

“Aidan said he wasn’t at the basketball game.”

My heart drops. Boys night. When he came home late. When his excuse was that he bumped into an old college friend. My hands tremble as I take in a deep breath. All these excuses. Is it really because he’s working late? Or is it something else? I banish that thought as quickly as it comes. It can’t be. Not Quinn.

“Work’s been kicking his ass lately.”

The silence is heavy with unasked questions, but like the good friend she is, she shrugs it off—for now. I know that later the questions will come.

“I can get Carter to help put up the photo booth. He’s going through those balloons like a pro.”

We both chuckle. I’m relieved at the subject change. Carter’s single, so he nabbed the role of court jester because of his alleged juggling skills. So, instead of overseeing an activity area, he gets to walk around, entertaining kids. He thought he escaped set-up duties, but Hannah torpedoed that when she put him in charge of blowing up the balloons.

“I’m sure Quinn will be here in time.”

It’s been crazy hectic. It felt like the kids all arrived at once, but fortunately, the picking of outfits went off without drama, and then they were sent on their way to have their photos taken. Bashing the pinata was only scheduled for later, so Piper, aka Rapunzel, graciously stepped in and took charge of taking the photos.

My job done, I finally got to go outside and was in awe of Hannah and Aidan. They transformed their backyard into a kid’s paradise. Aidan and Nathan were overseeing an obstacle course with a bouncy castle at the end, while Rose had a line of kids waiting to have their faces painted. Ryan and Aspen were off to the side, handing out bean bags and righting stacks of toppled tin cans. Maya was in her element, supervising kids slashing away at canvasses with paintbrushes.

Everything looked under control, so for the rest of the party, I helped Hannah ferry around drinks and snacks and diffuse the little spats that broke out here and there.

Once the last happily exhausted child left, we could relax. The kids had their fun day, which meant we could relax and kick back.

I check my phone for what feels like the hundredth time. I’m beyond mad. Quinn’s still not here, and all my calls and

messages have gone unanswered.

“I don’t know how you guys do it. I thought tourists were exhausting. Kids run rings around them,” Carter grumbles, sipping his beer.

There’s a beat of silence and we all burst out laughing.

“I never knew a child could scream so loud,” Ryan laughs, visibly shuddering through his laughter.

“I thought the neighbors were going to call 911,” Hannah’s laughing so hard she’s doubled over, clutching her side.

We’re laughing now, but when it happened, we all dropped what we were doing and ran, thinking that something horrible had befallen one of the children.

“Man, that kid took one look at your funny shoes, and that was it,” Aidan says, wiping tears from his eyes.

“They’re called crakows or poulaines,” Piper supplies helpfully through her giggles.

“That’s so random. How do you know all this shit?”

She shrugs. “Random stuff is kind of my jam.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Carter mutters, a scowl on his face. He took his job very seriously and was beyond offended when the little boy started screaming like he was some kind of deranged clown coming to drag him down a sewer or something.

“It wasn’t the shoes. It was his face.”

I stifle a sigh. Let the battle commence in three, two, one...

Carter doesn’t disappoint. “Is that so, baby Ryan?”

She rolls her eyes. “Just give it rest, Carter. It wasn’t cute then, and it still isn’t cute.”

“It was cute how you followed us around everywhere.”

“I was eight, you clown.”

His trademark cocky smirk is playing on his lips, his eyes shining with challenge, while hers shine with annoyance. He

loves the verbal battles they have. Rose, not so much.

“Jester, baby Ryan. Get your facts straight.”

“Well your face looked like a clown.”

“That’s all on you. You painted it.

All of us drew the line at having our faces painted except Carter. He didn’t stop bugging Rose until she gave in with a scowl.

Rose huffs. “Just so you know, you juggle like shit.”

Quinn steps out onto the patio, and just like that my mood sours. I watch as he walks up to us, a big smile on his face. He looks very happy for someone who had to spend half their Saturday in an office.

“Hey everyone,” he says, walking up to me and bending down to kiss me. I turn my head, and he gets my cheek instead.

I feel eyes on me, and I know I shouldn’t have, but I’m mad at him. He let me down. He let all of us down.

The chorus of hellos that greet him is subdued, and his smile dims.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he says, flashing his *please forgive me* smile at Hannah and Aidan. It’s always been a potent weapon in his get-out-of-trouble arsenal when he was younger, but we’re older now, and somehow, it feels a little...lackluster. And being late would mean you still made it to the party, but the party is over, so this goes way beyond late. He ghosted both me and Aidan when we tried to get a hold of him.

I want all those words to spew out of my mouth and hopefully wash him in shame, but I can’t. Not in front of everyone.

“I got held up at work and couldn’t get away earlier,” he continues, and I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes. If only I had a dollar for every time he said that.

“It’s cool, man,” Aidan says. “A heads-up would be nice next time, yeah?”

“There won’t be a next time,” he promises, but as I’ve unfortunately come to learn, his promises mean shit right now.

I get up and walk inside, not wanting to stick around, and listen to his empty excuses. Anger and resentment are twisting my stomach into knots, and I can’t stand to be around him right now.

I’m unscrewing the cap off my beer when Quinn walks in.

“Where’s the twins?”

“They’ve gone home with Hannah’s parents. Something about early plans in the morning,” I mumble, not meeting his eyes.

Don’t make a scene in front of your friends, Bailey, I remind myself.

I watch as he grabs a beer from the fridge and takes a long swallow. He lowers the bottle, and then we’re staring at each other.

“What was that outside?”

“Seriously?” For the second time today, I have to stop my eye roll.

“What? I’m here now, aren’t I?”

I snort. “Don’t do me any favors.”

“Fuck, Bailey. Can we not start this shit today?”

“Sure,” I say, nodding. “I won’t *nag*. I won’t be *dramatic*. I won’t start on how you embarrassed me today. Or how you not only let me down but your friends as well. Or how you strolled in here, not a care in the world. Or how you don’t give a fuck about anything but what you want.” My voice is practically a hiss by the end.

“Aidan’s cool. You’re the only one making this situation worse than it is.”

“He’s not cool. He’s being polite,” I say, frustrated with his obtuseness. “You know, you can blame work only for so long

before people get sick of your shit.”

Once again, the silence between us stretches. Nobody warned me when I said my vows that “for better or worse” would be so damn hard. I thought “for worse” would be issues like not agreeing on something and arguing until we both compromise. Or taking turns being strong when the other is weak. Or occasionally putting yourself second. Things like that. I never thought it would mean feeling like you’re existing in a marriage for one, and you’re the only one fighting for that happy ever after.

Laughter drifts from outside, and it makes me sad. I want to be out there without a care in the world. I want to snuggle up next to Quinn, his arm thrown over my shoulders, enjoying a fun evening with our friends.

“Bailey,” he sighs. “What do you want me to do? Quit my job? Would that make you happy?”

I shake my head. “No. You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to pin this on me and make me the bad person. I don’t know what the hell is going on with you, but for both our sakes, I hope you snap out of it quickly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.”

“It means that I’m sick and tired of your crappy attitude. There’s only so much I can put up with.”

I tap my finger on the beer bottle, Hannah’s earlier words bubbling under the surface. Do I want to say anything? A question like that, hell, even an insinuation, is something that can never be taken back.

Quinn is many things—good things and bad things, like all of us—but a cheater? No. Never that. We might be going through a hard time, but we’ve always had such a strong bond born out of our love and our history. He’d never hurt me like that. At least that’s what I always believed.

“Just say it.”

“Say what?”

“I know you, Bailey. You have something on your mind,” he says, tapping his head. “I can see it working.” He gestures at me with his beer bottle. “Seeing that, once again, I’m the bad guy, you might as well get it all out.”

Did I imagine a hint of a sneer in his voice? His words are condescending enough that it’s possible.

“You didn’t mention that you missed the last boys night.”

I peer into his eyes, trying to gauge his reaction.

“I told you. I bumped into Craig. We went for drinks.”

“You did. But you didn’t mention that it was before. You made it sound like it happened after.”

His eyes narrow, his posture becoming defensive. “What are you implying?”

I sigh. “Nothing, Quinn. Absolutely nothing.”

“You sure? Because for a minute there, it sounded like you were accusing me of something.”

The words are so horrible that not even he can say them.

“All I’m saying is that I hardly know what’s going on in your life anymore. I’m your wife. We’re supposed to share things. We’re supposed to be involved in each other’s lives. What we’re doing is not healthy. Surely you can see that?”

“All I can see is that I have an ungrateful wife who keeps busting my balls when all I’m doing is trying to provide for us.”

I swallow thickly. He did not just say that.

“Fine, Quinn. From now on, I’ll keep quiet. ”

And I will. I’ve seen a side to Quinn these last few weeks that’s left me reeling. The way he talks to me is either indifferent or condescending, and it’s not just his words, it’s his actions as well. For the first time in my life, I’m filled with doubt. Does he even still love me? I’ve always taken it for granted, but now I’m not so sure. I’m not sure about anything anymore. But what I do know, is I can’t keep doing this to myself. I can’t keep living in this state. If he’s going through

something, something he doesn't want to share with me, I can't make him open up to me or allow him to take it out on me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BAILEY

“ARE YOU going somewhere?”

I continue brushing my hair and take in Quinn’s sleepy eyes. His hair is rumpled, and there’s an indentation in his cheek from his pillow. Averting my eyes again, I continue brushing.

“Does it matter?” Putting my brush down, I turn around, leaning against the sink. “Or did you maybe plan a special day for us? Where we go out and do things as a couple?”

The silence stretches as I wait for his answer. I thought getting confirmation that your husband doesn’t care about spending time with you would hurt more than it does. Instead, I find myself strangely apathetic while waiting for his answer. I shouldn’t be surprised. There’s no confusing Quinn’s actions of these past months, and there’s only so much a heart can take before it starts protecting itself.

“I guess a non-answer is an answer in itself. Don’t worry. I’m not going to try and force you to spend time with me.”

“Bailey, come on. That’s not true, and you know it. My life is just crazy at the moment, and—”

I hold up my hand, cutting him off. “I don’t want to fight, Quinn. You’re free to do whatever it is you do these days without me nagging or being dramatic. Just do me a favor. If you don’t plan on making family dinner tonight, let Mom know. I’m really not in the mood to field a thousand questions.”

I take a deep breath and brush past him, gathering my bag and keys.

“Bailey, I know things have been...difficult lately, but I do love you.”

Pausing, I turn to him and study his face. “I used to think so. But now I think you’re lying. To yourself and me.”

I’ve had a great day, and all it takes is walking into my parents’ house to have my mood plummeting. Is it sad that I would call scrubbing walls in preparation for painting a great day? Maybe. It’s tedious work, and my arms and hands were cramping towards the end, but there is a certain satisfaction in the physical labor. Between that and joking around with my friends, I managed a few precious hours to shut off from my own life.

I’m so proud of Aspen and the progress she’s made with the shelter. When I first saw it, I had my doubts. Its previous owner had died, and the place had been abandoned while her son had tried to sell it. By the time Aspen bought it, it was rundown and needed a lot of work before it could start operating again. I thought she was crazy taking on such a big project but rescuing animals is her dream, and if anyone can make it work, she can.

But now, everything comes crashing back. Quinn’s car isn’t in the drive, and I have no idea if he’s coming. He hasn’t bothered to let me know, and if it wasn’t for the fact that I would have to try and explain his absence, I would have preferred him not to be here.

Whichever way, I’m not looking forward to spending an evening pretending in front of my family.

“There you are. I was starting to think you weren’t coming,” Amelia says, plucking the bottle of wine from my hands and heading to the kitchen.

“As if not coming is an option. Pour me a glass,” I call after her, grinning when she throws up a hand. Sometimes, I

think the only thing that gets me through these family dinners is the wine.

“Hey, Dad. How was fishing?” He tilts his head absently, and I give him the obligatory peck on the cheek. A glance at the TV confirms that he’s watching one of his favorite fishing shows. Growing up, Sundays were known as Fishing Day, and to this day, his routine has never wavered. After church, he’d pack his truck, and off he went for the rest of the day. And if the weather didn’t permit it, he would be out back in the shed, rearranging his tackle box or whatever it is you do to take care of fishing...stuff. Not that I know anything about that. He took me once, and I was so bored I fell asleep, losing the pole in the process. Needless to say, he never took me again.

“Not one single bite,” he grumbles, his eyes glued to the TV.

“That’s too bad.”

“Enjoying the show?” I ask Gabriel with a smirk on my way to the kitchen, a long-suffering sigh his only answer.

“Bailey, you’re here,” Mom says, pausing long enough to give me a quick peck on the cheek.

“Why wouldn’t I be? I never miss these things.”

“These things?”

“You know what I mean,” I mumble, stifling my sigh at her frown and snatching the glass Amelia thrusts at me.

“Where’s Quinn?”

“Not sure.” I shrug, taking a healthy sip and turning to Amelia, hoping to change the subject. “Where’s the kids?”

“Gabriel’s sister. We’re picking them up after.”

“What do you mean? He didn’t come with you?”

I sigh, cursing Quinn for not phoning Mom. “No, he had a few things he had to take care of.”

“But he is coming?”

I shrug again, grabbing a cherry tomato and popping it into my mouth. Mom looks me over from head to toe, her eyes narrowed, as if I've done something wrong, and looking long enough will point out exactly what that is.

“Call him,” she demands, her hands on her hips.

Amelia sniggers, and I throw her a dirty look.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because he's an adult, and I did remind him about dinner. I don't see the need to do it again or police his whereabouts.”

I'm not about to tell her that when I left this morning, I had the urge to lurk outside our apartment building and follow Quinn to see where he goes and what he gets up to. That a little seed of doubt has sprouted in the deepest part of me, and no matter how much I want to deny it light to grow, it's there now, its roots firmly planted.

“What kind of attitude is that? He's your husband, Bailey.”

“I'm well aware,” I grind out. “But that doesn't make me responsible for his whereabouts at all times.”

“What's going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Then prove it. Call him.”

I throw my hand up in frustration, not in the mood for one of Mom's lectures. Especially not her one-sided one, where Quinn can do no wrong, and I'm, as usual, the bad one. “Gosh, Mom, if you're so desperate to have him here, call him yourself.”

Annoyed with everything, my good mood from earlier destroyed, I march to the living room and throw myself down on the couch next to Gabriel. I'm aware that I'm acting like a child throwing a tantrum, but I don't care. I'd rather watch some man hooking—I squint at the TV—a shrimp than be subjected to Mom's interrogation.

We're just about ready to sit down for dinner when Quinn walks through the door. Seeing how Mom's eyes light up and how she rushes to hug him leaves a burning in my gut. Especially after the peck on the cheek and the interrogation I got. I shouldn't be surprised. It's always been like that, but it's never bothered me before. Their close relationship made me happy, but now, I can't deny that I'm jealous.

We take our places, and after Dad says grace, we tuck in. I try to concentrate on my food, but it's hard when even the slightest movement has my leg brushing against Quinn's.

"So, how is work going, Quinn?" Mom asks, and I have to suppress my eye-roll. His work has been consuming so much of his time that it's become like a third person in our marriage, and it's the last thing I want to hear about.

"Crazy busy," he says, sipping his beer. "My workload is insane."

"You poor thing," she tuts. "Stress is very bad for your heart. Don't forget to take time to relax and have some fun. You have to take care of yourself."

"Good luck with that," I mumble around a mouthful of peas. I've always hated the damn things, and even though I'm almost thirty, I still get the pursed mouth and disapproving look if I try and skip them. It's not worth the argument, so it's the first thing I eat just to get it over with.

"What was that?" he says, side-eying me.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"You should come fishing with me next week," Dad says, his eyes lighting up. "There's nothing better for relaxing."

I snort because there are a few things I can think of off the top of my head. One in particular, but what do I know? It's been so long that I'm practically a nun.

Across the table, Gabriel sniggers, and I'm just in time to see Amelia elbowing him in the side.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Amelia says, "have you and Quinn spoken about that house?"

“What house?” Quinn asks at the same time I mutter, “No.”

“There’s a house in our street going on the market soon which I think would be perfect for you. I mentioned it to Bailey a few weeks ago. She didn’t tell you?” I fidget under *the what the hell* look she’s giving me. This is exactly why I didn’t want to come tonight.

“No, she didn’t,” he says, shifting uncomfortably.

“Why ever not?” Mom accuses her eyes on me. “Didn’t you say you wanted to buy a house and start trying for a baby?”

“Yes, but you need to be able to relax to make that happen, so no.” Was that a tad bit snarky?

Gabriel coughs, trying to hide his grin behind his fist.

“Bailey, what’s gotten into you? You’ve been in a mood since you got here. I hope you’re not like that at home. It certainly doesn’t help with Quinn’s stress. Also, you’re not getting any younger, and the longer you wait, the harder it will be for you to conceive.”

“Mom, that’s uncalled for,” Amelia scolds.

I wait for Quinn to speak up, to defend me in some way, but he’s silent, looking down at his plate.

I put my knife and fork down, pushing away from the table.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going home.” I grab my bag and keys and turn to the table. I let my eyes briefly rest on Quinn before looking at Mom. “I’m not in a place where I can handle your criticism tonight, so I’m going to leave before I say something I’ll regret later.”

I’VE NEVER GIVEN much thought to the difference between day and night. It’s just a fact that night follows day. It’s just a fact that night follows day. But it’s as I’m in bed, the world

silent except for the quiet hum of the refrigerator, that the disparity between the two is displayed in full.

There's a reason why people say everything looks better in the morning. It's easy to distract yourself. The world is bustling, and there's always something to do or people to talk to, so you keep yourself busy, pushing the things you don't want to face to the back of your mind.

But when the world around you is hushed and shrouded in darkness, and your mind's defenses are down, that's when the ghosts of things you don't want to face creep out to haunt you. I guess there's a reason that most horror films happen in the dead of night. It's as if the darkness takes on a life of its own, forcing you to acknowledge things you can successfully hide during the light.

And I can't hide it anymore. I'm a people pleaser. I've always been a people pleaser, and thinking back on my life, I can't pinpoint the moment I became one. Was I born that way, or is it the age-old question of nurture versus nature, where the way I grew up influenced me to be this way?

Growing up, I always felt inadequate and unseen. Amelia was the firstborn and the golden child. Cody was the baby of the family and Dad's partner in crime.

"Bailey, you need to do the dishes. Amelia has an important test."

"Bailey, you can't go to your party. We're going to Cody's football game."

Those are refrains I've heard my whole life. When we got into fights, I was always the one who ended up in trouble. Cody broke a vase—it was my fault. Amelia's favorite sweater went missing—it was my fault. I learned to keep the peace, and it's only now that I'm starting to realize that in doing that, I've been putting myself second.

I never did anything special. I didn't fish, play football, or do ballet. I played with my friends, read a lot, and did average in school. I didn't shine, which meant I wasn't worthy of

attention, so I stepped back, allowing everyone around me to shine.

When Quinn came along, we developed a friendship that became closer as time went on. Finally, I felt as if I belonged, that I was special, and I did everything I could to hold on to that, to not jeopardize that in any way.

I've always given in to his demands. I went to his first pick of college instead of mine because he said he couldn't bear to be without me.

I wanted a small, intimate wedding, barefoot on the beach with family and close friends. Quinn and Mom insisted on a big, elaborate wedding. Quinn's reasoning was he wanted to show me off, and I gave in because it made me feel special that he was proud of me.

I wanted to move into the apartment on top of the bookstore that was left to me in my grandparents' will. Living rent-free would have meant buying a house a lot quicker. Quinn didn't like that idea. He said it would feel weird living there, and he wanted a place that was just ours with no ghosts of the past haunting us. It didn't make sense to me, but I gave in. If it made him happy, it would make me happy.

This last one is what hurts the most. I thought owning a home with a yard and having children was a dream we shared. In fact, I know it was something we both wanted—we talked about it often enough—and for Quinn to now change his mind without caring about what I want is something I can't overlook.

For all my life, I've sacrificed what I've wanted to keep other people happy, and I'm done. I'm tired down to my soul.

Kallan's words echo through my mind like a whisper in the dark—We only get this one life. What we do with it is up to us.

I don't want to wake up one day when I'm nearing the end of my life and realize that I've been a passenger in my own life. I don't want to have any regrets. It's time I start loving myself again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BAILEY

FROSTY FROGS is busy, but I luck out and find a spot at the bar. Looking around, I smile when I see Maya hustling through the busy crowds, somehow juggling four plates—which I'm sure is piping hot—and still managing to dodge flying arms and stumbling bodies.

After Kallan walked me home, I couldn't face another night in an empty apartment, so I made the impulsive decision to grab something to eat instead of my usual cooking for one. So here I am instead. The new me. Not the one sitting around at home waiting on Quinn. This place has always been our group's go-to spot, and most times, I'll be guaranteed to bump into someone I know.

“What can I get you, gorgeous?”

Swiveling back to the bar, I look up into a pair of beautiful gray eyes.

“You're new here,” I observe, taking him in. I can see why Nathan hired him. His stubble-covered jaw and the tattoos running up both his arms firmly put him in the crowd-pleaser category. And judging by the smile on his face as I take him in, he knows it.

“A few weeks,” he confirms. “Can't say I've seen you around. I would have remembered.”

I might not have a lot of dating experience, but I can spot a well-rehearsed line anywhere. I beckon him closer, and he leans forward, a quizzical look on his face.

“Is that one of the lines you study in the ‘How to become a good bartender’ manual?”

For a moment, I worry I might have offended him, but he barks a laugh, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “No, but it sure helps with the tips.”

“I bet.”

He’s utterly shameless, and we both laugh.

“So, what brings you here tonight? Just a drink, or are you looking to meet someone tonight?”

There’s a hint of suggestion in the set of his mouth and the way he’s looking at me, and for just a moment, I wonder what it would be like to have a random hookup. I’ve never had one of those. It’s only ever been Quinn. Just as quick as the thought enters my mind, it leaves, leaving me feeling deflated.

“Can’t a girl just go out for a drink?”

“Sure can. And if that’s all you’re looking for, stay right here,” he says, tapping the bar top, “and I’ll make sure it stays that way. The name’s Keegan,” he says, sticking out his hand.

“Bailey,” I say, shaking his hand and sharing a smile with him.

“Hey, dick. No flirting with family allowed.”

“I wondered where you were hiding,” I say to Nathan as he wraps his arms around me, enveloping me in his familiar scent.

“Hey, sis.”

“Sister? Can’t say I see the resemblance,” Keegan says, his eyes bouncing between us.

“The day she married my big bro, she became my sister. So hands off.”

“Just keeping the customers happy, boss,” he says, lifting his hands.

“So, go keep them happy. I’ve got this.” Nathan turns to me. “So, what are you doing here?”

“Quinn’s working late, and I wanted some company tonight.”

“Been doing that a lot lately, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah.” I sigh. I don’t want to think about it tonight.

Nathan drags a stool closer and sits close enough for our knees to touch. “What’s going on with him? He came in a while back and didn’t seem like himself.”

He was? Instead of coming home, he came here, choosing to spend his free time without me. It’s just another sign I can’t ignore that everything is not okay. But I can’t drag water from a stone. Unless he decides to talk to me there’s nothing I can do.

Nathan’s eyes are so much like his brother’s, the exact same shade of blue, but that’s where the resemblance stops. Quinn is clean-shaven and polished, and Nathan sports permanent stubble and has tattoos covering most of his arms. Nathan’s favorite accessories are his leather jacket and bike, whereas Quinn wears suits and ties and wouldn’t be caught dead on a bike. But despite their differences, they are brothers, and they love each other. I know that if there’s anyone I can talk to, it’s Nathan. The concern in his eyes leaves no doubt of that.

“I don’t know, Nathan. He won’t talk to me,” I say, shrugging helplessly. Every day that passes, it feels like I’m losing my husband a bit more.

Five minutes later, I’m seated at our usual booth, and Nathan’s setting down my beer and sliding in across from me.

There are definitely perks to being friends with the owner. He has a table permanently reserved for our friend group, so no matter how last minute it is or how busy the place is, we’re always guaranteed to get a table.

“Talk to me.”

“There’s not much to say. He’s never home but when he is, he’s moody and confrontational. I keep asking him what’s wrong, but all he ever says is that he’s busy at work and under pressure. I can’t get him to talk to me.”

“There’s nothing you can pinpoint?”

I bite my lip, hesitating. Do I confide in Nathan? But what is there to confide? All I have is suspicions, which could just be paranoia caused by the distance between us. And would it be fair to condemn Quinn based on that? Also, just the thought of it has me feeling lost. I’ve always been so sure of our love. Of our connection, and maybe I’m just being naive, but never in a million years would I have ever thought I’d be in a position where I even contemplated the possibility of Quinn being unfaithful.

“No. He was stressed when he was gunning for that promotion, but nothing like this. I thought it would get better when he got it, but it’s only gotten worse.”

I don’t want to think about it tonight. All we ever do is fight, and all I want is a couple of drinks and to relax.

“I’ll see if I can get him locked down this weekend. Take him fishing. Maybe he’ll talk to me.”

“You hate fishing.”

“Yeah, but he loves it. All for a good cause, right?”

I reach out and squeeze his hand. “You’re a good brother. I can’t remember when last he took time off to do that. So, enough about me. Tell me what’s been going on with you.”

“I want you to meet Cassie.”

“That’s the new girl you’re seeing?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring her by later. I need your stamp of approval.”

“Sounds serious.”

He’s never asked me for my input, but then again, Nathan’s never really been serious about any girl. It’s always made me hope that he might have some buried feelings for Maya. They’d be perfect together and everyone can see it, except for him.

He shrugs. “Might be. It’s about time I start thinking about settling down, you know?”

An hour later, I'm ready to leave. Maya sat with me while I had dinner. I've met Cassie. She seemed friendly enough, although the moment she found out I was Nathan's sister-in-law, she seemed a little bit too friendly, as if she was trying too hard. I hear my name being hollered. Looking over at the bar, I spot Andrew, a huge smile on his face, waving at me. I grin back because it's impossible to not smile when Andrew unleashes the full force of his smile on you. Grabbing his beer, he strides over to me, butterflies erupting in my stomach when I see Kallan following him.

"Do you mind if we join you?" Andrew asks, eyeing the empty booth across from me.

"Maybe she's waiting for someone," Kallan grumbles, flicking the back of Andrew's head.

Since Kallan and I had dinner, it feels as if things between us have shifted in some way, and he's looking at me now with a million questions swimming in his eyes.

"Just me." I smile and watch as they take their seats.

"You must have gotten here early to get a booth," Andrew says, looking around the pub.

"My brother-in-law owns this place. He always keeps a table available for his friends."

"That's so cool. You married well," he jokes, taking a sip of his beer. My smile slips a fraction, and the downturn of Kallan's mouth doesn't escape me. "Olivia isn't around by any chance?"

"Olivia?"

He shrugs when he sees my raised eyebrow. "She's cute."

"She's also nice," I warn, squinting at him.

"Everything okay, Bailey?" Maya asks, glancing between Kallan, Andrew, and me, an empty tray under her arm.

I introduce them and watch as she retreats behind the bar, sharing a few words with Nathan. A few minutes later, she's

back with a tray of shots.

“It’s on the house. Welcome to the neighborhood, guys.”

IT’S LATE WHEN I get home. One shot turned to two, which turned to three, and I’m feeling kind of floaty and warm.

Quinn’s sprawled out in front of the TV, a beer in his hand, and he’s looking at me when I step in.

“You’re home.” I can’t remember when last he’s been home before me.

“Where were you?” he asks, his eyes following my movements as I hang up my coat and toe off my shoes.

“Does it matter?” I’m so relaxed from all the drinks I had, but I’m also tired and not in the mood to talk to him. All we do is fight, and I don’t want to spoil a good evening.

For the first time, I wish he was working late. That I could get into bed and just revel in the carefree feeling I had tonight. God, I can’t remember the last time I laughed so much. It was so nice to just let my hair down and forget my empty existence for a while. I know reality will catch up to me, but not yet. But it seems that luck has deserted me tonight because he follows me to the bedroom.

“Of course, it matters. You’re my wife. The store closed hours ago and I worried.”

“Right,” I say with a chuckle.

“Why is that funny?”

“It’s funny because you say you were worried. You haven’t worried about what I get up to in, oh, I don’t know, forever. Most nights, I could be lying in a ditch somewhere, and you wouldn’t be worried. You’d actually have to think about me to be worried about me.”

Okay, maybe I did drink a bit too much. But I’m also annoyed. The one night he comes home early and I’m not here, he’s got questions.

“Wait, have you been drinking?”

“Yup,” A shower sounds amazing, so I walk into the bathroom, Quinn hot on my heels. “Imagine that,” I say, widening my eyes.

“What the hell has gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” I chuckle again, turning on the shower. “Nothing has gotten into me in a loooooong time.” Too long, in fact. I’m not even thirty, and the only way I get any kind of action is if I use Vlad. At least he’s never let me down. And now I kinda want to listen to Depeche Mode. Can’t go wrong with a classic eighties song.

I finally turn to Quinn and take him in. For a change, it doesn’t hurt looking at him. Instead, I feel...nothing.

“Who did you go with?”

“Oh, nobody you’d know. I was out ‘networking’.” That’s the phrase he uses when he gets home late, reeking of booze.

“Bookstore owners do not need to network,” he scoffs.

“Oh, sorry. My bad.” Tonight, he can say what he wants. I don’t care. He can stick his condescension up his ass for all I care. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m about to have a shower. You can close the door on your way out.”

“What’s going on with you? This isn’t like you.”

I shrug because he’s right. Normal me would be home, waiting for him to come home, wondering and stressing about us. But I don’t want to be her tonight. I want to be, *I don’t give a fuck about anything Bailey* tonight. Tomorrow will come soon enough. So I don’t say anything, instead giving him a pointed look. There’s no way I’m getting naked in front of him.

After an epic stare-down—one I could see between two gunslingers in the Wild West—he makes a sound of frustration and spins on his heels.

“Oh, and Vlad and I have a date tonight, so unless you feel like watching, I’d suggest sleeping on the couch,” I call to the sound of the bathroom door slamming.

I DRAG MYSELF out of bed, cursing the throbbing behind my eyes. I should have stuck with just beer. I shouldn't have let Andrew twist my rubber arm when he lined up shots.

When I finally stumble into the kitchen, Quinn's there, perfectly put together as usual, sipping a cup of coffee.

He watches in silence as I reach the holy grail, pouring myself a cup. I debate briefly whether I want to sit at the table, but all the questions I can see brimming in his eyes have me making a beeline back to the bedroom. Not now, satan.

“Bailey—”

I throw up my hand. Quid pro quo, Quinn. If I can't say anything, neither can you. It's a fair exchange.

Wrapped in a towel, my hair dripping down my back, I feel a million times better when I step into the room. Amazing what a cup of coffee, two Advil, and finding my backbone can do. No matter how much my head hurts, it's satisfying that, for once, I wasn't the one waiting at home. To be the one who doesn't need to question. I should have known that my happiness would be short-lived.

“I have a conference I need to attend next weekend.”

I look over to where Quinn's standing in the doorway, his keys in hand.

“That's short notice.” Normally he knows about these things months in advance.

“I know. I wasn't going to go, but management said the company needs representation, so tag you're it.” He shrugs.

“And?” I say, waiting for him to continue. Conferences don't happen often, but when it does, I always accompany him. We have breakfast together, and I do my own thing until dinner time, when they break for the day. Then we spend the evening together and use the Sunday to explore whatever location we're in.

I feel a spark of excitement. This could be just what we need. Some time away together, even if it's short.

“And what?” His tone is a bit frosty, obviously still a bit put out about last night.

“Where is it?”

“Boston.”

“You need me to take you to the airport?”

This is where he should be saying, “Don’t be ridiculous, we’ll catch a cab. Of course you’re going with me.”

Instead, he shakes his head. “I’m driving. I’ll be leaving Friday at lunch. It’s a big one, and I want to settle in and get a good night’s sleep before Saturday.”

Of course, it’s I and not us. Why would I have thought differently? I shrug and walk to the cupboard, not wanting him to see the hurt on my face.

“Look, I would have asked you to come, but it’s going to be jam-packed. We won’t have any time to spend together. You’ll get bored.” Bored in Boston? I don’t think so, but whatever. “It’s running longer than they normally do. We’re finishing up at lunch on Sunday, so I’ll be back by late afternoon.”

“It’s fine, Quinn,” I mutter, grabbing some jeans and a top. That damn headache is back, pounding at my temples.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

QUINN

THE FURTHER away we get from home, the more my shoulders relax. Our town's not small, but it's not huge either, and there's always the chance that someone can spot us.

I have loads of leave due, so it wasn't hard to get the day off. Justine sweet-talked Phillip, and because she's an intern, he didn't put up much of a fuss.

It was hard meeting Bailey's eyes this morning when I dropped a quick kiss on her lips. We treated conferences as a mini getaway, and I couldn't miss the hurt in her eyes. I was worried she'd see the lie on my face, but it was the best excuse I could come up with. It's not like I could say, "I need to get away without you because I need a break from you," or "I desperately need a couple of nights where I can fall asleep and wake up next to the girl I'm fucking."

I bet that wouldn't have gone down well.

As soon as Justine came running out of her apartment all my reservations went up in flames. Fuck, it feels good to do something just for me.

I have one hand on the steering wheel, the other cupping her leg which, is exposed by the tiniest pair of shorts known to man. I can't wait to get to the hotel and rip them off. I shift in my seat, trying to get more comfortable, forcing myself to listen to her instead of focusing on visuals. Soon enough, I promise myself.

My smile is indulgent while she's jabbering away at things she looked up for us to do while in Boston. I've done all those

things already, and I'm not interested in doing any of them again. If the weekend goes the way I want it to, we won't be doing much sightseeing at all.

Once we get to the hotel, the receptionist takes my credit card with a smile, and I'm thankful that Bailey and I decided to keep our finances separate. I grumbled a bit in the beginning because married people should share everything, right? I eventually gave in because it was purely a business decision because of her store.

At least now I won't have to try and explain away all the numerous charges on my credit card statement. I'm sure she'd have something to say about the flowers, the numerous restaurant bills, and the couples' package at Spa Solange. Then there's the charge for the tennis bracelet that's winking on Justine's arm. It cost more than I wanted to spend, but fuck the way she blew me after was something for the record books.

"This is amazing," Justine breathes, her eyes wide when we walk into our suite. She drops her overnight bag on the bed and walks over to the wall of windows. I told her to pack light, and like the good girl she is, she listened. "This view is stunning. You can see for miles."

With the amount of time we'll be spending in this room, I went all out. Two things were non-negotiable. A king-size bed and a tub that's big enough for two.

I hope she enjoys the view because this is as much of Boston as what she's going to see.

I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. She sighs and leans back against me, tilting her head up.

"You spoil me so much." Her voice is soft, her smile softer. But it's the look in her eyes that makes me uncomfortable. It's vulnerable. It's trusting. It's more than I deserve.

"You're worth it," I whisper, kissing her softly. And she is. Just not for me. Annoyed with the places my mind's going, I turn her in my arms. I didn't come here for self-reflection. I do enough of that whenever I have a quiet moment. Not that it's

helped me figure out this situation I'm in and why I'm doing it. At all.

She winds her arms around my neck, going on to the tips of her toes, and then her mouth is on mine. Sometime during this weekend, I'm going to fuck her against these windows, but not now. Right now, I want to play. I want to explore, so with my hands under her ass, I lift, and her legs wind around my hips. She squeals when I throw her on the bed.

“Do you want children?” Justine murmurs, her head on my shoulder, her nails raking down my chest. The day is creeping into twilight, starting to cast shadows in the room.

“I suppose. One day,” I say, running my fingers lightly across her hip, my voice as sleepy as I feel. It's been a long day with the drive and then the way we christened this bed.

“How many do you want?”

“Don't know. Haven't thought about it.”

I don't like her questions. It's casting shadows on top of dark places in my heart I don't want to think about. I've always pictured a girl with Bailey's chocolate hair and green eyes. Or a boy, again with Bailey's hair and eyes. I've never pictured any of them looking like me.

“I want two. A boy and a girl. The first one has to be a boy, and after that, a girl.”

“Why a boy first?” I don't really care why, but her silence invites me to ask the question.

“I have an older sister. I always wanted an older brother who could take care of me. You know, threaten all the creeps away.” She chuckles, and the way her tits rub against me has my damn cock twitching again.

Her words though—they hit too close to home, so I make some kind of noncommittal sound. Bailey has an older sister. Fuck, why is she on my mind so much?

“What's your dream holiday destination?”

Bailey and I stayed local for our honeymoon. Money was tight, so we did the mature thing and used the money an exotic trip would have cost on a car and our apartment. We said that once we were more settled, we'd splurge on a holiday. Fuck. I want to hit my head. Tell my mind to shut. The. Fuck. Up.

"I have a Pinterest board of all the places I'd like to see someday," Justine says when I take too long to answer. "Are you messy or neat at home? I bet you're messy. Your desk always looks like a hurricane's hit it."

Annoyed, I disentangle myself from her and sit up. I blow out a long breath, trying to reign in my impatience. It's not her fault I'm being an ass.

"What's with the twenty questions?"

She lifts herself onto her elbow, looking at me in bewilderment. "I'm just trying to get to know you. These are normal things to ask when you're dating someone."

"Yeah, but we have time. It should happen organically. It feels like you're forcing it."

Okay, maybe I should have counted to ten instead. I've let too much impatience shine through, but honestly, I don't care. I don't want to discuss a future with her. I want to live in the here and now.

"I'm sorry," she says, dropping her gaze. "It's just...we've been dating for a while now, and I don't know all that much about you or your life. I thought this weekend would be a perfect opportunity to get to know each other better."

I glance over at her, and I'm immediately entranced by the sight of her tits. They're bigger than Bailey's, and I was right. Her nipples are a lighter, rosy pink.

"No, I'm sorry," I say, pushing her back on the bed and settling over her. "I can be a moody bastard sometimes, and you don't deserve that."

I press a kiss to her neck, running my hand down her side, her hip, and her skin pebbles. "Let me make it up to you?"

"How?" She says, her breath speeding up.

Moving down her body, I grip her thighs, parting them. “You’re fucking flawless, I groan, pressing my face between her things and inhaling.

For now, Justine’s mine, and I’m not ready to give her up.

KALLAN

“THIS IS heaven,” Andrew whispers out of the corner of his mouth, his eyes darting all over the place. “There are women everywhere.”

You know that uncomfortable feeling you get when it feels like someone is looking at you? Yeah, times that by ten, and you’ll get close to how I’m feeling right now. My eyes meet those of a woman sitting towards the front. She’s turned around in her chair, her eyes focused on me, staring at me without blinking. She doesn’t look away while rummaging in her bag and popping a mint in her mouth. Another woman, who I’m assuming is her granddaughter, puts a cup of coffee down in front of her, and finally, she turns back to the front. But not before patting her hair and giving me a saucy wink. Damn, that’s a lot of purple.

I sink lower in my chair when a glance shows a few sets of eyes focused on us. He’s right. There are women everywhere. Women of all ages, shapes, and sizes. In fact, we’re the only two men in the whole damn place.

“What the hell kind of event is this anyway?” I’m thinking I should have asked him this question before I blindly agreed to come. It’s not too late, though. I could still duck out and wait Andrew out at the shop. Better, I could go for a few beers and something to eat. But then Bailey steps out from the back, and all thoughts of leaving fly right out of my head. She’s laughing at something the woman she’s with is saying, and fuck, it’s good to see her laugh. It’s been killing me to see the lines of sadness etched into her face. I can’t stand the feeling of helplessness that brings, and I would give my life savings to be able to carry the burden for her. But I’m well acquainted with grief and the process one must go through to get to the other side.

So, for now, all I can do is try and provide as much shelter against the storm she's experiencing. One day, the sun will shine for her again, and I'll be right there, ready to experience it with her. If she'll let me.

Andrew elbows me in the ribs, dragging my eyes away from Bailey.

"What?"

"I said, I don't know. Olivia said some or other author was doing a reading with a book signing after."

"What made you think this was a good idea? You haven't read a fucking book in your life."

There's no real heat behind my words because I'm keeping an eye on Bailey, who's moved to the front, her back to us while she's stacking some books on the rectangular table. Fuck, the way those jeans cups her ass wants to make me bite my knuckles, and when she bends forward, I shift uncomfortably in my chair. It takes real effort, but I manage to drag my eyes away. The last thing I want is for her to catch me staring and bust me for the creep I'm being.

"Just look around you," he says, but I catch him staring at Olivia.

"You realize a lot of these women are old enough to be your grandmother?"

"Yes, and a lot of them have daughters and granddaughters," he smirks, but before I can tell him he's full of shit, Bailey clears her throat and the room quietens down.

"Thank you all for coming. It is my honor to introduce you to Lorraine Hart." Applause breaks out, and Andrew and I dutifully clap along, him a lot more enthusiastically than me. "She has graciously agreed to do a reading for us from her latest novel, 'The Beastmaster's Virgin Conquest.' I know most of you here tonight have been beyond excited for this."

What. The. Fuck? The rest of Bailey's words are lost when I turn my head, glaring at Andrew who's eyes are wide, lips formed in an "o."

I'm still glaring when the woman starts reading, but then I realize what I'm hearing, and fuck... If only alien abduction was a thing. I'd make a poster volunteering. Anything to get me out of here.

My breath sped up as the moonlight painted his rippling abs in soft shades of purple.

"Who is your master?" he growled, the fire in his eyes and the vibrations of his impossibly deep voice a match that ignited an inferno of want and need deep in my core. I whimpered helplessly at all the unfamiliar sensations ripping through my body, reducing me to my most primal state of being.

"Say it!"

"You are!" The words ripping from my throat were both a surrender and a cry for mercy. Mercy from a man that knew no such thing.

All it took was a quick movement, and his loin cloth fell to the grass, leaving him naked. I watched with a mixture of curiosity and wonderment as his cock rose, its incredible thickness coming to rest against his belly, twitching as if it had a will of its own. I had never seen a man unclothed before, and the first tendrils of fear snaked through my body, settling in my stomach. He was about to ravage me, plunder the deepest part of me, and I knew he was going to show me no mercy. Even if every fiber of my being wanted it, wanted him, I knew it was going to hurt.

"That's it. You're dead," I mutter, sinking even lower in my chair and keeping my gaze glued to the floor.

"I'm so buying a copy," he whispers. "Look around you. The women are eating this up."

Fuck no, looking around is the last thing I'm going to do. My eyes might just land on Bailey, and seeing her and the visuals the book is evoking are not a good combination.

"That was so cool," Andrew says, bouncing on his toes.

“That was...something,” I mutter.

Most everyone has cleared out, but a few stragglers are hanging around, chatting. I cringe, thinking they might be discussing the book. I zoned out when shit got...intense, picturing myself on some far-off planet, chipping away at rocks for a living. And they say men are bad...

“Hey guys,” Addie chirps, looking just as perky as when we met. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.” *You’re not the only one, lady.* “But it’s so nice of you to support your fellow business owners.”

“Of course,” Andrew says, “Us ‘business owners’ have a duty to stick together.”

She nods, lapping up the shit he’s spewing. If he didn’t have the hots for Olivia he wouldn’t get near a bookstore. The idiot.

“Poor girl,” Addie sighs, staring at where Bailey’s just exited the kitchen. “It’s such a shame.”

I straighten up, my heart beating faster. I’m not one for gossip. I don’t gossip, and I don’t tolerate it in my presence, but if it concerns Bailey and can help shed some light on what’s going on with her, I’m all for it.

“What do you mean?”

She hesitates, her silence encouraging me to ask follow-up questions. Instead, I glower at her, waiting her out.

“Well, I was out last week, picking up some supplies for my sister. She’s going through a bit of a tough time, it being her first pregnancy. Morning sickness has hit her hard, so I was getting her some crackers and ginger ale. I don’t know what it is about ginger that helps, but it really does.”

I want to shake her and force her to get to the point. Instead, I nod, silently encouraging her to go on.

“Anyway, I was just leaving the store when I saw...” She looks around her, leans in closer, and drops her voice. “...her husband.”

“And?” Damn, woman. Get to the point.

“He wasn’t alone.”

My heart drops in my shoes. I don’t like where this is going. “What do you mean?”

“He was with a girl, and they looked all cozy, eating ice cream with their arms wrapped around each other.”

I grit my teeth at the knowing look she gives me. I fucking hate gossips.

If what Addie said is true, her husband’s stepping out on her. I didn’t believe Bailey when she said her husband doesn’t love her anymore; the idea is simply inconceivable to me. Who in their right mind would want anyone else if they have Bailey?

Fuck, I don’t know what to do with how it makes me feel.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

QUINN

“I REALLY have to go now,” I murmur, but then my lips are on hers again, and we’re kissing like teenagers making out under the bleachers.

“You sure you don’t want to come in?” Her words are a siren’s call delivered directly into my ear.

Fuck, I want to give in so badly, but I need to get home. I’m already later than I told Bailey I’d be, and if I do, I know it will be at least another hour before I leave.

“I wish I could, but I still have to finish up that presentation for tomorrow.”

“If you come in, I’ll help you. We can get it done in half the time.”

I smirk at her. “We both know that if I do there won’t be any working or talking.”

That was the theme for the weekend. We went at it like rabbits all weekend, only venturing out for the occasional meal. “Besides, my dick needs a break.”

“But I love your dick,” she whispers, grabbing hold of said dick over my pants. “Let me just give it a little kiss goodbye.”

Fuck, this girl. One would think that after this weekend, I would have had enough of her, that this lust I feel for her would have abated, but it hasn’t. Everything she does to me, everything I do to her, is addictive. I feel myself weakening, but with regret clogging my throat, I push her hand away. I know if I let her blow me, I won’t be able to resist fucking her. We wouldn’t even make it out of the car.

But I know Bailey's waiting for me, and I don't want to smell like sex when I walk in.

"I'm sorry, baby. Rain check? I really do have a lot to do."

"Buzz kill," she mutters, but her eyes are smiling, and there's no heat behind her words.

I pull her in for another kiss. "I'll make it up to you, promise."

Bailey's on the couch, reading when I walk in. My heart drops into my stomach when our eyes meet. There's no joy, no happiness to see me. Instead, they're empty. She might as well be looking at a stranger. I know things were a bit off when I left, but Bailey can't hold a grudge, and I thought she'd at least be happy to see me.

"How was the conference?" she eventually says. "It looks like it was a long one. You look tired."

She's inspecting my face and I look down. It's irrational, but I have this fear that all my indiscretions will be reflected on my face, splayed open wide for her to see.

"It was. Early morning breakfasts, full day of presentations, and then dinners and networking till late." Fuck, when did I become such a good liar? "It's a good thing you missed this one. I hardly had two seconds to myself."

"Yeah, I thought it might be something like that. You didn't call."

"I'm sorry. I would have called if I could."

"It doesn't matter. You're home now."

"Do you mind if I take a quick shower?" I showered just before we left, but now I have this sudden urge to scrub clean every single spot Justine touched. As if it would clean me from my sins.

"Can it wait a few minutes? I have something for you."

"You do?"

She nods and grabs a little box wrapped in blue paper from the coffee table. Biting her lip, she hesitates before getting up and walking to me.

“I found this a while back and wanted to give it to you for our anniversary.”

The reminder is a cold slap of reality. I’ve been so wrapped up in Justine I’ve completely forgotten.

She takes a deep breath, her eyes fixed on the present in her hand. She smiles, but it’s not a smile I’ve seen before. Her lips are tipped up, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. The look in them is...bittersweet.

The irrational fear I felt earlier morphs into little tendrils of dread snaking through me, crawling up my spine and settling in the pit of my stomach with a sense of doom.

“When I saw it, I thought it was a sign, but now it just feels like something you should have.”

She shrugs, her hand clenching around it, but then she thrusts it at me and walks away without looking at me. I stare at it as if I’m holding a viper in my hand. The wrapping paper is a bright blue. My favorite color. An image of Justine’s eyes flashes through my mind, and I blink quickly to banish it from my mind. Is it possible that I can feel any shittier than I feel at this moment? I want to yell at her to take it back, that I don’t deserve it, but I’m a coward. Instead, I tear off the paper to reveal a little box. I open the lid, and everything around me stills. I blink a few times, willing my mind to catch up with what my eyes are seeing. I’m scared to touch it, scared that it’s a figment of my imagination.

Moving without thought, I sink down on the couch, and my hands are shaky when I reach in and take it out, my fingers tracing the crudely carved Q on the hilt of the little pocket knife. It can’t be. It simply can’t be. But it is.

It had belonged to Grandpa Joe. I had always admired it, always begging him to let me play with it. He always refused, saying it wasn’t a toy but something a man should handle responsibly.

Then, one summer, on my thirteenth birthday, he gave it to me, saying I was old enough and responsible enough to take care of it. I felt like he'd given me the moon, and the first thing I did was carve my initial on the hilt, right next to his.

I carried it with me everywhere.

One day we had just gotten to the dam after a long day of blueberry picking. It was our ritual. Pick blueberries until we were hot and sweaty, our fingers stained blue. Then cycle to the dam for a swim. I reached into my pocket to take it out before jumping into the water, but it wasn't there. I went hot, then cold, frantically digging through both my pockets, unable to believe it wasn't there. I was always so careful with it. When I couldn't find it, I screamed so loud that Bailey jumped with fright. She listened with dread when I stammered out that it was gone. That it must have fallen out of my pocket on the ride over. Then we both scrambled, frantically searching everywhere. We must have spent weeks combing that dirt road but could never find it. I was devastated by the loss but eventually gave up looking.

I gave up, but Bailey never did. She would disappear all the time, and I always knew I'd find her on that dirt road, on her hands and knees, searching for the knife. Up to the day Grandpa died and we stopped going, she searched for it.

I tighten my hand, the edges of it digging into my flesh. Dad sold everything Grandpa owned. The only value Grandpa's possessions had was the dollar amount attached to it. He didn't let me keep a thing. At least now I have something small of his.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, stepping into the bedroom.

"At Second Hand Treasures. Mr. Thomas called. Said he'd gotten a few books I might be interested in," she says without looking at me, continuing to fold clothes. "Normally, I'd just grab the books and leave, but something drew me to the display cases, and there it was, nestled amongst a few other things."

She takes a deep breath, wiping the corner of her eye. I'm so dumbstruck that I can only stare at her.

"I barely dared hope when I asked if I could see it, but a part of me just knew. And then, seeing the Q, I thought it was fate."

"But how? How did it get there?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. Maybe you didn't lose it on that dirt road. Maybe you misplaced it in the house somewhere and the new owners found it."

I look at Bailey, swallowing heavily. "Even back then, you loved me so much you never gave up looking for it."

She nods her head. "Of course, I didn't. Losing it hurt you so bad, and I loved you. I didn't want anything to hurt you."

"It's just right that you're the one who found it," I whisper, forcing the words through the tightness in my throat. If someone stabbed me in the heart right now, I'd feel less pain than I'm feeling now.

"I can't believe this. After all these years... How is this even possible?" I look at Bailey through watery eyes. "I wish Grandpa was alive to see it."

"I know."

Grandpa was like a dad to both of us, and holidays on his farm were a package deal. Bailey always went with me, and my grandparents treated her like one of their own. I miss those days, spending our days in the sun, helping out where we could. It was the best childhood, free and uncomplicated, and at the end of each holiday, I cried when it was time to go home.

Some of his last words to me were, "She's a good one, Quinn. Don't ever let her go." The loss of him was hard on both of us, and I know this brings back so many memories, not only for me but for her as well. I want to go to her and wrap my arms around her, but as much as I want to, I can't.

I feel ashamed. I feel tainted. And the way she's turned her back on me screams that any kind of contact would not be

welcomed. So instead, I stay where I am, like the coward I am.

“Thank you, Bailey. This means the world to me.”

I’M IN THE shower when the enormity of it all hits me. What I stand to lose if Bailey ever finds out.

Seeing that knife has opened the floodgates, and now I can’t stop the memories of our life looping through my mind.

I often got teased for having a girl as a best friend, but it never mattered to me. Bailey could run faster, climb higher, and spit further than most boys our age. And at seven, that was the most important thing in life.

The early days when sleepovers were still allowed. How we’d stay up way past our bedtime, holed up under a blanket, flashlight shining while reading comics. As much as Bailey loved playing outside, she loved reading.

How her smiles could make me feel better no matter how bad my day was going. How with a look, we could share a whole conversation.

How those smiles and looks gradually changed, became longer and more lingering, until one day Bailey exploded.

“Ugh, just kiss me, already,” she exclaimed, her hands on her hips, challenge blazing from her eyes.

That first kiss was awkward, with our mouths pressed together and our eyes wide open, staring at each other. When we finally pulled apart, we were both flustered.

“Maybe we need to practice more?” I said, hoping it wouldn’t be a one-and-done kind of deal. It wasn’t. We practiced a lot. Often. And soon, I was hooked. I couldn’t get enough.

The first time we had sex. She cried, and I embarrassed myself. Two-pump chump is definitely a thing.

The day she walked down the aisle. I saw my world reflected in her eyes. It was a big wedding, but everyone faded away. It was just me and her, and it was my turn to cry, not

caring about the ribbing I'd have to endure from my groomsmen.

How every time we made love, it was more than the physical attraction. It was the emotional connection built on countless shared memories.

And all the little moments in between. The highs, the lows. The laughter and the tears.

I drop my head in my hands, and my shoulders heave, my tears mingling with the water running down my face. What the fuck have I done? I've betrayed the best person in my life. The only person who's ever accepted everything about me—the good and the bad. The only person—since Mom died—who cared for me more than she cared for herself.

If she finds out about my unfaithfulness, it will shatter her, and I'll lose her. I've survived many things in my life, but I don't think I'll ever survive that.

Furiously, I start scrubbing. I scrub until my skin feels red and raw, but I can't scrub away the ugliness, the knowledge of what I've done festering in the deepest part of me.

When I slide in next to her, I pull her into my arms. My grip is tight. If I can hold on tight enough, everything will go away. Everything will be like it was before I succumbed to this madness. I'll bury it deep, and she doesn't need to know. Every day, I'll make it up to her, and hopefully, if enough time passes this shame that's suffocating me will fade along with the memory of what I've done.

I have to end things with Justine. There's simply no other way.

I CAN HARDLY look at Justine. Last night is still fresh in my mind. I've made up my mind to end things with her and have been avoiding her all morning. It doesn't make it easy, though. Just because my mind has made the decision doesn't mean my body has. It hasn't gotten the memo yet. The lust is still there, simmering beneath the surface. It's just not worth it to give in to it.

I know it will be best if I request her to be transferred to another mentor, but I can't think of a good enough reason to do so. Phillip will have questions especially because I've been giving her glowing recommendations. So, until I can come up with a plan, I've assigned her to help Ben. I could tell she was hurt, but it needed to be done.

I haven't missed the worry-filled looks she's been shooting me. It coats me in guilt, and it's sick and twisted. Not only am I lying to my wife, but I'm also lying to her. I'm feeling guilt towards both of them, and it's eating me up inside. Justine doesn't deserve this. She's done nothing wrong, and I'm sure she won't take it kindly if she finds out she's been involved in an affair. That her trust in me has been completely misplaced.

She's young enough to still have stars in her eyes, and I don't want to be the one to dim them for her. Life has a way of doing that all by itself.

But the love I feel for Bailey is as vast as the ocean. She's always been my safe space, and that hasn't changed. So, for us, I need to do this. I just need to find a way to do it gently so that things don't blow up in my face.

She eventually catches up with me in the afternoon, cornering me in one of the lesser-used boardrooms where I've been hiding.

Closing the door behind her, she leans against it, looking at me in silence while biting her lip.

“What's happened between yesterday evening and today?”

Fuck. Right to the point. I struggle for the right thing to say. It's not like saying, “I realized that I love my wife, and you're just a passing infatuation,” will go down well.

“I think we should cool things for a while.”

“Why? Did I do something wrong?”

She pushes off from the door and rounds the conference table, stopping in front of me and forcing me to look up at her.

I shake my head, willing my eyes to not travel down her body, to not trace the curves I mapped with my hands all

weekend. My cock jerks, and I want to grab it, squeeze some sense into it. Fuck, that thought just makes it harder, and it twitches, grabbing Justine's attention and drawing her eyes to it.

"You did nothing wrong." The sentiment is truer than she can fully understand. "We're playing a dangerous game where we both will lose if we're found out. It's best if we back off—keep things professional until your internship is over. Then it won't matter if we're together. Nobody will have a say in it."

I'm talking through my ass. When her internship is over, and I don't have to see her every day, this lust will fade to nothing. It would have run its course, and my life will return to normal.

"It's a few months. I can't go a few months not having you in my life."

"It's not that long."

She shakes her head, desperation filling her eyes. "It is."

She drops down to her knees, her hands reaching for my belt, and I grab her hands, attempting to stop her.

"Baby, stop. Anyone can walk in." She's unashamed in her desire and need for me, never afraid to show how much she wants me. It's addicting, rendering me helpless against her, so my attempt is half-hearted at best, allowing her to easily unzip me and scoop me out.

"They won't," she whispers, pushing my legs further apart. Cupping my balls, she squeezes gently, massaging them. It feels so good a groan rips from my lips. This will be the last time, I promise myself. I'm already going to hell. One more time won't hurt.

My mind blanking, I thrust into her eager mouth, my head falling back against the chair, my hands tangling in her hair. Fuck I'm so weak. Anyone can walk in, but right now, I don't care. I'm reduced to the feel of her tongue swirling, the decadent sounds of her sucking, the warm heat of her mouth. My balls start tingling, warning me that I'm on the edge, and my hips take on a mind of their own, jerking until I can feel

the head of my cock butting up against the back of her throat. She looks up at me, her eyes locking on mine, and the desire and hunger I see in them is an inescapable aphrodisiac. It shoots me over the edge, and I'm erupting, shuddering, gasping her name.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

QUINN

DESPITE MY good intentions, I keep giving in.

Monday, we had the incident in the boardroom. It was irresponsible, but while in the moment, walking that edge of being caught? So fucking hot. That evening, I had her bent over the couch.

Bailey was asleep when I got home, and once again, I felt sick with guilt. Tomorrow, I promised myself. I'll do it tomorrow.

I woke up early, and after a quick kiss on Bailey's sleeping mouth, I left. I can't bear to look in her eyes. Not until I've ended things with Justine.

Tuesday was a repeat of Monday, except I went to her apartment after work. It was a crazy day at the office, and Upper Management had a meeting that ran late. I didn't even try to fool myself that I was going to end it. We fucked when I got there, then made dinner together, then fucked again. I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew, it was two in the morning, and I raced back home like my hair was on fire. Lucky for me, Bailey didn't even stir when I got into bed.

Things between Bailey and I have been strained since I got back. Well, more strained than it's been the last few months. We've hardly said two words to each other.

Justine has become insatiable, and I'm trying to get as much of her as I can now that what we have between us has reached its expiration date. The memories of us have to last me a lifetime because I know I will never do this again. Not

only is this juggling act exhausting, but it's also eating me up inside.

Justine has been a bit off today. Her smile hasn't been as bright as usual, and she's been withdrawn.

Earlier, when she walked into my office, I could see she'd been crying, her eyes all red and puffy. A sense of dread filled me. Had someone seen us together? Wednesday before our weekend getaway, we were out getting ice cream. She was snuggled into my side, and I caught someone looking at us who I thought looked familiar. I immediately pulled away, wracking my brain on who it could be. Was it someone at the office's spouse? Going through my mental catalog of people I've met, I still couldn't place her, so I shrugged it off.

I asked Justine what was wrong, my heart feeling as if it was clawing its way out of my chest. She shook her head, gave me a tiny smile, and said we'd talk later.

It's been bugging the crap out of me all day. I need to know if I have to start doing damage control. My mind's been going to all kinds of places all day. If we've been caught, what is the worst that can happen? They'll fire me. I've managed to keep my work and personal life mostly separate so Bailey would never have to find out. I can tell her that I've resigned. That I'm tired of all the long hours and the toll it's taking on our relationship. I know she'll be on board with that. But how to handle Justine? Obviously, if I'm out of a job, that will be the end of us. It will have to be a clean break, and then Bailey and I can have a fresh start. Get back to us.

Justine said she'd been craving fried chicken, so we ordered and ate in silence when it arrived. I poured some wine, which she was reluctant to accept but eventually did.

I have this thought nagging in the back of my head that I'm forgetting something, but I shake it off, focusing on Justine instead. This silence is killing me, and I need to get to the bottom of what's upsetting her. She's usually so easygoing, which means that whatever is going on with her must be bad.

If it's family related, I can relax, offer her some comfort, and then brush it off.

“What’s wrong?” I’m bursting at the seams with impatience as I brush a piece of hair from her face.

She looks down, biting her lip, and I stifle my sigh of impatience.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” I trail my hand from her cheek, down her neck, over the slope of her breast, before finally settling it on her leg. Her whole vibe is telling me that fucking will not be happening tonight and that in itself is something new. Not once has she denied me.

“I know,” she says, and fuck me, I can see her eyes glistening with tears.

“You’re killing me here,” I mutter, giving her leg a slight squeeze. “Is it us? Has anyone seen us or said anything to you?”

She shakes her head, and sweet, sweet relief floods me. Okay, that’s good. I can relax and breathe enough to live another day. Anything else I can handle.

Wait, maybe she’s having second thoughts about us and just doesn’t know how to tell me? The feeling that fills me at the thought is confusing. It’s part relief, part annoyance? I’ve been meaning to end this, so why does it matter who does it?

“Fuck Justine, you’ve gotta talk to me. Do you want to end this? I know all this sneaking around is difficult, and I wouldn’t blame you if you got tired of it. I also know you’d never want Phillip to find out.” I throw in the last line as a reminder that she’s also got something to lose if we’re outed.

“No, it’s not that at all,” she says, hurrying to reassure me and entwining her fingers with mine. She laughs lightly. “God, I don’t know why I’m so emotional. Just give me a moment.” She leans to the side, reaching for her wine. It’s when she freezes that I look to see what’s captured her attention that I see it. My wife, standing at the door, a look of profound devastation carved into her face.

BAILEY

I HAVE been silently seething since Quinn returned from his conference, the pressure cooker of my emotions threatening to erupt. For months now, my anger has been bubbling and festering, and I have had enough. I can't do this any longer. Tonight is the night we finally have it all out. I'm done with burying my head in the sand and denying what is so obvious, looking past all the red flags he's been lobbing at me faster than I can dodge them.

I'm tired of not being a blip on his radar. I'm tired of how he's stopped touching me and spending time with me. I've had enough of the disregard he shows me. Of being his punching bag when he's in a mood or when I dare voice my unhappiness at how he's been treating me.

Saying that he was too busy to call was a load of crap. The truth is, if he wanted to, he would have. And how he forgot our anniversary? That's the cherry on the cake. Our anniversary has always been incredibly special to both of us. The fact that he forgot is such a simple thing in a long lineup of unsimple things, but one that speaks volumes.

It's one of two things. Either he doesn't love me anymore, or there's someone else. Or a combination of both. The thought of any of those things is enough to make me want to curl into a ball, but I can't stand this limbo anymore.

He will make time for me. He owes me that, at least. I have never been one for ultimatums, but tonight, I'm giving him one. If he can't be honest with me, I'm insisting on a separation.

So here I am—at his workplace—little staccato cracks following me as I make my way through the lobby, echoing hollowly through the cavernous room.

The realization that he'd forgotten our anniversary was a bitter pill to swallow, and initially, I thought, fuck it, if it means that little to him that he can just forget about it, so can I, but the longer I thought about it, the more I realized that it would be the perfect time to try and get some answers. So, instead of canceling our dinner reservation at The Blue Harlem

Lounge—the expensive as hell restaurant where Quinn proposed and where we go every year for our anniversary—I put on the beautiful dress I bought especially for tonight and took my time with my hair and makeup.

It's early enough that they haven't locked the front door yet, and this time of night, after the hustle and bustle of a workday has died down, the space feels cold and empty.

“Mrs. Foster. How are you this evening?”

Changing course, I head to reception instead of the elevator, and even though I'm mad, I can't help but smile at the familiar figure sitting at the desk.

“Hi, Mike. I'm doing well, thanks. How are you?”

“Much better now that I've seen your pretty face.” He winks.

“Don't let Mrs. Mike hear you say that. I would hate for you to have to sleep on the couch for the next week.”

He waves my words away. “She won't care because she knows that even after thirty years of marriage, I still think she has the prettiest face.”

“You're a good man, Mike. Your wife is lucky.”

I really mean those words, because isn't that the dream? The thing that we all hope for when we get married? For that special connection to still be there after so long?

He shifts uncomfortably. “Nah, I'm the lucky one. No other woman would have put up with me for as long as she has. Now, it's been a while since I've seen you. Did you come to drag that husband of yours away from work?” He says, eyeing me up and down.

“Something like that,” I mutter, the anger that I'd pushed down while talking to Mike rising to the surface again.

“That's good. That man spends way too much time at work.”

“Let's see if I can pry him away, then.”

With a weak smile, I murmur goodbye and head to the elevator.

About a year ago, the PR Account Executive in charge of Quinn's team quit unexpectedly. Quinn had a real shot at the position, and he was determined to get it. We knew it would mean putting in extra hours, but it was his dream to lead his own team, and I supported him. Days, nights, and weekends blurred into each other, where he'd leave for work at the crack of dawn, only to drag himself home late at night to pass out and do it all over again the next day. It was hard, but his dedication and passion to reach his goal made me love him so much more. Most nights, I'd rush home from work, whip up a meal, and make the drive so he could at least have a home-cooked meal at a decent hour. It was my tiny contribution to show my appreciation for all his efforts, and to steal a few minutes a day with my husband.

As the night guard, Mike was always manning the reception desk when I got there, greeting me with a friendly word or two, and with time, the greetings morphed into casual conversations. When Quinn finally scored the promotion, I was so happy for him and relieved that it was over and that I would finally get my husband back. Seems that I was wrong. Judging by the hours he's been putting in over the last six months or so, managing his own team increased his workload, not lightened it.

The elevator doors sliding open with a soft ding breaks me from my memories, only to be assaulted by a sense of nostalgia as I take in the open-plan office in front of me. My eyes land on what used to be Quinn's desk. It's much neater than what his used to be, with a tiny cactus taking up one corner.

The time we shared dinner at that desk was short, but we made it count. We'd cram a whole day's conversation into that thirty minutes we had, often not caring if we spoke with our mouths full because the little time we had together had been precious. Other times, we'd just stare, silently drinking each other in.

It didn't matter what we did as long as we were together. Shaking my head slightly, I make my way through the open plan and down the corridor that houses the offices, my footsteps muffled by the carpet. I'm halfway down when I hear a few murmured words, followed by a light, feminine laugh. For some reason, my heart starts beating faster, and my steps slow down. There's only one door open, and I check behind me, counting the doors on the left to make sure I haven't made a mistake. Sure enough, the open door is the fourth, erasing any hope I had that I was wrong. That maybe I just missed Quinn, that he did remember our anniversary and was actually on his way home. Breath shallow, I take the steps needed to get to the door, the pain in my feet from my high heels forgotten.

There are a few moments in every person's life that are defining. Moments you look back on that make you say, "That was the moment that changed me," or "That was the moment that changed the course of my life."

It could be a decision you made that set you on a whole different life path than what you had envisioned for yourself, or it could even be something simple like deciding on Mexican takeout instead of pizza that causes you to bump into someone you wouldn't usually meet. Someone who would go on to play a vital role in your life.

I don't need time to go by to tell me that this moment will be one of them, maybe the greatest of all those moments. Everything in front of me is screaming it at me. The laughing takeout boxes on his desk instead of plates delivered with a flourish by a waiter. The cell phone lying forgotten next to it whispering that we're friends, bonded by the fact that we've both been ignored. The two glasses of red wine on the coffee table in front of them, smugly satisfied that they got chosen instead of the white I would usually pick. The kicked-off high heels lying discarded on the floor boasting that I'm naive, thinking that mine could top them in the game of seduction. Their bodies turned into each other, her leg drawn up, skirt riding high on a smooth thigh, a hand I know so well resting on bare flesh, fingers that have traced every inch of my body now entwined with fingers tipped with blood red insisting that

he doesn't belong to me, not anymore. His arm resting on the back of the couch curled towards her, almost caging her in, declaring that my husband, my lover, and my best friend had found someone else. Someone better.

But most of all, it's the look in his eyes—eyes that are focused on someone that's not me that tells me. The eyes that say, "No matter if the world is burning down around us, I won't look away." The eyes that once looked at me like that are now assuring me I've been replaced.

I think I stop breathing while I watch them, watching each look, each touch, each word opening a crack in my world that a moment ago wasn't perfect, but at least was whole, was mine. Now I feel like an outsider, someone who's watching a moment that wasn't meant for them, someone who's intruding on someone else's private moment, and I'm numb.

Reaching for her wine her head turns, and she freezes as unfamiliar blue eyes meet mine. The stillness in her body must alert him because his head turns my way, and because my gaze has snapped back to him, I see recognition setting in, his smile fading, and dread taking over. It's the look of a man who has just been caught. One I suspected but never fully believed I'd see on my husband's face.

Devastation is a living entity, one that demands I scream and break something. Inflict pain so that someone else can feel what I'm feeling to help lessen the crushing burden, but pride takes the reins, shoving all those feelings down. My hands are quivering, and I grip them tightly together to hide the weakness that's threatening to buckle my knees. I won't give them a front-row seat to the breakdown I feel hovering on the edges of my numbness. *I won't*. So, one by one, I take the fear, anger, and humiliation and shut them down, leaving emptiness behind. Seconds tick by in the silence as we hold eye contact, and I know at that moment that my life will never be the same again.

Woodenly, like a marionette, I turn, knowing that I have to leave before the emptiness I've been granted evaporates and the tsunami of emotions I know are waiting below comes crashing down on me. I've almost made it to the elevator when

his frantic voice calling my name echoes down the corridor. I don't want to acknowledge it, so I power on, hoping that the elevator is still on this floor. I don't spare his old desk a glance as I move past it. Dimly, I wonder if it's hers. Is it her that replaced him, replaced me in his life, or was she here already, an unknown lurking on the edges, waiting for her moment? Thankfully, the elevator doors open immediately, but just as it's closing, his hand slaps against them, halting my retreat.

"Bailey." His voice is hoarse, filled with so much pain, and I feel the monster, deep in my chest, stir with anger and rage. How dare his voice be filled with pain? He caused this pain. He doesn't get to feel pain.

"Let go," I whisper. A whisper is all I can do. More than that, and I'll break.

"I'm not letting you leave. Please, not like this." Movement behind him tears my eyes from his. The look she's giving me over his shoulder is one of shock. Or is it dread? Did she feel so secure in their sneakiness that she didn't think they'd get caught? Or is she scared that I'm going to win this competition that I haven't been aware I've been in?

"You better let go. You're upsetting your girlfriend." My mouth is dry, my words thick, and I swallow hard in a desperate attempt to dislodge the lump in my throat. I'm barely holding on by a thread.

His head whips around. "Justine!" he barks. "Give us some privacy." I feel a small sense of satisfaction when she steps back, shock crossing her face. So, she has a name. My hands clench at my sides.

"No need." I move to push his hand off the door, but still when I notice his bare finger.

"Bailey, please. Just wait for me. Let me get my things, and we can leave together. I don't want you driving like this."

I ignore his concern because he and his concern can go and fuck themselves. Where was that concern when he started whatever he was doing with Justine?

“Does she know you’re married?” His eyes drop to where I’m looking, and he visibly recoils, pulling his hand back and clenching it into a fist. A hand that I’ve never seen bare since the day we said our vows.

My eyes feel dead when I look at him. “Don’t come home. I don’t want you there.” His breath hitches, and he takes a small step backward as if I’ve punched him.

We keep eye contact as the doors slowly close, Quinn’s face looking as wrecked as I feel inside. I sag against the back of the elevator, those strings holding me upright finally cut. I blink slowly, and when I blink again, the doors to the lobby open. A few blinks later, I’m in my car and pulling out of the parking lot with a vague recollection of Mike calling out to me. It feels as if time isn’t moving right, my thoughts like leaves tumbling in a brisk fall breeze while I drive aimlessly. At some point, I must have left town because an empty, dark road stretches ahead of me, my headlights the only light in the darkness pointing the way.

The silence in the car is a thick shroud, its weight bearing down on me, but I can’t find it in me to turn the music up. If it could drown out the chaos of my mind and heart, I would have, but it can’t. Nothing can. The oppressive silence becomes too much—reaching out and almost suffocating me with its pressure. A tear escapes, its fiery heat scalding my frozen cheek. It breaks the floodgates and multiplies until a river of agony is pouring down my face. My shoulders heave with a pain so visceral it burrows deep into my bones, fusing itself so tightly to my marrow, blending with the very essence of what makes me, me.

My phone buzzes yet again, and with a curse, I tear a hand off the steering wheel, my white-knuckled grip loathe to let go. Silencing it, I briefly contemplate throwing it out the window but instead throw it over my shoulder, not caring where it falls. It hits the back seat with a dull thud that’s not satisfying in the least. I want to hit something, break something, make something... someone hurt as much as I’m hurting right now. But violence has never been an option for

me, so instead, I drive, trying to get as far away from what caused me pain as I can.

BY THE TIME I get home, the sky has taken on that indistinct quality where it's something in between—not quite day yet, but not night either.

At some point, sanity prevailed, and I realized I couldn't out-drive my grief. No matter how far I drove or where I went, it would still be with me, nestled like a tiny poisonous seed that grew and thrived on images that relentlessly played through my mind. On scenarios I made up in my head. On little bits and pieces over the past few months that I've put together. Thoughts, images, and realizations that hurt to the bottom of my soul.

I'm weary, from the top of my head down to the tips of my toes. My eyes are swollen and tired, my jaw aches from clenching it so hard, and my shoulders and back are one huge knot of pain. I want to fall in bed and forget that this day—actually yesterday now—ever happened.

Quinn jumps up from the couch when I open the door, his hair disheveled, his eyes wild. He lets out a deep breath.

“You're safe, I was so fucking scared. I took a taxi home, and when you weren't here—”

“What are you doing here? I told you I don't want you here,” I interrupt him.

“I need to talk to you. I need to explain.”

I don't want to do this. Not now. I'm not ready. My heart is throbbing like an open wound, each pump oozing pain, and I don't want to know the details. I want to protect what little I have left for as long as I can.

“You don't have to explain anything. What I saw was explanation enough.”

“Bailey, please. Lets just—”

I whirl around, violence tingling the tips of my fingers. “I don't care what you need right now! Right now, what I need is

for you to leave. To get the hell away from me. I can't even look at you."

"Okay, okay," he says, taking a deep breath. "We'll talk in the morning. Or at least a bit later..." Looking lost, he glances out the window where the first feeble rays of sunshine are making themselves known. "I'll be right here. Whenever you're ready."

Will I ever be ready to talk? Maybe. But not right now. I'm not ready to hear any of those asinine words cheaters throw out to try and explain their reasons. It was an accident. It just happened. I wasn't thinking. It didn't mean anything.

It's all hollow. No words can mitigate what he's done. But I don't say anything. I bend down, undo the buckles, and slide my shoes off. An image of a pair of discarded shoes flashes through my mind, and I hurl them as hard as I can. I don't aim, and I don't care if they hit anything. Instead, I watch in detachment as they bounce off the wall and fall harmlessly to the floor. Stupid, pointless shoes.

I'm proud of myself for not slamming the bedroom door behind me. Yanking off my dress, I bunch it up and stuff it in the trashcan in the bathroom. It cost me more than I would usually spend on an article of clothing, but there is no way I will ever be able to wear it again. I avoid looking at my reflection while I brush my teeth. I refuse to acknowledge the hollowness that I'm sure is reflected in my eyes. By the time I crawl into bed, the time on my phone tells me I have about three hours until I have to get up for work. I close my eyes, willing sweet oblivion to drag me under so I can have a break from all of these feelings assaulting me. Instead, it feels as if the universe hates me because all I see is a montage of my life with Quinn playing against my closed lids, all of it seemingly a lie.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BAILEY

I STUMBLE out of the bedroom, bleary-eyed and a deep throbbing pounding at my temples. What little sleep I managed to get was not restful, to say the least. I stop when I see Quinn sitting at the dining table, his head in his hands, a cup of coffee in front of him. He looks up, and to say he looks wrecked is an understatement. Good. It serves him right.

“I’ll get you coffee,” he says, jumping up and rushing to the kitchen.

I watch in silence as he prepares it just the way I like it—two sugars and a dash of cream. Just that small action is like a punch in the gut. There isn’t a time I can recall when Quinn hasn’t been in my life.

He comforted me when I cried on his shoulder the first time I got my period, even though he was grossed out. I teased him mercilessly when his voice broke. We went to the same school and went to prom together. Attended the same college. I was there supporting him when his mom passed away and then again through the death of his grandparents.

Knowing a person almost as well as you know yourself is a comfort that can’t be bought. I know that you can never truly know everything about a person. After all, you don’t have access to their innermost thoughts and feelings. You can only know what they choose to show you. What they choose to share with you.

But after all this time, I thought I knew everything there was to know about Quinn. The look in his eyes could tell me what was on his mind. The set of his mouth and the tone of his

voice could tell me what mood he was in. Now I'm realizing that I don't know him as well as I thought. That there's a part of my Quinn that I don't know at all, and the thought is making me physically ill. Watching him while he stirs the coffee and places it on the counter is like watching a stranger.

"There you go," he says, giving it a slight push toward me as if that small action can entice me to get closer. Instead, I cross my arms across my chest. I should have put a bra on before I left the room. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I'm feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable in front of him, and it's throwing me off.

"Don't you have to leave for work?"

"I'm not going," he breathes out. "I thought we could..."

"What?" I bark, irritated when his voice trails off.

"I thought we could talk about last night."

"What about last night?" I want him to spell it out for me. I want him to admit every single thing he's done.

"Please, Bailey," he whispers, his red-rimmed eyes dropping to the coffee. "Just take it," he says, nudging it towards me again. I stare at it as if it contains poison. Taking a cup of coffee that someone offers you is such a normal thing to do, but somehow this feels like more. As if by taking it, I'm giving in, backing down, capitulating to his wishes and desires, and I refuse to do it. Fuck him, and fuck that cup of coffee.

"You know what?" I say, throwing up my hands to stop him. "You drink it. I don't want anything you made for me." I take a deep breath, squeezing my eyes shut. "I can't do this now. I have to get to work."

I spin around and power towards the bedroom. I have this overwhelming urge to get out. To run until I can't run anymore. I should have just kept on driving last night.

"Bailey, wait. Don't leave like this. I want to explain. Last night isn't what you're thinking."

“Oh, so you didn’t forget about our anniversary?” I throw over my shoulder. “I didn’t find you in your office with another woman? I dreamed all that?”

His shoulders sag, and he hangs his head. He has no words.

“That’s what I thought. Despite what you think, the world doesn’t revolve around you. Life carries on. I need to open the store.

All day, I make a conscious effort not to talk to anyone. Olivia tries when she gets in, no doubt ready to ask how our dinner went, but I cut her off, asking her to man the counter for the day before shutting myself in my office. I keep my head down, focusing on stacking a new delivery of books, sorting them into different categories, and pretending the outside world doesn’t exist. Sometime around lunch, my exhaustion drives me to the front, my need for coffee eclipsing my need for solitude.

Waiting for my coffee, I shiver, rubbing my arms. I don’t know why I’m so damn cold. It’s still summer, for fuck’s sake.

“I hope you’re not coming down with something,” Olivia says, a concerned frown on her face. I know I don’t look the best. I slapped on a minimal amount of makeup this morning, my need to get out of that apartment far greater than my need to look good.

“I don’t think so. Just a bad night’s sleep is all.”

“Did Quinn keep you up all night?” she teases.

“You could say that.” Just not for the reason you’re suggesting. I know my smile is feeble, but I can’t muster any more effort than that.

I’ve almost made it back to my office, coffee in hand when the bell jingles and Kallan walks in. The sight of him is enough to stop me in my tracks, a thousand different emotions bubbling in my stomach.

He smiles when he sees me, but it quickly dims as his eyes rove over my face. His long legs eat up the distance between us, and between one breath and the next, he's standing in front of me.

“What's wrong?”

How is it that with one look, this man whom I've only known for a few months can tell that my world is falling apart? I want to cry. I want to scream that no, I'm not okay. I want him to wrap me in his arms and give me the comfort and support that my husband's supposed to give me. And it's that thought that makes me take a step back and force a smile on my face. He's not my husband; he's my friend. While I know there's nothing wrong with accepting comfort from friends, the problem is—I don't feel attraction towards my friends.

“Nothing's wrong. I'm just a bit tired today.”

“Bailey.”

It's one word—my name, but the way he says it is a reproach, letting me know that he knows I'm lying. It makes me feel bad. The last thing I want to do is lie to him, but I just can't talk about it.

“I used my car, so you're off the hook today,” I tease instead, hoping he'll let it go.

He sighs, running his hand through his hair. “You know I enjoy walking with you.”

“I know.”

Our little ritual has become a comfort to me over the months and I think to him as well. I was just too exhausted this morning to even contemplate walking.

Quinn's waiting for me when I get home. He's been messaging me relentlessly all day, starting almost the moment I got to work.

I've called in sick. I'll be here when you get home.

I love you, Bailey. With all my heart.

I'm making us dinner. What do you want?

I love you and I'm so sorry I hurt you.

Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore, and in a fit of frustration, powered down my phone. I've gone from hardly ever hearing from him to this constant barrage, and I just needed a minute to think.

I've been forced to become used to an empty apartment when I come home, and now that it's not, I'm annoyed. No, annoyed is not a strong enough word for how I'm feeling.

I craved coming home to my husband and having a normal evening of cooking dinner together and settling down in front of the TV. Mundane things, things that should be normal for a couple. But now that he's here, I want him gone.

I feel his eyes on me the moment I step through the door. I take my time putting my bag and keys down and taking off my shoes. It's only once I've straightened that I meet his eyes, and once again, it's like looking at a stranger. He looks a little less wrecked than this morning. He must have pulled a brush through his hair at some stage, and his business suit has been replaced by jeans and a T-shirt.

He must have gone out at some point because there's a bouquet of my favorite flowers—a mixture of lavender lilies and carnations—on the counter, next to a bottle of wine. *White wine.*

I wonder if he bought his girlfriend flowers to apologize. Maybe some buy-one-get-one-free kind of deal.

Smells of garlic drift through the air, and knowing Quinn's limited cooking skills, I know it's pasta of some sort.

All I'm interested in is his words. Not flowers, wine, or whatever he's prepared for dinner.

“So...” I say, sitting in the stuffed chair, leaving him no option but to settle on the couch. Space from him and what he's about to say is what I need right now. “You wanted to talk, so talk,” I say, my voice calm. I'm exhausted, and it's as if all that anger and pain I felt last night and this morning has fizzled into nothing, leaving me numb.

He sits down and blows out a deep breath.

“I don’t know where to start,” he says.

“The beginning would be a good place.”

“Before I do, I just want you to know that I love you and only you.”

“Yes. I really felt your love last night. When you were having a meal with another woman on our anniversary.”

“I’m so sorry I forgot,” he mumbles, misery coating every word.

“Quinn, just tell me. Who is she?”

“She...” He hesitates, searching for the right words, so I help him out.

“Justine.”

“Yeah. She’s an intern who joined my team a few months ago.”

“I remember you mentioning her. She messaged you one morning,” I add when he looks confused. “You were upset that Phillip hired her. I guess you didn’t stay that way for long, huh?”

“It’s not what you think, Bailey.”

“You’ve said that. What is it then that I’m thinking?”

“I’m not having an affair with her.”

I lift my brow because how stupid does he think I am? Naive, yes, a thousand times, yes, but stupid. No.

“I’m not,” he denies hotly, leaning forward as if he needs not only his words but his whole body to convince me of his words.

“Okay then.” I laugh, standing up. “I’m so glad you cleared that up for me,” I say, sarcasm dripping off my every word.

“Bailey, you said you’ll let me talk.”

“I did. But I don’t see any point if you’re not going to be honest with me. You’ve been lying to me for months, and I’m over it.”

“This is hard—”

“Hard?” I echo his words in disbelief.

“Of course it is! It’s hard because I’ve hurt you, and that’s the last thing I ever wanted to do. I love you, Bailey. You gotta believe me. I love you so fucking much. Please, just let me explain.”

The seconds tick by as we stare at each other, a plea in his eyes. His shoulders sag when I sit back down.

He lets out a breath, rubbing his hands over his face. The silence stretches while he looks down at the floor, composing his thoughts.

“When I got that promotion, I felt like I was in over my head. Most days, I felt like I was drowning. Fuck, mostly, I was just winging it, pretending I knew what I was doing. Justine joined my team, and at first, I gave her easy things to handle, but she was good at what she did, so I gave her more and more. I started depending on her, which led to a lot of late nights.”

“Just the two of you?”

He nods. “But I swear to you, Bailey, it was just work. Anyway, we started talking. Mostly about work and how cutthroat the industry is. We developed a friendship, and I felt I could confide in her because she understood the environment.”

His words are tiny little arrows coated in poison.

“So, night after night, while I was waiting at home for you, you were at work confiding in another woman?”

“Yes,” he says, closing his eyes. “I can see now that it was completely inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate,” I muse, thinking about how inadequate that word is. When I’ve always been there for him. When I’ve

never given him any reason to turn to someone else for support. When I've always thought we were a team.

The image of them on the couch, their intimate postures, his hand on her leg has been looping through my head all day, and the picture it paints screams to me that he's a big, fat liar. That he's trying to downplay what really went on.

"What I saw..." I shake my head and take a deep breath, forcing the words out through a tight throat. "...it didn't look like two colleagues confiding in each other. It looked like more. A lot more."

"Fuck, Bailey, I know it looked bad, but if you'd stayed, I could have explained it to you. Justine was upset about some personal issues, and what you saw was me trying to offer a friend some comfort in a difficult time. That's all it was. I swear to you, on my life. Things have never been physical between us. I know I messed up big time. I let all the stress from work get to me, and I crossed a line I shouldn't have, and I'm willing to do anything to make that up to you. I'll go to counseling. We can do marriage counseling. Anything you want."

I want to ask him about his ring, and I consider it for a moment, but my shoulders are drooping from exhaustion, and I just don't have it in me.

"Okay, Quinn," I say, standing up.

He stares at me in confusion, anxiety and relief warring with each other on his face.

"What does that mean?" he asks, jumping up and taking a cautious step toward me.

"It means I've listened to you, and now I'm done listening. I'm tired, and I'm going to bed."

"But I made us dinner. Please, eat something at least."

"I'm not hungry," I say, hardening my heart against the plea in his voice. Too many times did he ignore my pleas.

QUINN

I TRY to catch Justine's eyes when I walk past her desk, but she keeps her eyes glued to her computer screen.

I know I have a lot of explaining to do. After Bailey left, I rushed back to my office to grab my phone and keys with hardly a word to Justine. I couldn't, no, didn't want to spare the time to reassure her. My only thought was to get to Bailey to try to salvage this huge cluster fuck I'm in.

I will never forget or forgive myself for the devastation on her face.

I close my office door behind me and drop my head in my hands. I have to let Justine go. I had a lot of time yesterday while waiting for Bailey to come home to come up with a plan to salvage this situation. Without losing both my wife and my career.

If I don't handle this situation tactfully, Justine could decide that getting revenge is more important than Phillip's regard. No matter how good I am at my job, I'll be fired.

Why the fuck did I shit where I eat? Why the fuck did I let my dick do the thinking for me?

There's a knock on my door, and by the sound of it, I know it's Justine. I sit up and clear my throat, schooling my features before calling for her to come in.

"I have that report you wanted." Shit. Her face is blank, her eyes not meeting mine while she puts said report down on the desk.

"Justine. We need to talk," I say to her back. She's already on her way out.

"I don't have the time now. I still have to go over the presentation, and then..."

"Justine," I bark, keeping my voice firm. "Close the door and sit down." She's always responded well to commands, and she doesn't disappoint. Shoulders falling, she closes the door and settles down across from me, still avoiding my eyes.

"I'm sorry about the other night."

“I thought you said you were getting a divorce.” Her tone is frosty, but there’s hurt glimmering in her eyes.

“I am,” I emphasize the words, willing her to believe me.

“It didn’t look like it,” she accuses.

“Look, it’s complicated.”

“That’s what all liars say.”

I blow out a breath and get up, rounding the desk and sitting in the chair next to her. She resists when I tug on her hands, and it’s a small victory when she gives in and lets me grip them.

“I didn’t lie to you. I just didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“It isn’t. Bailey and I are getting a divorce. You must understand. We have a long history together. So her seeing us together...It was a shock. She knew that that’s what eventually would happen, that we’d both move on with our lives, but knowing it and seeing it are two completely different things.”

“You rushed out of here, brushing me off like I meant nothing to you. And then you haven’t answered any of my calls or messages.”

A tear falls, and she brushes it off.

“I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have done that, but I sometimes worry for Bailey’s mental health.” Fuck, I’m going to hell, but I’m on a roll now.

“What do you mean?”

“Bailey’s always been...a little fragile. She doesn’t do well with change, especially if it’s sudden, and I was worried she’d do something to hurt herself. I’m not in love with her, but I still love her as a friend. She’s been in my life forever. What kind of man would I be if I allowed her to run off and hurt herself? I never want to live with that kind of guilt. Tell me you can understand that?”

She nods hesitantly, her throat working while I wait for her to process my words.

“You’ve never said that to me.”

“Said what?”

Her chin quivers, another tear following the first, which she wipes away. “You’ve never said that you love me. I know it hasn’t been long, but I thought...I thought you at least had some feelings for me.”

I haven’t said it because, despite all the bad shit I’ve been doing, I couldn’t force myself to say it. I don’t love her. But it dawns on me that I am going to miss her. I’m going to miss how her eyes light up when she sees me. I’m going to miss how she never seems to be able to get enough of me. But most of all, I’m going to miss how she makes me feel like a king.

Maybe if I’d never met Bailey, I could have fallen in love with her. But that’s all it is and all it could ever be. A maybe.

I have to be careful, though. Giving her too much hope will bite me in the ass down the road. Giving her no hope will most probably bite me in the ass in the here and now.

“You know I have feelings for you. Strong feelings. I think I’ve shown you that over and over,” I say, grinning and pecking a soft kiss to her lips. Her smile is tremulous, but at least it’s there. “Whether that turns into true, lasting love is something only time will tell. It’s something that we shouldn’t rush or try to force. I made that mistake with Bailey. I don’t want us to make the same one. You’re still young. You might decide sticking with my grumpy ass is not something you want to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

BAILEY

A WEEK passes in a fog. The numbness that set in the day after our anniversary has persevered, and I'm grateful for it. It's allowed me to go through my days on autopilot. So what if my smiles are few and far in between and feel alien, stretching my face into unnatural angles? At least I managed some. I've been avoiding everyone as much as possible. I've resorted to taking my car to work every day to avoid having to talk to Kallan. It's not him specifically I don't want to talk to. It's everyone. It hasn't stopped him from coming in for coffee every day, but he doesn't push it. His mouth greets me, but his eyes tell me he's there if I want to talk. I appreciate it, and every time I watch him walk back to his shop, I'm filled with an inexplicable sense of sadness.

Home is a different story. It's been impossible to avoid Quinn. Every day I get home, he's there, waiting for me with dinner and something he got for me. Flowers, chocolate, perfume, a book, my favorite ice cream. Dinner is either something he's made or takeout. I hardly eat, mostly just picking at whatever is on my plate, despite his pleas for me to eat. From the moment I step through our apartment door, he's attentive to all my needs, even trying to predict what I need before I can voice it. It's...frustrating. Months ago, I was desperate for this kind of attention, but now it all feels empty. Now, all I want is for him to leave me alone so that I can just breathe. It all feels a little too much, too late.

Our evenings are spent with Quinn telling me all about his day while I listen in silence, often finding myself spaced out. He doesn't let it deter him, though. It's written in the

determination on his face when he carries the conversation for the both of us. As if that determination alone is enough to fix what I fear might be broken beyond repair.

I know I can't go on like this. I know I need to do something, make some kind of decision. But I feel lost. All the important decisions in my life have been made with us as a team, and the thought of having to do it alone is like jumping out of a plane without a parachute. So I do nothing.

Every night, I close the bedroom door and go to bed alone. Mercifully, I fall asleep almost as soon as my head hits my pillow, exhaustion tugging at my bones, but each morning, I wake up just as tired.

It's seven thirty when we walk into The Blue Harlem Lounge. This belated anniversary dinner is just one of the things Quinn has on his redemption list.

"Mr. Foster. So good to see you again," the hostess says with a smile, which dims when she looks at me. Because Quinn's pressed up against me, I feel him stiffen. "I reserved your usual table."

I meet her eyes, and I'm not sure what I see in them. Condemnation? Disgust? Judgment? I can't exactly pinpoint any of those emotions. Perhaps it's a combination of them all. All I know is I don't like it.

Her smile in place, she grabs two menus, and I'm helpless as I follow in her wake, Quinn's hand a firm presence on my back herding me behind her. The table she leads us to is in the back of the restaurant. It's cozy and intimate, surrounded by big potted plants, making it semi-private and setting it apart from other tables. Quinn rounds the table, taking his seat after holding out my chair for me. The perfect gentleman.

"Your waitress will be with you soon," the hostess says, placing menus in front of us. So consumed with all the realizations and facts I can no longer ignore I don't notice her leaving.

Quinn's voice pulls me from the dark place my mind has gone.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening." Even to me, my voice sounds dead. Like I'm on autopilot.

"I was asking if you'd like some wine."

There's a desperation in his voice that catches my attention and drags my eyes to him.

Two glasses of red wine standing side by side.

It feels like an eternity that I stare into his eyes. His beautiful, deceitful eyes.

Abruptly, I stand up, knocking my knee on the table.

"Actually, I think I want to leave."

"Bailey, wait." I ignore his frantic call. I ignore the stares, but for some reason, I stop at the hostess stand.

"I'm his wife." I don't know why it's so important to me that she knows, but I don't question it. The way her eyes widen with understanding and then soften with compassion settles something in me, and with a tiny nod, I leave. I'll never step foot in this place again.

Quinn finally catches up with me outside. "Bailey, wait. Please come back inside. Let's just forget everything and enjoy a meal together."

Forget everything? I shake my head. "I'm not hungry. I want to go home."

My voice catches on the word because that's a lie. That place isn't my home. Not anymore.

The car ride is stiff and awkward, the silence deafening. I don't miss his glances or the rhythmic clenches on the steering wheel.

I bypass everything and walk straight to the bedroom, Quinn a heavy presence on my heels.

I thought I could do this. I thought maybe we could weather this storm together and come out stronger on the other

side, but that was before I allowed myself to acknowledge the full scope of his betrayal. When I still preferred denial over reality.

“What are you doing?” he asks anxiously, watching as I grab a suitcase and unzip it.

“Packing.”

Grabbing me, he grips my arms. “Bailey, please. Don’t. You said you’d give us another chance.”

“I said no such thing, and if you don’t let go of me, I’m going to fucking punch you,” I say calmly, looking into his eyes. It’s been years since I’ve punched anyone, but I still remember the basics of making a fist. My arms are tingling with repressed fury, and I’m a hair trigger away from making good on my threat. That blessed numbness I’ve been living in this week has dissipated like mist on a sunny morning.

My eyes must convey my seriousness because he drops his arms, his fists clenched by his sides.

“I realized something while we were waiting for the hostess to seat us. She greeted you like she knew you. Which means you’ve gone there often. And the way she looked at me as if I was your side piece? She must have thought Justine was your wife and you were cheating on her.” My laugh is scratchy. “That was our restaurant. Our special place. And you took her there.”

His face blanches, confirming my words. Not that I needed it.

“So that got me thinking. That night when you fucked me up against the door, that wasn’t about me at all. That was because of her. I knew it was different, that you were different, but I chalked it up to you wanting me so much you couldn’t keep your hands off me. The next time you touched me was when you got home late from work. I’m guessing you came home after being with her. You wouldn’t let me switch on the light. It was so you could pretend I was her, wasn’t it?”

My hands are shaking, and it’s taking all the strength I have to stay calm while listing all the realizations I came to

during the last week.

“The last two times my husband fucked me wasn’t about me at all.”

“The Sunday we argued and you came home late. You said you already had something to eat. You went and spent the day with her. I spent the day worrying about you, waiting for you at home like I’ve always done. Oh, and the conference. You didn’t ask me to go... God, I’m so stupid. She was there with you, wasn’t she? That’s why you didn’t ask me to go along. It was so that the two of you could spend time together. Boy’s night and Iris and Violet’s birthday party. All lies so you could be with her.”

All these realizations are painting a map in my head of the timeline of his affair, and it’s sickening. I take a breath, swallowing down the sob bubbling up in my throat.

I wait for something from him—anything—to make this nightmare end. To tell me I’m wrong and delusional, but he’s silent and pale, his eyes blue pools reflecting my misery back at me.

The extent of his dishonesty, his consistent deceit, is so utterly astounding, making it hard for me to fathom that the Quinn I believed I knew could actually be capable of such behavior. How suddenly this person I’ve known my whole life—loved my whole life—could become a complete and utter stranger. Saliva rushes into my mouth, and I force down my nausea. I feel so damn used, dirty, and humiliated, and it’s taking all my strength just to keep standing. How could I have been so blind?

“The two of you must have had a few good laughs at my expense,” I whisper. “Poor, naive Bailey, waiting around like a well-trained dog for her husband to come home.”

He flinches, clamping his hands over his ears, the sound ripping from him bordering on anguished. But I’m too lost in my own devastation to pay his any heed.

I can feel myself beginning to tremble. I'm about to lose it completely. I can sense myself standing on that precipice, ready to fall headfirst into my sorrow. A choked sob slips from me, and I press the back of my hand to my mouth.

Dropping down on the edge of the bed, I lean forward, closing my eyes and putting my head in my hands, trying to focus on just breathing. A breath in, a breath out. A normal function that feels beyond my reach right now.

I feel him, his warmth pressing against me. His face against my legs, his hands clamped around my calves. His body's shaking its distress, but I don't know why. He did this. He must have known that all his lies and all his actions would eventually lead to this. And he did it anyway.

"Bailey, please don't leave me," he begs, his voice hoarse, his grip tightening, as if he holds on tight enough, I'll stay.

"You left me first," I whisper.

"No, I didn't. I'm right here. I made a mistake. God, so many mistakes, but I can fix this. We made vows to each other. For better, for worse. Till death do us part. Please don't give up on us. Give me a chance to fix this."

His words are a frantic, jumbled mess. He's pleading, begging, but I can't take any satisfaction in it. I never wanted Quinn on his knees. I never wanted to be in a position where he'd be begging for a second chance. I just wanted him to love me. Only me. We were each other's firsts for everything. I thought we'd be each other's last, and the knowledge that we're not—that I'm not is sickening.

Jumping up, I tear myself from his grip, backing up a few steps, my chest heaving.

"You're a fucking liar and a coward, Quinn Foster. A coward who didn't have the balls to tell me he stopped loving me and instead chose to destroy me."

Getting up, he takes a step towards me but stops when I take a step back.

"I have hurt you. I have lied to you about things. And I'm so fucking sorry I did that. But what I've never lied about is

loving you. I lost my way for a bit, but I've never stopped loving you."

"Liar!" I scream. "It's impossible to love someone and hurt them like this."

"Okay, okay," he says, holding up his hands as if he's placating a wild animal. "Let's take a step back and cool off. Then, once we're both calm, we can hash this out and find our way forward."

"You don't get it, Quinn. Being calm won't change a thing. What you've done is unforgivable. I'm done. We're done."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KALLAN

THE STREET'S quiet by the time I lock up. Andrew left hours ago—rushing out as if his ass was on fire—to get ready for some or other movie he and Olivia had made plans to go and see. I teased him about his date, but he insisted it wasn't. It was just two friends who bonded over their love for superheroes. I'm not buying it.

I could have gone home and come back instead of waiting for Elizabeth to collect her order, but I'm behind on my bookkeeping. It's a shit job, and one that I hate with a passion, but it needed to be done.

She ordered a set of ten photo frames, each one engraved with a grandchild's name and a personalized message, and her eyes lit up when she saw them. She kept thanking me, and usually, that would fill me with satisfaction, but tonight it didn't.

I'm at my wit's end.

Something is seriously wrong with Bailey. She's a shell of her former self. Her shoulders are perpetually slumped in defeat. Her genuine smile that was always at the ready is missing. But it's her eyes that slay me. They're one of the first things that attracted me to her. They're so damn expressive, she can't hide anything for shit. If she's happy, you can see it in them. Angry, sad, frustrated—the same thing.

This past week they've been hollow and so damn empty that it feels like you can fall and never reach the bottom.

I can see she's hurting, and I can't do anything about it because she's avoiding me. The helplessness that it brings is a special kind of hell. And then there's Addie's words. They've taken up permanent residence in my head, and every time I see Bailey, guilt hits me like a sledgehammer. I've been debating on telling her. On the one hand, it's none of my business. I didn't see anything, so it's hearsay, and there's a possibility that it's not true. Why hurt her with something that could potentially be nothing?

On the other hand, what if it's true? If it was me, I would want to know. I would appreciate a heads-up instead of being blindsided. It's only the thought that it might be my jealousy talking that gives me pause.

I've put way more thought into this than is healthy. I've pondered the possibility that they might be in an open relationship, but I don't think that's the case. Call it gut feeling or instinct, but I don't think she would be on board with that kind of relationship.

But then, the way she's been acting this week? Maybe she does know. Maybe her behavior is connected to Addie's words, and seeing how she's hurting is enough to quench the words burning in my throat. There's no way I could add to her hurt.

Footsteps catch my attention, and I glance over, seeing someone hurrying down the sidewalk. It's dark, but I instantly know it's Bailey. I've spent enough watching her over the last few months to recognize her. A part of me realizes how creepy that sounds, but hell, if I can't touch, at least I can look. I watch in silence as she reaches her shop and unlocks the door. At least she tries. She drops the keys and swoops down, picking them up. I'm about to call out a greeting when she drops it again, and her shoulders slump, her head bending forward, resting against the door. With a couple of strides, I'm across the road, bending down and picking them up. She startles, her body stiffening but relaxes when she sees it's me.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm so clumsy."

Her hands are shaking when she tries to take the keys from me, but I gently move her over and unlock the door.

“Thank you,” she says softly, and I step back before following her inside. “I won’t be long. I’ve just got to grab some keys.”

I shake my head and grab her shoulders, gently guiding her to one of the tables.

“Sit.” My voice is firm, and I wait for her to comply before rounding the counter. I’m comfortable enough by now with the workings of her store to know where everything is. I bypass her commercial coffee maker, which takes at least fifteen minutes to warm up, keeping an eye on her while I make us each a cup of coffee. She’s slumped forward in a chair, her head in her hands, and I don’t need to be a mind reader to know that something’s happened. Something that’s completely devastated her. My hands clench around the cups as I make my way back to her. I need to know what hurt her. I need to know if *he* hurt her. And if he did? Then I need to find him and completely destroy him.

“If I think back on my childhood, there are two things that stand out,” she says when I’m seated. “The first one is spending summers on Grandpa Joe’s blueberry farm.” Her voice hitches, and she looks down, swallowing heavily. “The second is being here. It was in that chair,” she says, motioning to the brown leather sofa standing in a corner. You can see it’s old, the seat cracked in some places, the seams on the armrest fraying. It doesn’t fit the aesthetic of the store, but it certainly takes pride of place. “where I first met Finn. Finn the Irish Wolfhound,” she muses. “I was there when he was born, I cried when he was stolen from his owner, and then I cried again when they were eventually reunited. That’s also where I met Alec and the Black Stallion. I so desperately wished I could be stranded on an island, surviving on seaweed with a wild black stallion as my only companion. Also, White Fang. He was one of my favorites. I don’t know why, but I was always drawn to books with animals. Maybe it was because I wanted a dog so badly, but Mom would never let us have one.”

She shrugs, taking a sip of the coffee I made. “Those days, I believed that nothing in this world was stronger than the bond between an animal and its owner. Then, I got older and started reading romance novels, and that belief changed. I started believing in soul connections between men and women. That no matter how rocky the start of relationships might be or no matter how many obstacles get thrown in the way, true love would overcome anything.” She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. When she opens them again, they’re glassy with the tears swimming in them. Two of them spill over, and she swats them away. “I should have just gotten a dog.”

Seeing them is killing me. I reach across the table and grip her hand, offering my support.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

I wait for her to continue, but she doesn’t.

“It’s good you had this place and all these worlds you could get lost in. I didn’t read much growing up.”

“Were you more of a movie guy?”

“I sneaked into a movie theater a time or two, but not really. Didn’t have the time, and if it wasn’t something I could eat or sell, it wasn’t a priority. You can’t eat books,” I joke, but it falls flat at the look of sympathy on her face. “I enjoy a good book now, but back then, I was hustling whenever I had a spare moment.”

I run my free hand down the back of my neck. Fuck. It’s not a time in my life I’m proud of. Or really want to think about.

“Had to if I wanted to eat,” I mutter, keeping my eyes focused on her hand still resting in mine. It’s the longest I’ve gotten to touch her, and you’d have to use a crowbar to get me to let go.

“You did what you had to, to survive.”

“Yeah.”

I don't know what it is about Bailey, but I want her to know everything about me. I want her to see the good, the bad, and the ugly. If, by some miracle, there comes a day where I might have a shot with her, I want her to know all there is to know.

There are a few things in my past I am ashamed of, but at the end of the day, my history and everything it entails shaped me into the person I am now. And I'm damn proud of who I've become.

"Quinn's been cheating on me." The words are soft, but she might as well have shouted them. I feel that gut punch for her. I know pain. I know loss. The two of them and I are old friends. I know the damage they can do to you, how they can choke the breath from your lungs until you feel yourself gasping for air. How they can carve bloody gashes into your beating heart until nothing is left but a useless lump of bloody flesh.

She's hurting, and I'd give anything for her not to. I'd take it for her, carry its weight if I could. My stomach literally aches for what she's going through, but experience has taught me that no matter how much I wish for it, I can't bear that burden for her. All I can do is be there for her. Offer her my shoulder to lean on when the weight gets too much to bear.

The urge to tell her what a fuck head I think he is, is simmering in my veins, but that's not what she needs to hear right now.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." The helpless look she shoots me has me dropping my free hand into my lap, curling my fingers into a fist. "Upstairs," she says. "My grandparents used to live upstairs. For now, I'm going to stay there. I'm so stupid." She pulls her hand from mine and drops her head into her hands. I'm already mourning the heat of her skin against mine. "I had a feeling, and all the signs were there staring me in the face, but I didn't want to see it."

It's like the damn finally breaks, and her shoulders heave with the force of her sobs. Yet, they're silent, not a sound

passing her lips. It breaks something in me, and without thought, I'm up and around the table, pulling her into my arms. It has nothing to do with my feelings for her. It's about providing comfort to someone in desperate need. She's so lost in her grief that she doesn't resist, instead clutching my shirt in her hands, her face pressed against my chest. If not for the shaking of her body and the dampness against my chest, I wouldn't know she was crying.

Time has no meaning while she unravels in my arms. I should phone one of her friends—Hannah would be best—to come over and see to her, but I'm selfish. I can't take away her pain, but I want to be the one she leans on.

AFTER BAILEY CALMS down, she's out of it, exhaustion painting every line of her body. I'm ready to carry her up the stairs, but she somehow manages, every footfall echoing dully on the metal stairs.

I pause at the entrance, not sure what I should do next.

"I would offer you something to eat or drink, but I haven't stocked up this place in forever. I never thought I would have to." Her voice trails off as she looks around her, looking completely lost.

I take that as my cue, walking up to her and putting her bag down next to her.

"Don't worry about that. You look dead on your feet."

"That bad, huh?" The slight tremble of her lips tries its hardest to form a smile, but with a sigh, she gives up.

Brushing a loose strand of her hair back, I shake my head. "No. Despite what you've just been through, you're still just as beautiful."

Tragically beautiful but still beautiful.

Her eyes well up with tears, and I want to kick myself. Instead, I pick up her bag, grab her hand, and lead her to the bedroom.

“Go, get ready for bed,” I say, giving her hand a quick squeeze before letting go.

“Are you—”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

My shop could be burning down, and I still wouldn’t leave.

Her stiff shoulders droop and I’m not gonna lie, my heart gives a painful squeeze.

I look around the space while waiting for her and I’m pleasantly surprised. The living area is one open room, the floor a solid hardwood, a quick glance confirming that it’s white oak. Usually, I would take my time to study the warmth of the wood tones, the variations in shades that lend depth and character, and the hardwood’s grain patterns. But right now, all my attention is focused on the closed door between me and the object of my obsession.

Half an hour later, she’s in bed, on the brink of succumbing to sleep. I pull the covers up and around her, tucking her in securely. Her eyes open slightly, and she stares at me for a few beats.

“Thank you. You don’t have to stay, you know. I’ve taken up so much of your time already, and I’m sure you have better things to do than watch me being a wreck.”

No, there’s nowhere in the world I would rather be, I think while brushing the hair away from her face. Never before have I seen myself as a protector. Rather someone that you need protection from, but I want to protect her. I can’t protect her from what she’s feeling, but at least I can stay here, protect her from that fuckhead husband of hers if he tries to come here and upset her further.

“I’m going to be so embarrassed tomorrow,” she says, her eyes closed, her voice faint.

Pride. That’s an emotion I’m very familiar with, but when it comes to Bailey, no such word exists in my vocabulary. I make a sound that’s not agreeing or disagreeing, instead

leaning forward and pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. It's small and brief, and it's all I'll allow myself to do.

“You deserve to be taken care of,” I murmur, and her lips tip up in a tiny smile before sleep pulls her under and smooths all the stress and pain from her face.

Resisting the impulse to stay where I am and watch over her, I get up and settle on the couch. She's sleeping for now, but if she wakes up during the night, I don't want her to be alone. I don't ever want her to feel alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BAILEY

IT'S EARLY morning when sleep reluctantly surrenders me. There's a blissful moment of ignorance where I can't place exactly where I am. And then the moment passes, and memories flood my mind. It is a gut punch that robs my breath and curls me into a little ball.

Oh God. I can't believe it's over. I can't believe that he won't be mine to touch or share my day with anymore. That there will be no more memories that we make together. That the journey we started when we were kids has come to an end. But the worst of it all is that it's been over for a while, and I'm only now catching up. The pain of it is staggering. At least my eyes stay dry. I think last night took all the tears I had, and now I simply don't have any left in me. Or maybe they stay dry because the initial shock has worn off. Whatever the reason, I'll take it.

Minutes tick by while I try to adjust to my new reality. I wish I could say it's my strength and fortitude that has me scrambling out of bed, but it's not.

It's the sound of my apartment door opening. I can't remember locking it last night, and I'm petrified that it's Quinn. I'm not ready to see him. I'm not sure that I'll ever be ready to see him.

I dither, listening to the footsteps crossing the floor, but then, berating myself for being a coward, I square my shoulders. Marching out of the room, I ready myself for war, every ugly thing I want to hurl at him on the tip of my tongue.

“You’re up,” Kallan says, stating the obvious and stopping me in my tracks.

I take him in while I’m processing my surprise. He’s in the same clothes from last night.

“Did you stay the whole night?”

“Umm.” He rubs the back of his neck. “That couch is really comfortable.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want you to be alone.”

Such a simple answer, but the emotions it evokes in me are anything but simple. I push it down. I don’t have the bandwidth to deal with anything right now.

“Well then, one of those better be for me,” I say, eyeing the takeout cups in his hands.

“I can’t promise any notes of honey, almond, or dried fruit, but it’s the best I could do. Seeing as being arrested for breaking and entering before breakfast is not on my to-do list for the day.”

“You remember that?”

He smiles, handing me the cup. “How could I forget? Your passion for coffee left a lasting impression.” His smile drops. “How are you feeling?”

I shrug. “I’ll survive. But I do feel a bit like an idiot. Sorry you had to see me like that.”

Leaning back against the kitchen counter, he studies me. I want to squirm, but instead, take a sip.

“I could always do something to even the score. Would that make you feel better?”

“Like what?” I say, staring at him like he’s grown three heads.

Looking down, he hums to himself, and I see his mind working with the thought he’s putting into it.

“I could always grab my guitar and spend the day serenading people walking into your store.”

For a second, I think he’s making fun of me, but then the sincerity I see in his eyes puts me at ease, managing to coax a small smile to my lips.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, blinking away the image of Kallan bent over a guitar, crooning a love song.

“Well, then stop saying ridiculous things.”

We engage in a stare-off, and I’m the first to look away, wilting under the intensity of his stare.

“You play guitar, and you sing. How are you still single?”

Some emotion, which suspiciously looks like hurt, flashes through his eyes before he can mask it. It’s there and gone again in an instant.

He nods. “I can play a bit. Self-taught. But I can’t carry a tune to save my life. That’s where the idiot part comes in.”

I smirk at him. “As much as I appreciate the offer,” and I do, I really do, even if it’s completely unnecessary. Kallan owes me nothing. In fact, at this stage, I feel as if the scales are solidly tipped in his favor, “I would prefer you not scare off any of my customers.”

Not that I think that’s possible. Kallan’s the type of guy women run to, not away from.

“If you change your mind, just say the word.”

After Kallan leaves, I get ready to open the store. I don’t want to. I want to curl up in a ball and nurse my wounds, but just because it feels like my world is ending, it doesn’t mean that the world stops turning. That’s my new motto. After fruitlessly rummaging around for about ten minutes, I realize I must have forgotten my phone in my hurry to get out of the apartment last night. Dread fills me with the thought of having to go back there to get it. Revisit the scene of the crime. The one where my heart was butchered. It takes about two and a half seconds to decide I can live without it.

The day drags on, and I immerse myself in the monotony of familiar tasks—which I'm grateful for. It allows me to keep busy, and I even have moments where I manage to not think about Quinn. It might just be a minute or two at a time, but I'll take it.

A few times, I find myself staring across the road at Kallan's shop, conflicted. I should feel embarrassed about him witnessing my breakdown last night. Instead, I feel...grateful. It felt good to be held and comforted through my tears. At no point did he seem uncomfortable or eager to get away from me. And he stayed the whole night just so I don't wake up alone instead of bolting at the first opportunity. Who does that?

It confuses me.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, like somehow that's going to make the headache pounding behind my eyes go away. I don't know anything anymore.

"Did I ever tell you how I came to be here?" Olivia asks, startling me from my thoughts. She closes my office door and sits down.

"At the shop?"

"Not just the shop, but this town."

I shake my head. She never volunteered any information, and I didn't want to pry, figuring she had the right to her privacy. She'd tell me if there was something she wanted me to know.

"I have four older brothers. My mom always wanted a girl, but by the fourth boy, she gave up. Then, surprise, ten years later, I came along. Because of the age gap, most of my cousins were a lot older than me. I have one cousin, Lilly, who is a year younger than me. We didn't have all that much in common with the rest because of our age, so we got close. More like sisters than cousins. I started dating Sam in Junior year, and a year later, Lilly started dating his best friend, Wesley. The four of us spent so much time together that I guess it was inevitable. After graduation, I went to college out

of state. Sam attended college locally. I was worried about the long-distance thing, but we made it work.

“It was during my third year, while on summer break, that I found out that Lilly and Wes had broken up. Wes told me he had caught Sam and Lilly together. I was devastated. They tried to explain that they didn’t mean for it to happen. At first, they bonded over missing me, but they got closer as time went on and realized they had feelings for each other. Strong feelings. Like the ‘I want to spend the rest of my life with you’ kind of feelings. And instead of coming clean, they kept it hidden because they ‘loved me so much’ and didn’t want to hurt me.” Even though she chuckles, I can see lingering pain in her eyes. “Can you believe they wanted my forgiveness and my blessing?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She nods. “At first, most of the family was on my side, but as time went on and Lilly and Sam didn’t waver from their devotion to each other, opinions started to change. I was told to get over it. People can’t help who they love. It’s true love, and I shouldn’t get in the way of that. Those kind of things. They were everywhere. But family get-togethers were the worst. I was just supposed to smile, be happy, and ignore the fact that two people I was close with betrayed me in the worst way. I was supposed to watch them be happy together.

“Eventually, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I just packed up and left. Didn’t tell anyone I was leaving.”

I reach out and take her hand. “I’m so sorry, Olivia.”

“Thank you. Time and distance have made me realize that Sam and I were never meant to be. We were already growing apart and would eventually have gone our separate ways. But it doesn’t make the betrayal sting any less. ”

“And your family?”

“That’s the betrayal I can’t get over. I sent them a message when I got here to say I’m safe and I’ll be in contact when I’m ready. A year later, and I’m still not ready. Don’t know if I’ll

ever be.” She shrugs as if it’s nothing, but she’s not fooling me. Some hurts take a lifetime to heal.

“That’s so messed up,” I mutter, my heart sinking at the thought that I still have to let my family know. I’m not sure what Dad’s reaction will be, but I know Mom will be upset. With me. She’ll somehow make it my fault.

“Anyway, I’m telling you this because I know something about betrayal and hurt. If you ever need someone to just listen, I’m here.”

A few hours later, I’m grateful that the day is finally over, and I make a quick grocery run. Just the essentials—fixings for coffee and a couple of bottles of wine. I don’t have an appetite for food, but a few glasses of wine sounds damn good right about now. After all, I need to toast my first day of singleton. On paper, I’m still married, but what the sledgehammer called life has taught me the last few days? A piece of paper means shit.

My step falters as I round the corner. Quinn’s sitting on the bottom step, his eyes already on me. I study him in the time it takes to get to him. He looks like hell. His hair which he’s usually so meticulous about, is a mess. It looks like he hasn’t been sleeping. His face is drawn, His eyes look tired, and dark bruises have taken up residence under them. He’s still beautiful, though. A beautiful stranger.

“What are you doing here?”

He holds out my phone. I take it from him, making sure our fingers don’t touch.

“Can I come up?”

I shake my head, my whole body revolting at the thought. There’s so much left unsaid between us. I know that. But tonight, I want to get lost in a bottle of wine and forget.

“I don’t want to see you right now. Much less talk to you.”

He gets up, but he doesn’t step closer. “Please, Bailey. The way we left things last night...I don’t want it to fester. We

need to fix this, and we can't do that if there's space between us."

The rage I feel is instantaneous. "We? *We* need to fix what *you* broke? There is no 'we.' There's only a you and an I. I think I was pretty clear on that last night."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "I refuse to accept that."

My hand clenches on the bag I'm holding, and I'm so damn tempted to hit him over the head with the bottle of wine. But that means going back to the store to buy a new one, which feels like too much effort. So, with much difficulty, I push back my murderous tendencies, taking a deep breath.

"I don't care about what you want or need. What I want is for my husband to not have fucked another woman. What I want is to not have to feel this way. What I want is for you to stop pressuring me into something I'm not ready for. What I want is for you to leave."

By the end, I'm almost shouting, and it makes me even angrier that we're airing our dirty laundry on the sidewalk where everyone can see. It's hard, but I manage to claw back control over my emotions.

"I don't know if I'll ever be ready to talk to you, Quinn, but I know that that day is not today. So please, if you've ever felt anything for me, just leave."

His shoulders drop. "I'm so fucking sorry, Bails." The last time I heard his voice so broken was the day his grandpa died, but unlike then, it doesn't move me.

"Yeah, me too," I say, trying to brush past him, but his hand on my arm stops me.

"I'll leave. I'll give you the space that you need for now. But I'm not going to go far. You can be angry at me. Shout at me. Hit me. Do whatever you need to do. I deserve it, and I'll take it but don't expect me to do nothing. I'm going to fight for us no matter what."

He drops his hand, and the urge to get away from him is so strong I don't watch to make sure he leaves. For all I care, he

could sit on that bottom step and rot. Once I'm safely inside, I grab a glass, and after a quick rinse, I pour a glass of wine.

I don't have anything in mind but drinking until I pass out.

"My marriage is over. I'm single. For the first time in my life, I'm single."

No matter how many times I say it, my voice echoing through the empty apartment, it still doesn't feel real. It feels foreign like I'm talking about someone else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

QUINN

“YOU CAME,” Justine breathes, leaning in to kiss me.

I pull back before her lips touch mine, ignoring the look of hurt that flashes across her face. What did she expect? What about pausing our relationship did she not understand? I don’t want to be here. I want to be wherever Bailey is, doing whatever I can to earn her forgiveness. I’ll crawl on my knees if I have to.

“You said it was urgent?”

The note of hysteria in her voice when she called me had me rushing over, a million worst-case scenarios running through my mind.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

I shake my head. “You know I can’t be here. What’s wrong?”

She’s standing in the middle of her foyer, wringing her hands.

“Justine,” I sigh, “Just tell me.”

“I think you should sit.”

She licks her lips, and I take a closer look. Is that trepidation I see? She’s nervous.

I sink down on the couch. “I can’t stay long. I have to get back to work.” Right after stopping at the florist, buying the biggest bouquet they have, and dropping it off at Chantler and Cook. Of course, I don’t say that.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurts, almost shouting.

It takes a few seconds for the words to sink in, but then they do, and my body—it’s as if it gets hot and then cold. “What did you say?” My words are barely above a whisper.

“I said, I’m pregnant.”

“With my baby?”

Her eyes widen, and her lips thin. “Of course it’s yours. Who else’s would it be?”

Of. Fucking. Course it’s mine.

Jumping up, I grip my hair and round on her, struggling to keep my voice down. To not grab her and shake her.

“How did this happen? You said you were on the pill?”

“I was! I am!” she cries.

“Then you can’t be pregnant!” I’m losing it, but I don’t care.

“I am. I missed my period, and I never miss my period. So I took a test. About ten different tests, and they all showed positive. You know the pill isn’t always a hundred percent safe.”

“No, no, no, no,” I moan, my legs giving way and sinking back down onto the couch. “Tell me this is a joke? Tell me you didn’t allow this to happen.”

She recoils as if I’ve slapped her. “What?” Her voice is barely above a whisper, her eyes wide with shock. I don’t care. If Bailey finds out, it’s over. There’s no way she’ll ever forgive me for this. If I lose my job, then so be it. Nothing is worth losing Bailey. “You’re saying this is my fault? That I let this happen?”

I drop my head in my hands, my mind spinning, taking a deep breath. I can still salvage this situation. Get ahead of it if I play my cards right.

“Justine,” I say, getting up and embracing her. “I’m sorry,” I whisper into her hair. “I didn’t mean that. It was just the shock talking.”

I hold her in my arms to calm her trembling before moving us to the couch. Her eyes are glassy and wide.

“We made a baby,” I whisper, trying out the words. They stick to my mouth like glue. I’ve always wanted children, but not like this. I shouldn’t be surprised. With the amount of sex we had these past months, it was bound to happen. I’m such a fucking idiot.

Justine nods, her wary eyes focused on me. Cupping her cheeks, I lean in, pressing a kiss to her lips.

“As beautiful as that is, a baby right now is not a good idea. You can see that, right?”

The light that started glimmering in her eyes fade. “What are you saying?”

“You’re still trying to figure out what you want in life. I work all the time. Children need so much time and attention, and we’re not in a place in our lives where we’re stable enough to provide that.”

“You want me to get an abortion?”

I nod. “It’s what makes the most sense. You’re still so young, Justine. Just think about it. What about all your dreams? All the things you said you wanted to do? You mentioned you want to travel—see the world. If you have a baby, you won’t be able to do that.”

She’s shaking her head before I’m even done talking. “I know I said all those things, but I’ve been thinking about it and I don’t think I want to. I don’t think I can.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Wait, how long have you known?”

“I found out after we got back from our weekend.”

“And you’re only telling me now?”

“I tried. I was going to, then Bailey—”

“Don’t say her name!” I can’t handle that. Not now. I take a deep breath, trying to reign in my frustration. “Justine now is not a good time. There’s still plenty of time to have children.”

“How can you be so cold? This is a baby we’re talking about. Our baby,” she implores, grabbing my hand and pressing it against her stomach. “You told me you have strong feelings for me. A baby doesn’t mean things have to change. It’s like you said, we could still let our relationship develop naturally.”

I snatch my hand back, curling my fingers into a fist.

“It’s because I’m not ready to be a father!” I shake my head, chuckling humorlessly. “You realize this will mean the end of my career, right? Phillip won’t just give me a handshake, a slap on the back, and say, ‘Good job, Quinn.’ I’ll be out of a job, and then how do you expect me to take care of a baby?”

“You could move in here. Save on rent that way while you’re looking for a new job. Or we don’t tell anyone I’m pregnant. I only have two months left on my internship, and I won’t be showing for a while. It won’t be impossible to hide.”

The thought of playing happy family with Justine and raising a baby together sends shivers down my spine. “Fuck, Justine. Grow up. This pretty picture you’ve obviously been painting in your head will never happen.” I shake my head. “No, you simply have to get rid of it. We have no business raising a baby right now.”

“It’s my body. You don’t get to tell me what I do with it.”

“And it’s my life!” I thunder. “You don’t get to decide for me how I have to live it. And I don’t want to live it tied to you by a baby.”

Silence descends, and it’s heavy, fraught with a million and one different emotions and accusations.

“I’ve been such an idiot,” she whispers. “You’re not really getting a divorce, are you?”

I would bet just about everything I own that if Bailey finds out about this baby, I will indeed be getting a divorce. All these plans I have of getting her back will go up in smoke.

This is it. The moment when all my sins come out to play.

I don't answer her. I don't voice the answer that's written across my face.

"Get out," she whispers. Her face has lost all its color, and her lips are trembling, but her eyes are fierce. And I can see by the look in them that she finally gets it. That the stars have imploded. That the blinkers have come off, and that she finally sees me, this, us for what it is. *Was*, I should rather say. "You might not want this baby, and I might end up not keeping it, but either way, it will be my decision. And if I decide to keep it, I don't need you in my life."

"I'VE FUCKED UP."

Ryan hands me a beer, and I bring it to my lips, not stopping until the bottle is empty. Ryan, the friend that he is, doesn't question it, silently getting me another one and handing it to me before sitting down.

After leaving Justine's place, I got into my car, and instead of returning to work, I just drove. Fuck work. It's the last place I wanted to be. Especially now that my days there are numbered. The moment Phillip finds out—and he will find out—I'm fired. I also didn't want to go back to our, well, I guess, my apartment. Without Bailey there, the place is like a fucking tomb, and I'm drowning in the silence.

Without consciously deciding, I found myself in Ryan's driveway. Whatever he was about to say died on his lips after taking a look at me. He just ushered me inside and got me a beer.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" Ryan says when the silence stretches.

"There's no point." I shrug, studying the bottle in my hand like it's the most fascinating thing in the world. "I won't be working there much longer."

"What do you mean?" He sits forward, his arms braced on his thighs, pinning me with a stare.

"Told you, I fucked up."

“You gotta give me more than that.”

I take another pull from the bottle, contemplating what to say. If I’m looking for advice, Ryan is one of the most level-headed of my friends. Carter has never been a relationship kind of guy, and Aiden, well, Hannah is Bailey’s best friend, and I don’t want to put him in a position of having to hide things from his wife.

“Where’s Aspen?”

“At work.”

I nod. I knew that, and his tone tells me he knows I’m stalling.

“We’ve had some epic parties in this place,” I say, looking around. It’s just another punch to the gut. How will this affect our friends? We all go way back, and everyone’s bound to feel one way or another. Nothing will be the same.

“Yeah, man. But you’re not here to talk about parties.”

No, I’m not here to talk about parties.

“I’ve been seeing a woman at work, and Bailey found out.”

He blows out a breath. “Can’t say I’m surprised, but fuck, Quinn.”

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m not. You’ve been acting sketchy for a while. I just didn’t want it to be true.”

“Yeah, well...”

“So what do you want from me?”

I shrug. “Advice. A time machine. I don’t fucking know.”

The silence between us is heavy while I avoid his eyes. He’s not only my friend, he also cares about Bailey, and I’m sure he’s feeling disappointed in me.

“Do you love this other woman?”

“Fuck no. I love Bailey.”

“Were you and Bailey going through a bad patch?”

I shake my head, feeling like the asshole I know I am. It’s almost like I wish I could say we were having problems. As if having a reason would somehow excuse it.

“Then why cheat on her?”

Isn’t that the question. My shoulders bow under the hint of anger I hear in his voice.

“I’ve never been with anyone but Bailey. Then Justine came along, and she’s sexy as hell. She was into me, and I let my dick do all my thinking.”

“That’s it? You got a boner for someone and then decided, what the hell, let me blow up my whole life? That’s not you, man.”

“Fuck! I know,” I say, jumping up and raking my hands through my hair. I’m agitated, and my body’s demanding that I move. That I do something. That I get in my car, get to Bailey, and force her to forgive me. Instead, I pace. “You’ve got to help me. She said we’re over, and I can’t,” I take in a breath, just the thought of it, a knife shoved straight into my chest, “I can’t lose her. Tell me what to do.”

He groans and falls back against the couch. “Keeping your dick in your pants is what you should do.”

“Not helping,” I bark.

“Yeah, that ship has sailed,” he mutters. “Look, I don’t know what to say,” he says, shrugging helplessly. “All you can do is be completely honest with her. Lay all your cards on the table, show her how sorry you are, and hope she can forgive your sorry ass.”

“I really fucked up,” I breathe.

“Yeah, you really fucked up.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BAILEY

“WOW, THIS is beautiful,” I breathe, unable to keep the awe out of my voice while taking in the view.

This morning, I woke up alone in my apartment, wondering what I was supposed to do with myself and second-guessing my decision to avoid everyone for as long as I could. The last thing I imagined was that I would be standing on Kallan’s porch, looking out at the lake and feeling as if I was in the middle of the woods.

But here I am, and I could stand here for hours just soaking in the sounds of wildlife instead of cars and people. It’s like a slice of heaven.

“It is,” he says, handing me a beer and leading me to the Adirondack chairs that are perfectly positioned to take in the view. “Wasn’t sure what I was looking for when I saw this piece of land, but once I laid eyes on it, I knew I had to have it.”

“Did you build the house yourself?”

“No, but I designed it and did some things myself. Like the floors. It took more than a year to get it all done, but it was worth it.”

“I’d say.”

I wasn’t sure what to expect as we drove down the dirt road leading up to his house, but when the log cabin came into view, I swear my jaw dropped.

Rustic. Utterly and charmingly rustic with rough-hewn logs and two stone chimneys rising proudly from the roof.

When thinking of my dream home, I never even considered a log cabin, but then he led me inside, and I was speechless. So simple and rustic, yet elegant and modern. Everything about it—the hardwood floors, the exposed beams, the stone fireplace, the large windows framing everything—was warm and inviting. The overriding emotion I felt was nostalgia. As if I was longing for a time long past and a simpler way of living.

“It’s very private,” I say, looking around. Here and there, you see glimpses of houses nestled in the woods. “Do you know any of your neighbors?”

“Not really. We’re not close enough to bump into each other.”

“Thank you,” I say, giving him the side-eye.

“For what?”

There are many things I want to thank him for.

Thank you for not looking at me any differently. I know once people find out, they’ll have an opinion. Lines will be drawn, and things will change. They’ll feel sorry for me, or pity me, or feel anger. It’s unavoidable, but I just want to be me, Bailey. With Kallan, I can be that.

Thank you for recognizing that the last thing I needed was solitude, even when I couldn’t. The thing about solitude is it’s lonely, so freaking lonely. There’s nothing to fill up the hours and stop your mind from spinning round and round. Nothing to stop the images that creep up in unguarded moments, playing like a movie reel in my mind. I must hate myself because all of them are of them. Of how his body moves over hers. The sounds he makes when he’s completely lost in the moment. His face when he finally surrenders. Words spoken in passion. It’s all the parts of him that used to only belong to me, and knowing that he shared that with someone else is a special kind of hell.

But my heart is not brave enough to say all of that.

“For dragging me out of my apartment.”

“So, how are you holding up?”

I sigh, staring out at the water. “As best as I can, I guess. It just hurts, you know. One day I think I’ve got my life all figured out, and then the next day, it’s just over. Gone. Almost like some cosmic force out there threw a pair of dice and decided my fate.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, debating something, before he starts speaking.

“Remember when I told you that my childhood was part of why I needed a fresh start?”

I nod for him to continue. “I used to be married,” he says, and now he’s the one looking out over the lake.

“You’re divorced?” I don’t know why that shocks me, but it does.

“Widowed, actually. Her name was Josephine, but everyone called her Josie. That was one of the hardest things after she died,” he muses. “mentioning her in the past tense, but it became easier as time went on. I met Josie during a very low point in my life.”

“Is she the person who helped you straighten yourself out?”

He nods. “I was young when I fell in with a bad crowd. The kind of people that operate in the not-talked-about underbelly of Vegas. At first, the jobs were small, but as I got older, they got bigger and more serious. I’ll spare you the details, but it was the kind of stuff that could land you some serious jail time.”

I don’t dare say anything because his words are riveting. It’s a side of life I’m completely unfamiliar with.

“I was cutting across a park on my way home one night, and there she was, sitting cross-legged on the grass, staring up at the moon. At that time of night, the park was always deserted, so seeing someone sitting there was jarring, and it made me stop. I was concerned but didn’t want to scare her, so I kept my distance and just watched her for a while. She must have seen me though because after a while she called out to me. Asked me if I was going to introduce myself. I didn’t

know what to make of her. I told her she was crazy sitting in the dark by herself, and she smiled at me and said, ‘Don’t worry. My cancer is going to kill me before someone else can.’ The way she smiled when she said that floored me. There was no bitterness, anger, or self-pity. Just acceptance and joy. And that was Josie in a nutshell.”

“She sounds like she was an amazing woman.”

“She was. She had such a zest for life despite the hand life dealt her. She made me feel as if my problems in life were nothing compared to hers.”

“I don’t think that’s fair to yourself. To compare the two. Your advice to me was not to compare or minimize my feelings.”

“You’re right,” he says, nodding. “But it made me realize that at least I could change my life, you know? I had the luxury of not having to accept things the way they were.”

“We only get this one life. What we do with it is up to us,” I repeat his words from that day at the harbor.

“I don’t know what she saw in me because I wasn’t a good guy back then, but it was something. Night after night, we met at that park and we became inseparable. She welcomed me into her life with no reservations. Her parents, as well. They showed me what it meant to be a family. Her dad took me under his wing and taught me all he knew about woodworking. I’m thankful every day for having met them. Without them, I wouldn’t be the man that I am.

For a while after she died, I went to a dark place. I couldn’t understand why life was so unfair. Why somebody so good would be taken so soon when the world was filled with bad people. Then one day, I realized I was doing her memory a disservice. I was going against everything Josie stood for because if anyone had the right to rage against life, it was Josie. Yet she never did.”

“That must have been so hard.”

For one crazy moment, I want to take Kallan in my arms and pretend that I mean enough to him to take away all the

hurts that he's faced.

"It was. But to get to my point. What you are going through is a kind of death, and death is hard. Regardless of what you decide to do, you need to give yourself the grace to grieve."

"I don't think I can eat another bite." Groaning, I drop my head against the couch, wondering if he'd think less of me if I unbuttoned my jeans. "You weren't boasting when you said you make a mean trashcan burrito."

After our heavy conversation on the porch, we went inside and I watched in fascination as he put together the most delicious-looking burritos, seemingly out of nothing.

"I don't make promises I can't deliver," he scoffs.

"So you play guitar, you sing, you make magic with your hands, and you can cook. I'm impressed, Kallan Reed," I tease, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye.

At the sound of his grunt, I roll my head so I can look at him fully. Is he...blushing?

"You're blushing," I say, half in awe, half-jokingly.

"Yes," he says, completely owning it. He picks up a piece of my hair and rubs it between his fingers, his eyes focused on what he's doing. "You can't blame a guy when a beautiful woman talks about making magic with your hands."

When his eyes finally meet mine, they're positively scorching, and for a few beautiful seconds, the world falls away, leaving only me and him. Leaving a world where I can pretend I don't have any baggage. Where I can freely respond to the way his eyes darken. It's been years since I've been looked at like this, and I want to drown under the tidal wave of emotions that brings.

But then he severs eye contact, and the moment is broken. In a swift motion, he gets up, swiping our plates from the coffee table and retreating to the kitchen.

Reality is something you can't escape from, and it makes me feel wretched. What am I doing? I have no business lusting over Kallan. It would be different if he was some stranger I met in a bar. I don't owe Quinn anything. Not anymore. But Kallan isn't some stranger. He's unlike anyone I've ever met, and he's come to mean so much to me in the short time I've known him. He deserves more than that.

KALLAN

It takes effort not to throw the plates down. Bracing my arms on the counter, I drop my head, taking slow, deep breaths, willing my body to calm down.

What the hell am I doing? I was two seconds away from saying fuck it and claiming her mouth. And she would have let me. That electric pull between us was so heavy it was a third person in the room that couldn't be denied, and the way she reacted was a siren call to a lonely and lost sailor. It was subtle, but it was there—the dilated pupils, the small puffs of air escaping her parted lips that I could almost taste when she leaned closer—giving me the non-verbal permission I needed. But I know tomorrow she'd regret it. I did a lot of stupid stuff when Josie died, and all of them left me feeling empty. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fill the gap she left because I wasn't ready. Bailey isn't ready, and what she needs most is a friend.

But fuck, I'm sure if names were in the dictionary, the description under hers would be *torture*.

It doesn't help that revealing all I had earlier has left me feeling exposed.

It takes effort, but I finally pull myself together.

“Come,” I say when I get back to the lounge. She's still seated, but her back is as stiff as a board, and she's fiddling with her fingers.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, stammering over the first word, her voice tentative. It bothers me. I don't want things

between us to be stiff and awkward because of my almost fuck up.

“Of course.” I smile, hoping it will help reassure her. “I thought I’d show you where the magic happens,” I say, referring to her request to see my workshop.

Her relief is immediate. She jumps up, and there’s a lightness to her step when she follows me outside. We’re quiet as we walk, but it’s a comfortable silence. I clench my fists against the temptation to reach out and pull her closer. Feel her warmth against me as we’re walking together, but one fuck up a day is enough.

I let her walk in ahead of me and then stand back and watch her as her eyes roam the space, taking in the various projects I have underway.

“It’s huge,” she breathes, turning in a slow circle.

“One would think. But when I get big orders it doesn’t feel that way.”

You don’t realize how much space tables and chairs take up until you have twenty tables and eighty chairs you need to store.

She takes a deep breath. “I love the way it smells. What’s under there?” she asks, walking towards my secret project I keep hidden under a tarp.

“Just something I’m working on.”

I grab her shoulders, steering her away from it, ignoring the look she shoots me. I’m not ready for her to see it yet. Soon, though.

I’m still holding onto her shoulders when she gives a little gasp.

“Oh my gosh, it’s the crib.” She reaches out, touching it, trailing her fingers over it. “I thought you sold it,” she murmurs.

As if I could sell it after seeing how much she loved it. That same day, Andrew and I wrangled it into my truck, and I

brought it home. The looks he kept shooting me said he thought I was crazy.

“I saw a few spots that I must have missed and needed some work. So I brought it back. Besides, I needed the space for something else.” Lies, all lies.

“I don't know. I think it's perfect.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

QUINN

THERE'S A somber atmosphere when I walk into the office. The first place my eyes stray to is Justine's desk. It's empty. Even the cactus is gone. My normal greetings are met with subdued voices and an avoidance of eye contact. A sliver of unease shivers down my spine.

Joellene heads me off as I'm on my way to my office.

"Morning, Quinn. Margery has requested your presence in her office the moment you get in."

Margery, head of HR. Of course. I nod and change direction. Every step I take feels like I'm marching to the gallows, all eyes trained on me. The cat's obviously out of the bag, and the rumor mill has been working in overdrive, spreading the gossip like wildfire in a relatively small environment like this. I won't be surprised if a rotten tomato hits me on the side of the head.

Phillip's sitting across the desk from Margery and jumps up when I stop in the doorway. I don't think I've ever seen him this angry. His hands are fisted at his sides, and there's a vein pulsing on the side of his temple. I bet he's burning up with the urge to take a swing at me.

"Quinn, come in and close the door behind you."

I do as she asks and take a seat on one of the visitors' chairs. Her eyes soften when she looks at Phillip, who's still standing, his eyes glued to me. "Take a seat, Phillip."

He's reluctant but does as she asks.

"I'm sure you know why you're here?"

The softness she had for Phillip is absent when she speaks to me. I nod. I have yet to say anything because there's nothing I can say. After the other night, I knew this was coming. No matter how valuable I've been to this company, no matter how many hours of blood, sweat, and tears I've given them, it means nothing.

“A non-fraternization clause was included in the employee contract you signed. Our policies are in place to not only encourage staff members to keep their interactions at work professional, but also to protect the company from potential sexual harassment lawsuits.”

Sexual harassment my ass. She was a more than willing participant.

“It clearly states that any employee in breach can be fired without any further discussion. You signed it and were obligated to abide by its terms. You have left us no option but to fire you for breach of contract.”

“I'm going to make sure you never get a job in this town again.”

“Phillip, please. Let's keep this to the facts.”

He shakes his head, his movement jerky. “No. I want him to understand just how screwed he is. I've already put the word out. Nobody is going to touch you.”

It's not an empty threat because Phillip is connected, and many people owe him favors. I always knew this was a possibility, but I did it anyway. It might not have been as bad if I screwed anyone else, but his beloved niece? He's out to destroy me.

I nod because there's nothing left to say. It doesn't matter that Justine was willing. I've been caught red-handed, the fat lady's sung, the ball's completely out of my court. I'm sure there are plenty more idioms to describe how completely and utterly screwed I am.

“Your personal items are boxed, waiting at reception. You can collect it on the way out.”

It's a clear dismissal, or at least, I take it as one, leaving with as much of my dignity as I can muster.

FROSTY FROGS IS quiet as I slide onto a barstool. It's not surprising. It's just gone nine, and Nathan's place is better known for its evening festivities than breakfast.

It's on my lips to order a cognac, but I think better of it. I'm out of a job, out of a wife, and in two months, my lease will be up, so I will be out of a place to stay.

I run my hands across my face, my stubble prickly against the palms of my hands while I wait for my beer. I'm aiming to get trashed. It won't solve anything, but at least I won't give a fuck for a little while.

I'm on my fifth—sixth?—beer when Nathan comes strolling in, his ever-present leather jacket slung over his shoulder, his helmet under his other arm. I've been telling him for years that that bike of his is a death trap.

His brows quirk when he sees me. The last time we spoke was when I blew him off to go away for the weekend with Justine. Fucking or fishing. It seemed like an obvious choice.

He rounds the bar and disappears into the back, but it's not long before he's back, leaning on the bar next to me, studying me in silence. I wait him out. It won't be long before he starts with the questions.

“Why aren't you at work?”

I smirk. Knew it. “Got fired.” I shrug and take another drink.

“Why?”

“I fucked the boss' niece.”

He straightens up abruptly. “What?”

“Yep. Fucked the boss's niece. She was employed as my intern.”

Confessing my sins seems easier the second time. As if talking to Ryan broke the seal.

“Damn.”

I look up at the unfamiliar voice and catch the look one of the bartenders is throwing at me. I don't recognize him. Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. I'm done lying. The truth is like a giant jellyfish that's wrapped itself around my body, its long tentacles suffocating me, its thousands of microscopic barbed stingers injecting a steady stream of venom into my body.

I've lost Bailey. She'll never forgive me for this. I might have stood a chance before, but now that Justine is pregnant—there's nothing in this world, fuck, this universe, that will get her to forgive me. The chasm yawning in my heart at that thought is so big and wide that it petrifies me. So, I ignore it for now.

“Tell me you didn't. Tell me you're joking.”

Fuck, I've forgotten about Nathan for a second, too absorbed in my self-pity. His voice is soft and dangerous. Bailey's like a sister to him, and his words aren't asking questions; they're demanding a certain kind of answer. An answer I would do anything to be able to give him. But it's too late now. Time to pull up my big boy pants.

“Wish I was, bro.” I shrug, downing my beer and pushing my glass to the nosy bartender—a silent command for another one. “And that's not all. She's going to have my baby, so surprise, you're going to be an uncle.”

I'm tempted to make jazz hands and all, but it feels like too much effort. My shoulders jerk at the sound of a glass smashing. Damn, there goes my glass. At least it was empty. Nathan's whole body is heaving, his anger giving Phillip a run for its money.

I should let him punch me a time or ten. It would be a win-win for both of us. He'll get rid of that aggression that throwing a glass couldn't quite manage, and I'll get to feel pain. Pain that I deserve and pain that I need to drown out this despair that's beating through my body.

“Does Bailey know?”

“About the affair, yes. That I’m going to be a father, no. Not yet.”

“Fuck, man! What were you thinking? I don’t understand. Were the two of you having problems? Did you stop loving Bailey?”

“No and no.”

“Then why?”

“It’s simple. I was tempted, and I gave in to it.”

IT’S EVENING. I’VE spent the day steadily drinking. After my delightful conversation with my baby bro, he kicked me out, but hey, this town was built for drinking, and there’s a bar around every corner. I didn’t have to go far to drown my misery.

A guy sniggers as I stumble, righting myself just before my face has the misfortune of meeting the cobblestones.

I flip him off. He can go and fuck himself.

My destination finally comes into view, and the lights blazing from the windows are a beacon, pulling me towards it, a lighthouse directing me safely through stormy seas.

I have to stop myself from pressing my nose against the window like a kid admiring all the sweets a candy store has to offer. I’m aching for just a sight of her.

My brain is slow—I guess that’s what happens after a full day of marination in alcohol—but it eventually catches up and processes what my eyes are seeing.

Bailey and...another man. They’re seated at one of her little tables, drinking coffee and talking. Seems innocent enough, but I have a clear view of his face, and his eyes—the way he’s looking at her tells me that whatever is on his mind is not innocent. Even my fucked up, alcohol-infused brain can see that.

Lucky for me, the front door is unlocked, which it shouldn’t be, seeing as it’s way past closing time.

“Is this what’s been going on behind my back?”

Her startled eyes meet mine. “What are you doing here?”

“Checking up on my wife.” I hiccup and hold my breath. Ten counts are what they say to stop them. I count slowly in my head, counting to fifteen instead, just to be sure.

“Quinn. Go home. You’re drunk.”

“Not so drunk that I can’t see what’s going on here. It didn’t take you long to replace me,” I sneer. At least, I think I’m sneering. Everything around me is hazy, and the world just won’t keep still.

“That’s enough. Don’t talk to her like that.”

The dude stands, and I peer up at him. Who is he? Have we met before? Whatever. It doesn’t matter. He’s protective over her, and it makes me laugh. Bailey need protecting from me? The idea is preposterous, but then I sober, suddenly not finding it so funny anymore. I would never hurt her. Physically, that is.

“Is this the guy you were ‘networking’ with the other night?” I make air quotes with my fingers just to emphasize how ridiculous I think it is that a bookstore owner needs to network.

“Watch your mouth,” he threatens, but whatever. I can take him. Probably.

“Quinn, you need to go home.”

“But I am home. Wherever you are is home.” I’m whining like a kid, but I don’t care.

She shakes her head, and the look on her face has me wanting to cry. I did that. I put it there.

“Not anymore. I moved out, remember?”

“No.” I look around, pull out a chair and park my ass in it. She’s here, so I’m staying. “I’m staying right here.”

She glances at dude who the fuck ever, sending him a helpless look. Why the fuck is she looking at him? She should be looking at me. I snap my fingers.

“No looking at him. Look at your husband.”

He shoots me a look, and we have a silent stare-off until Bailey’s voice registers, pulling my attention back to her. Just for a second, and then it goes back to him.

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”

She’s quiet for a bit, and it dawns on me that she’s on the phone.

“He’s out of his mind drunk, and I don’t want him to be alone tonight, so I’d appreciate it.”

Such a good wife, always caring about me.

“Quinn,” she says, snapping her fingers and drawing my eyes from the dude who’s still staring at me. His eyes are giving me a sort of violence that I’m down for. “Nathan’s at work, so I called Aidan. He’s on his way to fetch you.”

I shake my head. He can try, but I’m not leaving this chair. At least not until *he* leaves. As if she can read my mind, which she probably can, seeing that she knows me so well, she turns to who the fuck ever dude.

“Maybe it’s best if you go. Aidan should be here soon.”

He’s shaking his head, and the asshole dares to touch her.

“I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

I decide to add my two cents worth. “I’m her husband. We’ve been alone plenty of times.”

“Just leave it. You can’t reason with a drunk person.”

He blows out a breath, and then he’s striding towards the door. “I’ll wait outside for Aidan.” He levels a look at me. “But I will be keeping an eye out.”

Then it’s just me and Bailey, the way it’s meant to be. She takes the chair across from me, eyeing me warily.

“He knows Aidan?”

“No,” she says, her voice clipped.

“But you know him. How? And for how long?”

She sighs, her shoulders slumping. “Quinn, you haven’t been around in a long time. How much did you have to drink?”

“Not enough,” I mumble, dropping my head in my hands. “I think Nathan’s disowned me.”

“Why?”

“Cause I told him. I told him about all the shitty things I’ve done to you.” I hiccup. Damn, they’re back.

Her sigh carries the weight of the world, a heaviness coating them that’s never been there before. It’s on the tip of my drunk ass tongue to tell her I got fired today, but self-preservation kicks in.

“I’ve decided to quit my job.”

She’s a picture of shock as she stares at me, her mouth slightly open.

“Why?”

Remembering Ryan’s advice I open my mouth to take it back, to tell her the truth, but I can’t. I literally can’t force the words out.

“You should be happy,” I say instead. “You hated my job.”

“No, Quinn. I never hated your work.” She shakes her head. “It made you happy, so I couldn’t hate it. What I did hate was that you never made time for me. That I wasn’t important enough.”

“You are important. So damn important.” Fuck, now I want to cry.

The sound of a car door slamming outside pulls her attention from me. “That will be Aidan. Quinn, please go with him. Sleep it off. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

I perk up. “Promise?”

“Yes. Just talk, though. I have to go fetch a few things from the apartment anyway. We can talk then.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BAILEY

HANNAH WALKS into the store, her eyes immediately finding me. I was waiting for this. I knew after I called Aidan to come to fetch Quinn, Hannah would have questions. She walks over and settles at a table, her eyes locked on to me like two lasers. It's with a heavy heart that I walk over to her. She's going to be so pissed at me for not telling her anything.

I'm halfway lowered in the chair when the inquisition starts.

“So. Fun night you had. Care to tell me about it?”

“What did Quinn tell you?”

“Oh, I don't know. There was some drunken rambling about jellyfish and venom. About some man trying to use networking to get into your pants. Oh, then there was something about the Grand Canyon being so big and wide that if he fell in, he'd never stop falling. But the real doozie was when he said you moved out days ago. He said you left him.”

I don't understand half of what she's saying, but those last two sentences I do understand, and how she practically spits out the words, tell me that they're the most important sentences of them all. Shit, I've been such a bad friend.

“Remember our anniversary dinner?”

She nods because, of course, she does. She was on board with my plan to drag him to dinner. She knew how important that night was to me. I texted her photos of me in my new dress after spending hours on my makeup and hair. Asking her if I looked okay.

“I found him in his office with a woman.”

The hurt I’m still feeling at seeing them together is unfathomable. This is why I didn’t want to say anything. Besides the hurt, there’s the humiliation. Our group of friends is so closely connected it’s inevitable that soon, everyone will know. I just wanted to keep it to myself and shy away from the fallout for as long as I could. So I tell her that, and I keep going, the words spewing out of me like water from a fire hydrant that’s just been demolished by a bus. I tell her of all the lies. All the betrayals. Every conclusion I came to. Moving out. All of it.

“No,” she breathes, her face covered in shock.

“He wants me to forgive him, but I just can’t stay with him anymore,” I whisper. “Not after everything.” It feels as if I’m trying to justify my actions to her. But I’m scared of what this might mean. Quinn is one of Aidan’s closest friends, and I don’t want anyone to have to pick sides.

“Of course, you can’t,” she soothes, grabbing my hand and lacing our fingers together. “I can’t believe this. I mean, it’s Quinn. The two of you are practically an institution. It feels like I’m in the middle of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.”

I smile at the reminder of Hannah’s love for old-school horror movies.

“And maybe that’s the problem. The statistics are against childhood sweethearts making it for the long haul. Maybe it was a mistake that we got together so young.”

“So what you’re saying is that me and Aidan are next?”

“Sorry,” I say, giving her a sheepish smile. “I didn’t mean it that way. I guess I’m just trying to make sense of it all.”

“I’m going to fucking kill him, and I know I’m not the only one that’s going to feel this way.”

I groan, dropping my head in my hands. “See? This is why I didn’t want to say anything.”

“And what did he mean by the networking guy?”

“That was just Quinn being drunk. Kallan was here, and Quinn saw what he wanted to see.”

“Who’s Kallan?”

“The owner of The Wood Room,” I remind her.

“Okay,” she says slowly. “And he was here? Late at night?”

I narrow my eyes. “He works across the road, Hannah. We’ve become friends.”

Early afternoon, my phone vibrates, and I see a text from Nathan.

Nathan: Went by your apartment last night and you weren’t there.

I bite my lip, hesitating, but then I remember that he knows. That Quinn told him.

Bailey: I moved out

Nathan: Where are you staying?

Bailey: In my grandparents’ old apartment

Nathan: Can I come over tonight?

I would love to see him, but I promised Quinn that talk.

Me: I’m seeing Quinn tonight. Maybe tomorrow night if you’re free?

Nathan: I’ll make sure I’m free. Love you, sis

My eyes tear up. He started calling me sis before we got married because he said it was just a matter of time. It’s just another thing Quinn is taking away from me.

It’s been a quiet day, so when the bell jingles, I look up and freeze. Never in a million years will I ever be able to forget her face. She looks around, hesitating, but then sees me.

Seconds slow down as we take each other in. Squaring her shoulders, she approaches me. Anger simmers with every step she takes. This is my store, my safe haven where I can keep

myself busy and try to forget—even if it’s only for a few minutes—the betrayal that’s weighing me down every second of every day. I clench my hands, the urge to throw her out almost overwhelming.

Her eyes meet mine briefly before dropping to the counter. “I was wondering if you have a few minutes to talk.”

“Can’t say I’m really in the mood to talk.”

“Fair enough.” She takes a deep breath. “You don’t need to say anything, and you don’t owe me anything, but I have something to say, and I would appreciate a chance to say it.”

“And I would have appreciated you not fucking my husband, but here we are.”

She flinches, no doubt feeling the animosity and disgust that’s radiating from me.

Nodding, she blows out a deep breath, her eyes meeting mine again. I can see what Quinn saw in her. She’s very pretty, with her black hair, blue eyes, and porcelain skin, and it’s just another dagger straight to my heart. I’ve read somewhere that when men have affairs, they usually “date down,” but that’s the biggest load of crap. Justine is not just pretty; she’s stunning.

“I just want the chance to tell you my side of the story and apologize. Please.”

Sighing, I nod. She seems determined to say whatever she’s come here to say, and I want to get it over with.

I find a table that’s semi-private and wait for her to speak. I watch her fidget until I can’t take it anymore.

“Did you know he was married?” That’s all that’s really important to me.

“Yes—”

I stand up because that’s all that matters. No matter how many times she apologizes, it won’t make up for what she’s done.

“That’s all I need to know, and I honestly don’t give a fuck if you’re sorry or not.”

“Wait, please,” she calls out. “He lied to me. He said you were getting a divorce.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you?”

“I don’t care if you believe me,” she says, a hint of temper shining through. “but I need to get this off my chest. He lied to me. I would have never gotten involved with him if I knew the truth.”

A tear rolls down her cheek, and jerking her hand, she swipes it away. Our silence is thick as I sit down, leaning back and crossing my arms over my chest, pinning her with a stare. Everything I am is screaming at me to protect myself from what she’s about to say.

“Quinn told me you were separated and you were getting a divorce. That you got married young but mistook friendship for love. Was that a lie?”

There’s a plea in her eyes for me to validate her words, but I can’t. I won’t.

I take my time answering, staring at a man flipping through a book in the Thriller section. Her words are flames, scorching everything around me, leaving me to breathe in the ashes of all that’s left. Is that how Quinn sees me? As a friend? When the silence gets too long, I turn back to her, and whatever she sees makes her face drop.

“We did get married young, that’s true. But no, we weren’t separated or getting a divorce. We had plans.” I shrug. “House, kids. Those kinds of things.”

“I was such a fool believing him.” She looks down, her throat working. “When he said he was crazy about me, I believed him. I feel so stupid now. Looking back now, I can see there were signs that I should have picked up on. But I didn’t. I was so flattered when he started paying attention to me that I was blind to everything else. And that’s on me.

I know none of this excuses what happened or changes the fact that I slept with your husband, but I just wanted you to

know that I'm sorry, truly, truly sorry. It was never my intention to get involved with a married man. I'm not a home wrecker. That's not who I am." Her last words are whispered, and I can feel an echo of my pain in them.

I nod, silently acknowledging her words. I don't know if she came here expecting me to say I understand, that it's okay. But I just don't have it in me. Nothing about this is okay.

"I guess everything else he said then is also a lie."

"Which is?" I know I shouldn't ask—spare myself the details—but a sick part of me wants to know how far his treachery and deceit went.

"I think he's caused enough damage," she says, shaking her head.

"If it's something about me, I think I have the right to know."

She shifts in her chair. "Things like he's worried for your mental health, and that you're fragile, and he was scared you'd hurt yourself. All excuses for why we needed to keep our relationship quiet, I'm guessing."

I chuckle, but it's an ugly, cynical thing. I have the strongest urge to check if I haven't woken up in an alternate universe. I'll give him fragile when I see him again. And it won't be myself I'm hurting.

"I want you to know that he's never told me he loves me. He only made me believe that he did. Not even after the baby did he say the words."

The world falls still around me, and it's as if I can feel the last vestiges of the life I thought I had icing over and shattering into a million pieces. Quinn's going to be a dad. Not only has she taken my husband from me, she's taken my dreams. I clench my hands under the table, my heart racing like a freight train.

"You're pregnant?"

She hesitates, licking her bottom lip. "He didn't tell you?"

I can't muster any words. All I can do is shake my head, my heart aching when her hand moves to her belly as if she needs to protect the tiny life from me. Tendrils of anger snake through my body, and I take a deep breath, trying to keep my face smooth. It should have been me having this baby, not her.

"I'm so sorry," she says, wiping another tear away.

"How long has he known?"

"A few days. He tried to convince me to get an abortion."

"And?"

"I'm keeping it." Her voice is defiant as if she's also expecting me to try and convince her to get rid of it. I might be angry. I might want to rage at the fact that someone else is having his child. A child that should have been mine. But I would never do that.

I nod again. "And Quinn? What are you going to do about him?"

It's slowly dawning on me that she has more of a claim on him than I do. We might be married, but they're going to bring a life into the world. Together. What's more important than that? Marriage is a legal commitment made on a piece of paper. Something you can end and walk away from. You can't walk away from a child.

She shrugs helplessly. "Besides the fact that my uncle fired him? Nothing. I can't change that he's the baby's father, and I'll never keep him away from him or her, but that's all. I don't want anything to do with him. He's not the man I thought he was. I'm going to go back home."

I don't want to, but I can't stop the pang of pity at the lost look on her face. She's still so young, and I'm sure this is not what she pictured for her life.

"I never imagined I'd become a single parent," her voice echoes my thoughts, "but my parents are very supportive and will help me."

"That's something, at least," I mutter. I feel sorry for her. I do. I'm not the only one Quinn was lying to, and unless she

missed her calling and should have gone into acting instead, I believe her. But just as much as I feel sorry, I hate her also. I know I shouldn't because Quinn was the one who decided to cheat. If it wasn't Justine somewhere down the line, it might have been someone else. I can't help it. Maybe with time, when this isn't still so fresh, that hate will lessen, but right now, I feel like I can't see the wood from the trees. It feels as if I'm being hit by a new revelation every week.

“Anyway, I didn't come here to talk about me. I just wanted you to know that I deeply regret what happened and the part I played in it. This is not the type of woman I've ever wanted to be, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself.”

I nod, standing up. “I know this must have been hard for you, and I appreciate your apology. It took a lot of courage. Having said that, I hope you'll understand when I say I never want to see you again.”

She nods and gets up slowly.

“Wait,” she reaches into her pocket and holds out a hand. “I don't plan on ever seeing him again, but if you...” I glance down and see a gold bracelet threaded through her fingers. “... if you see him again, please will you give this to him. I don't want it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BAILEY

I HESITATE outside the apartment door, wondering if I should knock. It was my home for so long, but I moved out, and now I feel like a visitor waiting for permission to enter someone's house. How can a few weeks make such a big difference?

I've had some of the best memories of my life in this place. But I've also had the worst. The absolute worst.

I stick my hand in my pocket, fingering the bracelet Justine gave me. After she left, I looked it up. It looked expensive, and I wanted to know just how expensive. How much money my husband was willing to spend on his mistress. Apart from my wedding ring, he's never bought me an expensive piece of jewelry.

It's called a tennis bracelet, but before that, was referred to as an eternity bracelet. They were meant to symbolize eternal love. I wonder if he knew that when he bought it? I guess it doesn't matter if he did. Just the fact that it's so expensive tells a story on its own.

"Fuck it," I think and open the door.

Quinn's sitting at our little dining table, his head resting on his hands, a bottle of whiskey and a half-filled glass in front of him. He lifts his head, and his once beloved blue eyes meet mine.

Defeat.

It's there from the curve of his spine, the slump of his shoulders, and the empty look in his eyes. What's happened to

the man who said that he'd fight for me no matter what? My traitorous heart clenches. No matter how much my mind rages against it, it still feels something for him. If I could wish upon a shooting star right now, I'd wish that I could erase everything I feel for him. Love, hate, anger. I don't want to feel anything. I'm tired of feeling so much. I wish I could just feel indifference.

"You're here," he breathes, a glimmer of light returning to his eyes and his back straightening.

"I said I'd come," I mutter.

"I thought you said that just to get rid of me."

"I'm not in the habit of lying, Quinn."

He flinches. "I deserve that."

"I'll just pack, and then we can talk."

He nods, his eyes dropping back to his glass.

The bedroom is a mess. The bed is unmade, and clothes are scattered everywhere, but it smells like him. Clenching my jaw, I start packing my things. There are so many unknowns in my life, and I don't know what my future holds, but what I do know is that I'm done with Quinn. I'll let him talk. Give him one last chance to be honest, not that it would make a difference. Then, I'm closing this chapter of our lives.

With the last of my things packed, I head back to find Quinn still sitting at the table.

My heart is heavy when I settle, across from him, taking in the mess around me. I don't see many dirty plates, but I do see a lot of empty bottles.

"I guess we need to talk about the...logistics," I say, trying once again to swallow the rock that lodged itself in my throat when I found out about the baby.

The sooner I can get a lawyer and get the ball rolling, the better.

"No, Bailey. You didn't give me the chance to explain my side. Please, just give me that."

“What’s the point, Quinn? When I gave you the chance, you looked me in the eye and lied to me. I’m not interested in hearing more lies.”

“Because I was so fucking scared I was going to lose you! I know I fucked up. I know this. Just a few minutes of your time. You promised.”

I look at him for a few beats before nodding. The air, my body, everything feels heavy as we stare at each other. It’s such a stark reminder of how things have changed in such a short space of time. We were always attached at the hip, things between us easy and uncomplicated, and I thought it would always be that way. The universe or whatever is out there must be laughing at my stupidity.

“I have been doing a lot of thinking and soul-searching since you left. I realize that what I’ve done is…” he shakes his head, rubbing his hands over his face, “…unforgivable, but Bailey, what we had—have—is something worth fighting for. The years between us, the love between us, is enough to get us past this.”

My shoulders tense at his words. “Quinn, I don’t—”

“I know you have a lot of questions,” he interrupts, “and I’ll answer all of them. But before I do, let me get this off my chest, okay?”

He waits for my nod before continuing.

“I want you to know that I am so fucking sorry for what I’ve done. I’m so fucking sorry for hurting you like this. Seeing the pain I caused you is unbearable, and I will never, ever hurt you like that again. I will live every day showing you how much I love you and not take you for granted. I’ll pay for any counseling we might need. I’ll give you all my passwords, and you can check my phone whenever you want. I promise complete transparency, and I’ll do anything, absolutely anything you need until I’ve restored your trust and faith in me.”

Finally, he loses steam, and I sit forward, clasping my hands on the table.

“That sounds amazing, Quinn. The problem is, I don’t believe a single word you just said.”

He shakes his head. “I know you have little to no faith in me right now, but believe me, there is nothing left to lie about.”

I want to say, *except for the baby. You haven’t said a word about that*, but I don’t. I need him to admit it to me. To prove he can be honest about at least one thing.

“I guess I just have one question. If you love me like you say you do, then why?”

“I let all the stress and pressure from work get to me. It wasn’t about love. It was about blowing off steam.”

“So you were using her for sex to help you relax?” I say, my voice flat. “You destroyed our marriage just because you needed to relax?”

He hangs his head, refusing to meet my eyes. “When you say it like that, it sounds disgusting. But yes, that was all it was.”

He said he was crazy about me.

“And there were no feelings involved? Apart from lust, that is?”

“No, Bailey. I don’t love her. I never did.”

You don’t spend thousands of dollars on someone if there are no feelings involved.

“Here’s what I think. Bullshit. If that’s all it was—you needing sex to relax—you could have come home at any time. I have never denied you. Never. Remember that Behavioural Science elective I took? The Lecturer drilled into us that behavior is a language. Quinn, for months, your language told me you didn’t want to be with me. You wanted to be with her. So, try again.”

“Bailey, what does it matter why I did it? It was a mistake, and it’s done. Whatever I say will only hurt you more, and I don’t want to do that. Can’t we just put it behind us and start over?” He reaches across the table and takes my hands in his.

“I know I fucked everything up, and I know I have no right, but I’ve got nothing left to lose by asking. I’ll beg if you want me to, but please, please say you’ll forgive me. I’ll quit my job. We can move, buy that house we dreamt of, and start a family just like we always planned. We can have a better life away somewhere new.”

“So you’re asking me to sell Chantler and Cook? To just give up my store?”

“If it gives us a fresh start, yes,” he says, his lips pressed into a firm line.

Anger bubbles through my veins like lava, and I rip my hands from his. I’m so done, and the feel of his skin against mine has a million spiders crawling up and down my arms.

“You’re something else, you know that? You don’t know the meaning of the word honest. You’re not sorry about the affair. You’re sorry you got caught. I would have lived my life none the wiser, naively brushing it off as a rough patch most marriages go through. Just the thought of living a lie like that makes me sick.”

“That’s not true! How many times do I have to say sorry before you’ll believe me.”

I reach into my pocket and put the bracelet on the table. Anguish flares in his eyes as he stares at it.

“Yes, Quinn. I know. Justine came to see me today. Our conversation was very enlightening. I guess congratulations are in order, Daddy,” I hiss, gripping the edge of the table. “Nothing you ever say will make me believe you. You just keep lying and lying and lying. When were you going to tell me about the baby? After we’ve moved? Once we’ve had a child or two? Surely you didn’t think you could hide it forever?”

He opens his mouth, but I cut him off. I’ve given him enough time and chances to talk, and with every word he utters my disgust for him grows.

“You’re willing to quit the job you were fired from?” I sneer. “How dare you demand all these sacrifices while still

lying to me? How dare you demand I give up my happiness for you? My shop makes me happy. My friends make me happy. I'm supposed to give that up for a man who's proved he can't be trusted?"

I pause, taking a deep breath, trying to bring my anger under control. I'm scared if I don't, I'll do him physical harm.

"How do you ever expect me to feel safe with you again? You've proven yourself to be a liar. Every time you touch me, I'll be wondering if you're thinking of Justine or someone else. Every time you work late, I'll be wondering where you are or what you're doing. If you send a text after hours, I'll be wondering who you're talking to. That blind faith I had in you is shattered. Destroyed, and once it's gone, you can't get back. Not truly. There will always be this doubt in the back of my mind. And you did that. Not me. You. If you truly love me like you say you do, how can you expect me to live like that?"

"So that's it, huh? You're not willing to fight for us? What about everything we've been through? The summers on the farm. Always coordinating our outfits for Halloween. Ice cream at Cheerio. Figuring out who we were and what we wanted from life together? Remember how we said we wanted to grow old together and watch our grandkids play? We're so much more than this last year, Bailey, and you know it."

"Stop throwing our past at me! It only makes things worse. If you could be unfaithful to me despite all that, there's nothing that will stop you from doing it again."

"Bailey, I won't. I lost my way for a while, but I promise, on my life, I won't do it again. Every day, I'll be the husband you deserve."

"Quinn, you cheated on me. You got another woman pregnant. Even if I could get past all the lies and the betrayal, I could never accept the fact that you're having a baby with someone else. That child will be in your life forever, a constant reminder of what you did, of the fact that you gave some other woman something that you were only supposed to give to me. I'll resent that child. And it will keep building and building until I end up hating him or her. Even if I know that

the child is innocent, I won't be able to help myself. And who hates a child? Maybe if I was a better person, I'd be able to get over it, but I know myself. I won't. And I refuse to become that kind of a person. You fucked up, and you expect me to pay for it? Where's your sacrifice, Quinn?"

I'm breathless by the time I'm done, my chest heaving with the force of my emotions. I can't believe how selfish and delusional he is. Has he always been this way?

"I'm so sorry," he pleads. "How can I save us? Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"Nothing Quinn. What you've done is a rejection of everything we were and ever could be. I'm so over you and your bullshit. I suggest you get a lawyer."

A sob escapes his throat. "So that's it? Just like that, twenty-two years are over?"

"Yes, Quinn," I sigh, getting up and feeling utterly and completely defeated and inexplicably bereft. "It was over the moment you stuck your dick into her."

At the door, I look at him for the last time. He's back to being slumped forward.

"Please, Bails. I have no one but you."

"That's not true. You have a child now." I feel my face crumple. "I will always love the boy I fell in love with. But this man in front of me? The man you've become? I despise him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BAILEY

AS I drive away, I leave Quinn and what feels like my old life behind. I can't bear the thought of going back to my apartment and having the silence mock me for my life choices. I need someone, something, anything I can feel a connection to.

Stopping outside Kallan's house, I bite my lip. This is a mistake. I should go to Hannah. Or maybe call Piper and Rose and meet them somewhere. Somewhere I can drown the thoughts that are dripping like acid on what's left of my shredded self-esteem.

Seeing and talking to Justine has done a number on me. Not once, in all our years together, has a woman managed to turn Quinn's head. But she did. She's younger than me. She's prettier, and I'm sure if it wasn't for her sleeping with my husband, I would have liked her. She seems...nice. Like the type of person that you can't dislike, no matter how hard you try. Although, I don't have to try. I don't care that she's a victim in this. I hate her and everything about her. Jealousy is an ugly, ugly monster.

I should leave. I might crave company, but I won't be good company for anyone. I should go to a bar—not Frosty Frogs—where I'm a stranger in a sea of people. Where I don't have to burden anyone with my problems.

I put the car in drive, but then his front door opens, spilling light onto his porch. A few seconds later, he's striding towards me, his long legs eating up the distance between us in no time.

Too late.

Our eyes meet, and all thoughts of leaving disappear. It feels right being here. With Kallan, I can just be myself. I know I'll get no judgment from him. He's familiar with loss and all that comes with it.

He opens my door, holding out his hand, and I take it, allowing him to lead me inside.

"His girlfriend came to see me today," I say once we're seated. I don't know what to call her. Girlfriend, mistress, affair partner. *Mother of his child*. "Seems like he lied to her. Told her we were getting a divorce."

"And you believe her?"

"He confirmed it," I say, shrugging weakly. My face crumples, and I drop my head into my hands. "She's having his baby."

He makes a sound low in his throat, and then he's next to me, and I'm sobbing into his chest while his hand moves up and down my back. This is the second time I've broken down in front of him, my pride lying in tatters around me.

Just as before, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't try to soothe me with empty words of comfort. He allows me a safe space to let go.

"I don't know much, Bailey, but I know you don't deserve any of this."

His expression is fierce while trailing his fingers over my face, wiping away leftover tears. I'm sure I look like crap because I'm not one of those pretty criers, but he doesn't seem to mind.

"It blows my mind that a man can have someone like you and throw it away."

I don't know what it is—his words, how he's looking at me, or the way he's touching me—but then I'm pushing closer and sealing my lips against his. For an unbearable second, his lips are still, but then he moans low in his throat, and his lips are moving with mine, his fingers tangling in my hair. My mind, thoughts, and the world quieten around me, shrinking

down to the firm softness of his lips against mine. Down to the flavor of his breath, I taste with every inhale.

“Bailey, no.” He says, ripping his lips from mine and gently untangling himself from me. He sits back, running his hand through his hair. Rejection flashes through me, and if the heat in my face is any indication, my cheeks must be flaming.

“Right,” I nod slowly, scrambling off the couch, mortification sitting on my right shoulder, high-fiving rejection that’s comfortably perched on the left. Desperately, I cast around for my keys. I want to leave. I want to find the closest hole I can find and launch myself into it. Then I want a huge boulder to fall on top of the hole and bury me so deep that no one will ever find me. How could I have been so wrong? I know I haven’t really ever dated—me and Quinn transitioning from friendship straight into a relationship—but I thought I was at least astute enough to recognize the signs if a guy was interested. I’m feeling so miserable I’m not paying attention to anything but grabbing my keys and getting the hell out of dodge. That’s why I almost shriek when Kallan grabs my arm, stopping my mad dash for freedom.

“Bailey, stop.”

My eyes dart around the room, refusing to meet his. “It’s okay, I get it. I thought I saw something that wasn’t there. Let’s just forget it happened and move on.” I’m nodding like a chipmunk on crack, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

“You weren’t wrong.” He sighs and pulls me closer despite my stiff, resisting body, engulfing me in his arms. “I do like you. So fucking much. And the old me would have fucked you without a second thought.”

“You would?” Finally, brave enough, I meet his eyes, and my breath catches at the unwavering intensity burning in them.

His voice drops, turning a delicious flavor of husky that sends shivers dancing down my spine. “I’m so damn tempted to grind my hips into yours so that you’ll never question that again.” My mind is screaming for him to grind away, but the tiny sliver of rationality senses a *but* in there, so I voice it.

“But?”

“But you’re not ready.”

I am, I really, really am, and suddenly I’m angry. Who does he think he is to tell me what I am and what I’m not?

“You’re wrong. I practically threw myself at you.”

“Trust me, Bailey, you’re not ready. I wish you were, but you’re not. You’re still married.”

I jerk out of his hold. “So it’s okay for Quinn to sleep around but not me?”

“And that right there is why you’re not ready. I know what you’re feeling, what you’re going through. I was you once. They say what you experience in a divorce is like death. The loss of a loved one, a life you had planned. When Josie died, all I wanted was a warm body I could dive into to make me forget when what I really needed was a friend.”

“So that’s it? You want to be my friend?”

“No, yes, none of it, all of it.”

My brows furrow in confusion because he’s not making a whole lot of sense right now.

“Bailey, since the first time I saw you, I wanted it all with you. This,” he says, pointing between us, “is going to happen. A lot.” He breathes in a shaky breath. “Believe me, saying no to you is hard. One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do when this is all I’ve been dreaming of since I first saw you. But when it does, it will be only us and a bed. If we do this now, it will be you, me, and Quinn, and I’m a jealous motherfucker. I want you all to myself, and I don’t want you to even be thinking of him. I need you to know when I finally get to have you that’s it. I’m never letting you go. I want us to start right. I want you to want me the same way I want you. I want to be more than just a warm body that helps you forget. And until you get there, I’ll be your support, not your crutch.”

Well then. I’m speechless, my anger dissipating like mist before the morning sun.

“I...I...I’m not sure what to say.”

My heart sinks, realizing he's right. Not only is there crazy chemistry between us, an undeniable attraction, but he's a great person and someone I could see myself getting involved with. I'm done with Quinn, but I'm angry and hurt. He'll be standing between us like a ghost, and that's not fair. If I start anything with Kallan now, it will be a friends-with-benefits situation because that's all I have to give right now. And he deserves more than that, deserves more than being used to get over someone.

"I don't want you to say anything. I want you to think about what I said. What I need you to know is that if being patient is going to get me you in the end, I'm in it for the long haul. I want to fuck you, but after that, I want to make love to you, fall asleep next to you, wake up next to you, have lazy morning sex, go down on you in the shower." He runs a hand through his hair. "I've had a lot of time to think of everything I want to do to you—with you. When I found out you were married, I was gutted, but now I'm seeing a chance and I'm not going to blow it. You're too important for that."

Silence reigns while I try to digest what he's said. My thoughts are tumbling like leaves in the wind, and suddenly, I'm exhausted. I've had enough of this day. I want it to be over.

"Thank you," I say, rubbing my eyes and getting up.

"For what?"

"For picking up my pieces. Again." I wince, not meeting his eyes. Because right now, I feel like I've been using him, and it feels horrible. "I'm not being fair to you."

Tilting up my chin with his strong yet infinitely gentle fingers, he waits for me to meet his eyes.

"Don't," he says. "I'm honored that you're allowing me to be here for you."

"Yes, well," I give him a shaky smile. "I think it's time I get going."

I still might go to that bar after all.

"No, you're not. I'm not going to let you drive like this."

“Tell me about Josie. What was she like?” I whisper to the darkness, wondering about the woman who got Kallan to love her.

I drove to his place, not wanting to be alone. Wanting someone to give me comfort. But the last thing I expected was to find myself in his bed, dressed in one of his shirts and being surrounded by him. It’s unexpected, yet...good. Like my soul has been starved for touch and the comfort it brings, and now it’s being recharged.

He sighs, but it’s not a sigh of reluctance. It’s more of a *I’m putting my thoughts together* kind of a sigh.

“Sorry. You don’t have to. If it’s too hard.”

“It’s fine,” he says, his breath stirring my hair. “Josie was a whirlwind. On good days, there was no stopping her, and you couldn’t help but get swept along with her. She had this list she made and was determined to pick off as many items as she could.”

“A bucket list.”

“Yeah. Some things were small, others were big.”

“Like what?”

“How to make a perfect origami paper crane. That one wasn’t too hard. Even with my clumsy fingers.”

“Hey, don’t put yourself down. I’ve seen the things you make with those clumsy fingers.”

He chuckles, and I’m proud that I’ve managed to make him laugh.

“Is that so?”

“Stop fishing for compliments. How long did you have with her?”

“Two years. We tried to help her with as many as we could, but some of the things, like children...that was never in her future.”

My heart aches at the thought.

“Was getting married one of them?”

I feel his nod in the way his cheek moves against the top of my head.

“Yeah. It was one I could do. One I won’t ever regret doing.”

“You’re a good man, Kallan Reed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BAILEY

I HATE alarms. I'm usually up before mine goes off, but on mornings like this, I want to throw my damn phone out the window.

After a satisfying stretch, I turn on my side, burrowing deeper into my pillow and forcing myself to keep my eyes closed. Old me would have glanced to the left first thing every morning to take in Quinn's slumbering features, cuddling closer to steal some of his warmth. New me wakes up every morning to an untouched pillow and cold sheets.

I have two choices here. Either break the habit or get a single bed. The second option feels too much like admitting defeat, so option one it is.

Research suggests that it takes about sixty-six days to form a habit, and breaking it may take anything from eighteen to 254 days. I've had over ten years to form this habit, which is a hell of a lot longer than sixty-six days, but I'm clinging to the hope that it won't take more than eighteen days for me to wake up without this soul-wrenching emptiness. If that doesn't work, there's always hypnosis. Now there's a thought. Hypnotize Quinn right out of my life.

Five more minutes won't hurt. It's not like I have far to go for work. Living upstairs has its advantages. But I miss my morning walks. The sounds of the waves—sometimes lapping, sometimes crashing against the harbor walls. The vibrant purples, reds, and greens of the mural—painted and paid for by a bunch of young, local artists—splashed across the side of Sid's corner store. The cobblestone streets. It's not a long

walk, ten minutes at most, but I treasured it. I enjoyed the silence, mentally preparing myself for the day ahead. I enjoyed the beautiful flower boxes bursting with color. Everything is painted differently in the early morning light when the world is still sleepily awakening from its slumber.

I don't know how people can live in big cities. The constant hustle and bustle where everyone is a stranger, and nobody cares about anything beyond themselves. Sure, we get crazy busy during tourist season, and it's our lifeblood, but we still know our neighbors and wave at them. We still have a sense of community.

Eventually, when I can't ignore my bladder anymore, I drag myself up and swing my legs off the side of the bed. I'm still rubbing leftover sleep from my eyes when my phone rings. Mom's the only one who ever calls me this early—not that she calls much—so I don't check before answering through a yawn.

“Mom, just because you enjoy catching the worms doesn't mean anyone else does.”

“That's no way to greet your mother,” she huffs over the sound of pots and pans clanking in the background. Mom lives to cook, and growing up there was never a meal that wasn't an occasion. Grabbing a bowl of cereal before school? Never an option. We never even had cereal in the house. She was of the mind that if it couldn't be fried, baked, grilled, or poached, it had no business being in her house.

Yawning again, I stumble my way into the bathroom.

“Bailey, are you tinkling while talking to me?”

My laugh is more of a snort. What's going on down there right now is a bit more than a tinkle. Who even still uses the word tinkle?

“Don't call me so early if you don't want to hear it.”

“I raised you to have better manners than that.”

“Mom, I do love you, but why are you calling so early?” I say, reaching for the toilet paper.

“I am calling,” she says, emphasizing the words, “to remind you about dinner tonight.”

Mom instituted our monthly family dinners a month after Amelia moved out, and skipping was not an option unless you were on death’s door. Or, if you ran away and joined the army like Cody did.

“I don’t think...” I don’t want to go. I’m not ready to see Quinn’s empty chair next to me tonight. A chair that’s been his since he was six. So that would make it about twenty-two years, but who’s counting? I know at some point, I’ll be strong enough to face yet another reminder of what I’ve lost, but everything is still too fresh.

“Amelia’s confirmed, so we’ll have a full house tonight,” she says, ignoring me.

When I broke the news about Quinn, she didn’t have much to say, which surprised me. She always regarded him and Nathan as a part of our family. Especially after their mother died. Mom always made sure they had enough to eat and included them in everything we did. Cody never showed any interest in fishing, and when Quinn did, Dad was ecstatic to finally have a fishing buddy.

“Mom, I don’t think I can make it.” I’m hoping she’ll understand without me actually having to say the words.

“Bailey, it’s times like these when family should stick together.”

I suppress my sigh at the hitch in her voice. Why does it feel like she needs more support and comfort than I do?

“Alright.” I’m forcing my voice to be cheerful because my day is just starting, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to allow another reminder to cast a shadow over it.

“Good. Dinner will be ready at seven.”

“Sharp. I know.”

We haven’t deviated from that time for as long as I can remember. Unless there was an extreme emergency, and I can count the times that happened on one hand.

It's just gone eight by the time I get downstairs. Usually, I'll take a few minutes to inspect the pink and white Impatiens displayed in the wooden flower boxes in front of the bay windows, deadheading the wilted ones. They were Grandma's favorite flowers, and without fail, every year, she would plant them. When I inherited this place, I kept up with the tradition. The windows are still the original ones, but the flower boxes Grandpa had made eventually succumbed to age and had to be replaced a few years back. It saddened me to do it. It felt like just another thing of them I'd lost. But this morning, all thoughts of flower care shoot straight out of my head. Nestled underneath the windows is a bench. I blink a few times, not believing what my eyes are seeing. Then I look up at my sign and back at the bench. The books carved along the back and down the arms are a replica of the ones on the sign. I remember having a conversation with Kallan about wanting a bench, but that was months ago and it was something I just said in passing. I spin around, but it's still early, and The Wood Room is tightly locked up.

It's been a few days since *that* night, and I've seen Kallan every day since. We don't speak about it, and physically, he keeps his distance, but the burning in his eyes every time he looks at me is filled with promise. A promise that he's here and he's waiting for me to be ready. And even though the call he made was the right one, that promise soothes the tiny sting of rejection that even his words to me that night haven't managed to shake.

I'm in a daze when I walk into my shop. We still have an hour before opening, and already the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee permeates the air, blending with the scent of books. They are two of my favorite things in the world and never fail to ease something inside my soul. I pause to take a breath. This is my happy place and has been since I can remember.

By the time I've stashed my bag under the counter, Olivia has a cup of coffee waiting for me.

“Why are you so early?” I ask, taking the cup from her with a grateful smile.

“I couldn’t sleep. And I forgot to tell you that Andy said he’ll be here at eight-thirty. I wasn’t sure you’d be in.”

The only thing that’s freshly made on our premises is the drinks. We order all our pastries and sandwiches from Andy, who’s the owner and baker at Seventh Heaven and, important to note, Addie’s arch-nemesis. He was hesitant when I approached him to supply us with goods but agreed after I assured him I’d put a markup on any of his products we sold. The people who order from us mostly want to settle down with a cup of coffee and something light to snack on while enjoying a good book.

“I didn’t know you bought a bench.”

“I didn’t,” I mutter, taking a sip of my coffee. “When did it get here?”

It wasn’t there when I locked up last night, so it must have been this morning.

“No idea. It was here when I came in.”

“Huh.”

“That was awfully sweet of him,” Olivia says, bending over the counter and resting her chin on her hands.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

“It’s romantic. I wish someone would make me a bench.”

“I could always drop a hint with Andrew,” I tease. “He’s no slouch when it comes to using his hands.”

Her face flames a bright shade of red, and I lift my cup to hide my smile. She’s picked up on how Kallan looks at me, and the grins she’s been giving me feel a lot like being teased in grade school. I even heard her softly singing “Kallan and Bailey sitting in a tree. K.i.s.s.i.n.g.,” so I’m really enjoying this moment.

“You never did tell me how your movie date went.”

“It wasn’t a date,” she huffs, shooting up and turning away, making a beeline towards the back.

“Whatever you say,” I call after her retreating back.

“We’re just friends,” she yells just before disappearing into the kitchen.

I’m still smiling while I’m dusting the self-help shelf. Even though it’s the shelf that sees the least action, it’s not dusty. But it gives me the perfect vantage point to watch Kallan’s shop.

Fifteen minutes before opening, I see his truck pull up, and I’m across the road, waiting for him before he even gets out.

“Good morning.” I’ve seen Kallan smile more in the last few days than in all the months since I met him. The one he’s giving me now tells me he knows exactly why I’m here. “I’m disappointed, though,” he says, leaning back against his truck and squinting at my hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m hoping that if I look hard enough, that duster will change into a cup.”

Shit, I should have brought him coffee. Lots of coffee.

“Oh, no, sorry,” I say, sticking the hand holding the duster behind my back.

“It’s okay. I’ll never turn down a good dusting.”

“You made me a bench,” I rush out, unable to hold back the words burning my tongue.

He nods slowly. “I did.”

“Why?”

All traces of humor drop from his face, replaced by that burning in his eyes.

“You know why.”

“AUNTY LEY LEY!” Ethan launches off the porch swing, stumbling in the process. I wince at how close his head comes

to connecting to the railing, but he corrects himself just in time and launches himself at my legs, clinging like a barnacle. I swear, that boy is the most accident-prone child I've ever come across, but damn, don't I just love him.

"Hey, beautiful boy," I say with a twinge of guilt in my chest. I've always been the fun aunt. I claimed the title the minute they were born and reserved the right to spoil them. And I'm failing. It's not their fault my life has gone to hell in a handbasket. I need to do better.

"I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too," I crouch down and smack a big kiss on his forehead.

"Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. What is that?" I point at his mouth, mock horror painted all over my face.

He smiles, his brown eyes sparkling with excitement. "It's come out." He stretches his mouth wide, pointing to the gap.

"He made Dad tie a string to the door."

"Did it hurt?"

He shakes his head. "No. It was quick."

"He screamed like a baby."

"Did not." He shoots his sister a dirty look, and I wink at Darby, pulling out my phone and taking a quick photo of his gap-toothed smile. He looks so damn proud.

"I hope you got lots of money from the tooth fairy?"

Straightening, I walk up to Darby and give her a side hug. She ducks her head when I try to ruffle her hair.

"I got a dollar. I put it in my piggy bank."

"What are you guys doing out here?"

"Mom told us to play outside." Darby rolls her eyes, clearly put out. "They're talking about grown-up stuff."

"She called Uncle Quinn a bad name." Ethan's eyes are big as he whispers the words to me. My sister doesn't curse. As in, ever.

Alarm shoots through me, and I turn, quickly scanning the road, thinking I might have somehow missed his car parked on the curb. “Uncle Quinn’s here?”

“No, she was talking to Grandma.”

After reassuring them that we’ll be out in a minute to get them, I walk inside, unsure of what’s waiting for me. Amelia isn’t the confrontational type, so whatever’s happened must be big for her to lose her cool. She’s four years older than me and has always been the level-headed one I could depend on to stay calm and give me unbiased advice.

It’s what I imagine a battlefield would look like. Amelia’s facing Mom—who has her arms folded across her chest—her back rigid. Gabriel’s scowling and Dad’s in his recliner, studiously ignoring everyone.

My smile dies as I warily take in the room. “What’s going on?”

“Yes, Mom. Tell Bailey what’s going on.”

Ooh, she’s using her Mom voice on Mom. Not good.

“For what it’s worth, I told her not to do it,” Dad pipes up unhelpfully, shrugging when Mom shoots him a look. “I warned you,” he mutters.

“Tell me what?”

Her mouth sets in a stubborn line, and she turns to the fridge, taking out a pitcher of sweet tea.

“What you’re doing isn’t right.” Amelia’s practically vibrating with anger, making my concern grow.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on?” I say in exasperation. Gabriel gives me an apologetic look, but I know I won’t get any answers from him. He knows better than to get in the middle of family arguments. Unless he feels Amelia is being slighted, then the gloves come off.

I hear a chorus of “Uncle Quinn” outside and freeze for a second before turning slowly to Mom.

“You didn’t.”

“He’s still part of the family, Bailey,” she says, every word dripping with defiance.

“We’re getting a divorce because he betrayed me. Another woman is having his child,” I say slowly, unable to believe that I have to explain this to her.

“Yes. I did all those things. And for that, I’ll be sorry for the rest of my life. I’ll do whatever I have to earn your forgiveness.”

Quinn’s voice is subdued, but I refuse to look at him. I can’t, so I keep looking at Mom, and that’s why I don’t miss the way her face softens when she looks at him.

The reminder of my place in this family is a punch to the gut. Amelia’s the firstborn, the child Mom’s always shown so much pride in. Cody is the spoiled baby, the one who’s currently off fighting for his country, and the one who can do no wrong. I’m the forgotten middle child, often left to my own devices. Grief shoots through me. I miss Gran and Gramps. The holidays I didn’t spend on the blueberry farm, I spent with them in the bookstore. They loved me how Mom was supposed to love me. And they’re not here anymore.

“He did. But we talked and—”

“You talked to him when you haven’t talked to me?”

Finally, I turn to Quinn. He looks like hell. “I don’t care if you’re feeling sorry. I don’t care if you want to earn my forgiveness. I told you we were done, and I meant it.”

“Bailey, you need to forgive him. Nobody is perfect. Anyone can make a mistake, and everyone deserves a second chance.”

“She doesn’t need to do anything!” Amelia shouts, and I send her a grateful look for her support.

“This is low, even for you. Getting *my* mom to help you fight your battles.”

“Bailey, I raised you better than that. You will not make him feel uncomfortable or as if he doesn’t belong.”

She was best friends with Anne, Quinn's mom, and she stepped in as a mother figure to him and Nathan when Anne passed and Quinn's dad lost the plot. I know she feels responsible for Quinn. I understand that, and I've always commended her for it. But not like this. Being her child should always trump any obligation she might feel. And maybe, if this happened to Amelia or Cody, it would have. But not me.

"You're wrong. You didn't do much raising. Grandma and Grandpa practically raised me. You were too busy with your other children to bother much with me."

I can't stop the bitterness from spilling out.

Her head rears back as if I slapped her, and I'm not normally a mean person, but seeing her reaction gives me a little bit of satisfaction.

"That's not true."

"It kind of is," Amelia says with an apologetic look at me. It's unnecessary. I've never held her responsible for our mother's actions, and despite the jealousy I felt towards her growing up, she's always been a good sister to me.

She looks at Dad for help, but he's not going to help. I love Dad, but his quest to always be the peacemaker, always trying to smooth things over with everyone, meant he never took sides. Meant he never put his foot down and stood up for what he believed in. I blame him just as much for how things were.

"Quinn hurt me more than anyone's ever hurt me, and still, you pick him over me," I whisper. "You don't want him to feel uncomfortable, but it's okay for me to feel uncomfortable?"

At least she has the sense to look guilty. "That's not what I meant."

"No. That's exactly what you meant. But it's okay. I know what my place is in this family. Tell me, Mom. Are you planning on being a grandmother to his baby?"

I wait for her to answer, but she doesn't. She doesn't need to. I can see the confirmation in her eyes. I don't know why I even hoped that, just this once, she would take my side on something. That, for once, she would put me first.

“I guess then there’s nothing left to say.” It’s so quiet you could hear a pin drop as I turn around and make my way to the door.

“Once again, you win,” I say, pausing when I get to the door, where Quinn’s still standing. Over the years, he’s given me so much, but in the end, he’s taken everything.

“I haven’t won anything,” he says, his voice hoarse. He looks like shit, but I just don’t care. “I’ll stay away. I won’t intrude on your family again.”

Behind me, Mom makes a distressed noise. His offer is a little too late, though.

“Nah, it’s okay. You can have them.” The words freaking hurt, but they need to be said. After tonight, I have no wish to come here again.

I close the door firmly behind me and close my eyes, taking a deep breath. My heart aches when two small sets of arms encircle me.

“Love you, Aunty Ley Ley,” Darby whispers, her cheek pressed against my hip. I guess they were snooping and heard things little kids are never supposed to hear.

“Love you, too,” I mumble past the lump in my throat. And it’s true. I love them more than anything.

The door opens, and Amelia walks out, Gabriel on her heels.

“I’ll walk you to your car.” She hooks my arm with hers and smiles down at Darby and Ethan. “Go with Daddy. I need to talk to your aunt for a bit.”

“You’re leaving?”

She rolls her eyes. “As if we’re staying after that. And with him there.”

Seems like the battle lines have been drawn, and she’s making sure I know which side of the line she’s on.

“You don’t have to do that.” The thought of her having dinner with Mom and Quinn would hurt, but her relationship

with Mom is different from mine, and I would never expect her to choose.

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't know she was planning to do that. I found out when I saw Quinn's place at the table set and questioned her. I would have said something if I knew."

"It's okay. This isn't your battle."

"Are you crazy? Of course, this is my battle. You're my little sister, and what she did... Actually, I have no words for what she did. I couldn't imagine ever doing something like that to Darby or Ethan. And until she somehow finds a way to fix things, she's dead to me." I lean in and hug her, silently showing my appreciation. "I owe you an apology, she says when I pull back.

"For what?"

"For not standing up for you sooner. I wasn't blind to how things were for you growing up, and I should have said something. But I told myself it was between you and Mom. I was selfish."

I sigh. "It is what it is. At least I had Gran and Gramps."

"That's true. They did love you the most. I mean, they left you the bookstore after all. It's an emotional wound I'll never get over," she teases.

"As if you've ever willingly read a book for fun," I scoff. "You should probably talk with Darby and Ethan. I'm pretty sure they were eavesdropping."

We look over to where Gabriel's leaning against the car, both kids safely in the back seat. "Yeah. I just don't get it," she says, shaking her head again. "Anyway, I better go. They need to be fed before they start chewing on the backseat. If you ever want to talk, just give me a call. Anytime. Just call, okay?"

"I will," I promise.

"And the next family dinner will be at my place. Just you and us."

CHAPTER THIRTY

BAILEY

IT TAKES me a few seconds to make sense of the roughly drawn tree with multiple branches snaking from its trunk, but then I do, and I can't hold back my giggle.

"Come look at this," I whisper to Kallan.

"You've got to be kidding me," he says, peering over my shoulder.

"Keep your voice down," I hush, taking in the disapproving looks pointed at us.

"For fuck's sake, it's Santa Clause's family tree, Bailey. And back there," he whisper-yells, throwing a thumb over his shoulder, "they have freaking statues of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. And a family portrait of Bigfoot. Big hair and everything."

"Well, Santa Claus had to come from somewhere."

I try to keep a straight face but dissolve into a fit of giggles at his incredulous look.

"That's it. I've had enough," he mutters, grabbing my hand and pulling me out of the building. "When you suggested a museum, I thought, cool, I'm not the greatest fan of museums, but Cryptozoology sounds interesting. Should have freaking googled it."

I'm still laughing when we pull out onto the road. "Oh, come on, the ten dollars was well spent. I bet you haven't laughed that much in years."

“That was the weirdest two hours of my life,” he gripes, but there’s no hiding his twitching lips and the crinkles around his eyes.

“What’s weird is that we seemed to be the only two people there who found it funny. I’ll have to remember to tell Piper about this place. She’ll love it.”

“Piper likes that kind of stuff?”

“She’ll definitely get a kick out of it.”

We spend the ride back cracking up over the exhibits we saw—from the FeeJee mermaid to the Abominable Snowman and everything in between—and by the time we stop to grab some burgers, my cheeks hurt from all the laughing.

Back in the truck, I fiddle with the radio, trying to ignore the mouth-watering smells emanating from the brown paper bag I’m clutching on my lap. The sounds my stomach is making would give a boulder rolling down a rocky hill a run for its money. Eventually, I can’t take it anymore and concede defeat grabbing a fry, and jamming it into my mouth. Damn, it’s good, with just the right amount of salt.

I’m just about to munch down on my second one when I catch Kallan staring at me out of the corner of my eye.

“What?”

“You planning on sharing any of those?”

“Sorry,” I say, popping the fry in my mouth. “It’s been forever since breakfast.”

“Just pass me one,” his voice stops me as I’m pulling out his order of fries. “Can’t take my hands off the wheel.”

I call bullshit but dutifully hold out the fry. His mouth closes over it, his lips brushing my fingers, and it’s impossible to hide my shiver. I know what those lips feel like on mine.

And that’s how it’s been these past few weeks. We’ve fallen into a comfortable routine where, most days, he’ll come in for a cup of coffee before heading home after closing. Some Sundays I’ll spend with him and some with my friends. My favorite, though, is spending it at his place. It brings me peace.

I can spend hours watching him work. It's soothing watching his strong, capable hands take a piece of wood and transform it into something beautiful. I've even managed to make something myself. The cutting board won't win any awards, but I'm proud of it.

But then there are moments like these. A brief touch against the small of my back, a glide of fingertips over my cheek when tucking a stray hair behind my ear. When I look up to catch him staring at me, that promise still burning brightly. Or sometimes I will be the one doing the staring.

All moments that I feel with a twisting in my stomach and heat in my cheeks. We don't act on it, and we don't speak about it, for which I'm grateful. I haven't seen or spoken to Quinn since the dinner at my parent's place, and while I'm getting used to not seeing him every day, my heart still hurts.

The rest of the ride is spent in silence. It's not uncomfortable. It's a silence that brings a smile to my face and hope to my heart.

I place the takeout bag on the counter, grabbing plates while Kallan gets the glasses.

In the weeks I've been living here, I've put my stamp on the place with new bedding, curtains, vibrant scatter cushions, and a couple of plants. It's taken a while, but I finally feel settled, like it's home and not just the place I used to visit.

"I want to talk to you about something."

"That sounds serious," I say, taking in Kallan's expression. His easy smile from earlier is gone and has been replaced by pinched eyebrows.

I put down my burger, wipe my mouth, and give him my full attention.

"I have to leave for a while," he says, wetting his lips.

My heart gives a dip. "Oh? Why?"

"I got a call from Delia. Josie's mom," he adds when he sees my look of confusion. "Henry isn't doing too well, and he needs some help."

“Oh no. Is he okay?”

He nods. “Apart from a broken leg, he’s fine. They’ve made plans to close up shop and retire to Florida at the end of the year, but Henry kept accepting jobs, and when he realized he was running out of time to get everything done, he panicked. He thought he was having a heart attack and was rushed to hospital. Luckily, it was just a panic attack. Unfortunately, this happened while he was on a ladder, hence the broken leg.” He shakes his head. “Stubborn old fool,” he mutters under his breath, but the words are underlined with affection.

“At least it wasn’t a heart attack.”

I can’t imagine getting to that age and suffering from a heart attack just as you’re about to retire.

“Yes, well, because of his inability to turn anyone down, he has a huge backlog and no way to honor it. He’s too proud to ask for help, so Delia called me.”

“Of course you need to help them.” I know he does, but just saying the words makes my chest ache.

“I don’t want to go,” he says, his eyes telling me all the reasons why, “But I owe him and Delia the world, Bailey. They took me in and accepted me for who I was, even when I couldn’t. And on top of that, Henry taught me everything he knew about woodworking. He gave me a different direction than the one I was on. Helping them out is the least I could do.”

“I get it,” I say, reaching out and putting my hand on his arm. “You don’t need to explain. It’s just...I’m going to miss you.” Looking down, I swallow, feeling wretched with selfishness. How could I have come to depend on him so much in such a short time? Surely it’s not healthy? “How long will you be gone?”

“I’m not sure. Delia says it’s quite a bit. I’ll be able to get a clearer picture when I get there.”

I nod, pushing down the feeling of rejection that’s threatening to surface. This isn’t rejection. Kallan has a life

besides me. People he cares about. People who care about him. This is just him being...him. Besides, maybe there was a grain of truth in what he said about using him as a crutch. Have I done that? Am I scared of being alone? Maybe distance will be good for me. Give me perspective.

“And your house and your shop?”

“Suppose you won’t be interested in house-sitting for me?”

“Hmm, tempting. Just think of all the parties I could throw without complaining neighbors,” I tease. “But no, that would be weird. Being there without you.”

“I’ll speak to Andrew. He won’t mind taking care of everything. Besides, the extra responsibility will be good for him.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BAILEY

THE ARRIVAL of Fall marks the days bleeding into each other. Green turns into a sea of yellows, reds, and oranges. Soon, the carpet of leaves will become thicker, and the trees barer until the snow arrives to blanket everything under its fresh canopy. With the end of tourist season and the chill that replaces people, our town takes on a sleepier quality. Where before I could look out my window and watch the streets teeming with life, now they are often empty and deserted.

It's been two months since Kallan left. We talk or text all the time, but it's not the same as seeing his truck parked across the road. As seeing him opening and closing his shop. I can't just pop across the road for a quick hello. His absence leaves a hollow ache in my heart. I miss his smile. I miss the low rumble of his voice.

Snapping fingers startles me from my melancholy thoughts, bringing me back to my surroundings.

"Are you even listening to me?" Piper says, her head cocked and her mouth pursed.

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was saying," she sighs with narrowed eyes, "that you should look around and take your pick."

"Pick for what?" I do look around, but it's a look of confusion. It's your typical Saturday night at Frosty Frogs. The bar area is packed. All the tables and booths are occupied, and a band is belting out songs on the stage.

“Oh gosh, you’re hopeless.” Her eyes flick upward as if she’s beseeching patience from the heavens. So damn dramatic.

“You, girl, need to get back in the saddle. Quinn did a number on you, and it’s about time you reclaim your power. So, go ahead, pick someone that will make you feel sexy and desired.”

“And then what?” I ask, my voice flat. I know exactly what she’s suggesting I do, and even if she means well, I don’t appreciate my lack of a sex life being thrown in my face.

“Then you take him home and let him do all kinds of dirty things to you. Rebounds are good.”

“Just because that works for you doesn’t mean it works for me.”

I’ve thought about it. I mean, for the first time in my life I’m single, and I have options. Unfortunately, I’m just not wired that way. I’ve got nothing against one-night stands. I just know that it won’t work for me. I need more than a conversation that lasts an hour or two before I get into bed with someone.

Or maybe I’m just scared.

“How would you know unless you try?”

“Just drop it, Piper,” Maya says. For once, she’s sitting with us instead of serving us. The girl works too hard.

“Piper,” I say, reaching across the table and squeezing her hand. “I know you mean well. I just...it won’t help, okay?”

“I hate to see you hurting,” she says, her eyes softening.

I nod. I am hurting, but not in the way she thinks. I miss Kallan, and I’ve been moping around since he left.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Hadley messaged. She’ll be in town next month.”

“Hadley’s coming?” I ask Hannah, ignoring Rose’s groan and Maya’s eye-roll. “Why? I thought she’d put us in her rearview mirror years ago.”

“Apparently her dad’s quite sick.”

“She should just send a condolence card or something like that,” Rose mutters.

“That’s mean,” Maya chides.

“It’s not like there’s a lot of love lost there,” she shrugs, unconcerned.

“Does Ryan know?” I ask Hannah.

“I’m sure he’s the first one she contacted. She’s going to be trouble. Just you watch,” Rose predicts.

Kallan: Good morning, beautiful

I’m sure I look like a loon with how I’m grinning, but I don’t care. Waking up to a text from Kallan is the best way to start my day. And he called me beautiful. The first time he did that instead of using my name, my heart gave a little flip, and I must have read the message about fifty times.

How sad am I to think that being called beautiful by him means so much more than any affirmation I could get from a man I pick up in a bar?

Bailey: Good morning, Mr. Reed. Why are you messaging me at four in the morning?

I hate the three-hour time difference between us. All it does is highlight how far away he is.

Kallan: Wanted to get an early start. I’m impatient to get home

And I’m impatient for you to be home.

Bailey: Don’t forget to take care of yourself while taking care of them

Kallan: Don’t worry. They make sure I’m fed and watered

Yeah, because they’ve got to take care of their workhorse. It’s uncharitable, but damn, it’s not hard to feel resentment towards them when they’re keeping him away for so long.

Bailey: How long do you think you’ll be?

Kallan: Hard to say, but if I had to guess about two months max. Don't know what Henry was thinking. I'm about ready to just say fuck it and throw in the towel

Two months! His frustration towards Henry has been creeping through in his messages, and I'm just about ready to give Henry a talking-to. I've never met the man, but I want to read him the riot act.

Bailey: But you won't

Kallan: I won't

I know if we were actually talking, I'd hear his sigh.

Bailey: I know I keep telling you this, but you're a good man, Kallan

Kallan: Have to get back to work. I just wanted to say good morning and I miss you

Bailey: Miss you too

Sighing, I get out of bed. Two months feel like forever. Would it be weird if I hopped on a plane for a visit? I've never been to Vegas, and I'm sure Kallan wouldn't mind showing me around. Unfortunately, that would delay him coming home.

I know he's eager to get back home, but there's this horrible voice in the back of my head that keeps whispering to me. *What if he doesn't come back? What if being back in Vegas brings back all these memories, and he realizes he misses the place? He's packed up and moved before. He can do it again.* I know it's my insecurities talking and I try to ignore it, but the more time goes by, the harder it gets.

I promised Darby and Ethan I'd take them for ice cream today, followed by dinner at Amelia's place. Still having a few hours to kill before I have to pick them up, I move at the speed of a sloth while getting ready. I'm staring into the fridge, debating the merits of making myself a smoothie for breakfast, when there's a knock on my door.

I don't know who I'm expecting when I open the door, but it's not Quinn.

The silence stretches as we take each other in. He's looking a lot better than the last time I saw him.

When I don't say anything, he clears his throat, giving me a sheepish smile.

"Sorry for just dropping in."

"What can I do for you?" I say, crossing my arms over my chest and giving him a flat look.

"Can I come in?"

"Why?"

"I've come to say goodbye. And I have something I need to get off my chest."

"You're leaving?"

He nods. "Yeah. Today, in fact. It won't take long, Bailey. Please."

I'm reluctant to hear anything he has to say, but hearing that he's leaving has thrown me for a loop, so I stand aside, letting him enter.

"I've been seeing someone. A therapist," he says once we're seated at my dining table. "He's helping me get to the bottom of why I've done the things I've done. It's an ongoing process, and I'll have to find someone new when I move."

"That's good, I guess," I say, unsure why he's telling me this. We're done, and whatever his reasons were doesn't matter anymore.

"Talking to him helped me understand that I haven't been happy in a long time."

"With me?"

Hi sighs, lacing his fingers together and focusing on them. "No...and yes. It's complicated."

"I don't understand."

"I've been carrying a lot of resentment. The farm, your bookstore, Frosty Frogs."

"I'm still not understanding."

“Fuck, this is hard,” he mutters, looking around the room. “What it boils down to is that I was jealous. Your grandparents left you Chantler and Cook. Nathan got Frosty Frogs. And I, I got nothing. You know how desperately I wanted the farm. Grandpa should have given it to me. Instead, he gave it to Dad, who sold it. I never wanted a corporate job. Hated it, in fact.”

“He had no idea your dad would do that. He trusted him.”

“He should have known better. He wasn’t blind to Dad’s faults.”

I sigh because we could go in circles on this topic. “You never once mentioned resenting the bookstore. Or that you hated your job.”

He shrugs. “I didn’t think it mattered. I thought the writing was on the wall for the business. It was barely floating when you inherited it, and you had no experience with running a business. It was doomed to fail, and I needed a job to support us when that happened.”

I can’t hold back the flinch at his ugly words. At his lack of faith in me. I feel like I’m on one of those television shows where someone will jump out and shout, “You’ve been pranked.” It has to be because I’m looking at Quinn, and I have no idea who he is.

“So that’s why you never wanted to move into the apartment?”

It never made any sense to me. We could have saved so much money living rent-free.

“I hated that place. And I thought you’d sell it along with the business. But then you did the expansion, and it took off.”

“That is...” I run my fingers through my hair, completely shaken. It’s incomprehensible to me that he could hide these feelings for all these years. That he’d been hoping I’d fail at something I loved so much. How was I so blind? So stupid? I thought we were a team that supported each other’s successes when all it’s been is a sham and a lie.

“Completely unforgivable, I know, Bailey. And I’m so desperately sorry. For all of it. That I wasn’t strong enough to

overcome my insecurities and resentment.”

I nod in acknowledgment because, for the first time, I can feel his sincerity. It doesn't change anything, but it's at least good to know he's sorry.

“So your affair was to punish me or something?”

“No, it had nothing to do with you. I hated my job, but I was good at it. It was a rush to feel valued and important. Justine was an extension of that. She wasn't connected to my past or these shameful feelings I was hiding away. She made me feel I could be free to just be me.”

His words are painful. I almost wish he would have just said, “I don't know, it just happened.” That would have hurt less. But at least I have answers, as hard as it is to hear.

“I don't expect your forgiveness, Bailey. That's not why I'm telling you this. I just...” He looks down at the table, his throat working a few times, before he looks back at me. “You deserve so much more than what I've put you through. That boy,” he says, rubbing his fist against his chest. “That boy you said you love, he would have never hurt you like this. And I can't bear leaving with you thinking that maybe you did something wrong.”

The silence between us is heavy, and I look away when he bats at a tear running down his cheek.

“Where are you going?” I ask, somehow managing to get the words past the ache in my chest.

“Connecticut. Justine's parents live there, and she wants to be close to them when she has the baby.”

I absorb his words, letting the idea of the added distance between us sink in. And I realize...I don't care. The new me is all about being honest with myself and accepting the truth of things. And the truth is, I've been incredibly lonely for the last year. I was more in love with the memories of us than with him. The realization is freeing.

“So the two of you are back together?”

“No, I don’t love her. And I think she pretty much hates me.” He grimaces down at his hands. “But she is going to have my baby, and I want to be a father to my child. I want to be a better father than mine was, and I can’t do that if I stay here. I’ll find a job once I’m there, and then we’re going to try the co-parenting thing.”

I nod, thinking about how weird it is to discuss Quinn’s future plans when all our lives we discussed our future together.

“Besides,” he says with a shaky smile, “You were right when you called me a coward. I can’t stick around and watch you fall in love. I know it’s going to happen. I just can’t see it happen.”

“You’re not a coward, Quinn.”

I regret the words as soon as I say them because isn’t he? Instead of making the hard choices, he took the easy way out every single time.

His grimace tells me that he disagrees. That he recognizes the deception in my words.

“I’m guessing my Mom’s not taking the news well.”

“That’s something else I want to apologize for.”

“No, Quinn. That’s not on you. That’s all her.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

KALLAN

“COME ON, buddy. I’ve got to go,” I say, picking up the squirming ball of fur and putting him in the playpen I bought for him.

Four fucking months and every second of that has been plagued with thoughts of Bailey. I dreamed of her lips on mine a million times. Of getting more than that tiny taste I had before. Her face drove me through cramping fingers. Her voice made me grit my teeth and power through the fiery ball lodged in my spine. Her smile made me ignore the blisters on my fingers. It’s been hell, and I’m exhausted. Sleep was beyond my reach on the flight back, my only thought getting home, but at least it was a more pleasant experience than the flight to Vegas. Then, I was a broody bastard, ready to growl at anyone who looked at me the wrong way.

But now I’m back, and it feels as if a world’s worth of weight has been lifted from my shoulders. If it wasn’t for a desperate need for a shower and a change of clothes, I would have gone straight to town.

To Bailey.

As it is, the half-hour it took feels like wasted time, and I’m not willing to waste a second more. I need to see her, touch her, look in her eyes, and see if she missed me even a fraction of what I missed her.

I’m about to scoop up my keys when a slamming car door freezes me in my tracks.

For a second, my heart bottoms out. Then I'm pissed. Don't know who it is, and I don't care. It's been four fucking months, and I'm not about to tolerate more delays. Whoever it is needs to leave. Nobody but Andrew knows I'm back, and today is not the day I plan on being fucking neighborly.

Grinding my teeth together, I swing open the door, ready to piss off neighbors I haven't even met yet, but what I find has me perfectly still, frozen in place.

"You're back," Bailey breathes, her eyes bright and filled with nervousness. "I hardly dared believe it when Olivia told me. I had to come to see for myself. I thought..." She takes a deep breath, wiping her palms down the sides of her jeans. "I thought you'd have told me?"

Fuck, I have a feeling my wanting to surprise her might have just backfired on me.

"I was coming to surprise you, but I needed a shower. Bad," I say, trying to pack as much reassurance in those words—those perfectly inadequate words—as I can.

"Oh, that's... Okay, that's understandable," she says, the tenseness dropping from her shoulders. "So, you're back, obviously, since you're standing in front of me."

My legs have a mind of their own as they move closer to her, my eyes roving over her face. Seeing her again and being close enough to touch her is everything. *Never again*, I vow. Never again will I go so long without seeing her.

"I'm back." Every beat of my heart feels labored and painful as my eyes search her face, looking for a sign, any sign, that I'm not alone in my feelings. That the time apart hasn't made her reconsider her feelings for me. So many times, I was tempted to ask her, but it was something I wanted to do face-to-face. So many things get lost in translation when you text. My eyes needed the confirmation, not just my ears. The flash in her eyes, the parting of her lips, gives me everything I need, and I step into her, eliminating the last bit of space between us. No distance, never again. "I'm going to kiss you now," I warn, cradling her face reverently like she's made of spun glass that will shatter at the slightest of pressure. But

looking into her eyes while I stroke my thumbs across her cheekbones, I know that's furthest from the truth. Inside her resides a core of steel.

Inhaling deeply, the flavor of smoky nuttiness overwhelms my senses. It's as if the scent of the coffee she loves so much has seeped into her pores, taking up permanent residence on her skin.

Fuck I missed it.

"Please."

That one little word seals her fate. She's mine now. There's no going back.

Staking my claim, I push my fingers into her hair, gripping the silky softness, and drop my other arm, wrapping it around her, pulling her against me. Her lips are warm and soft as I drag mine across hers, demanding everything and more. She answers with a gasp, and then my tongue is brushing against hers, over and over again, each sweep turning my hunger into a raging inferno. The warmth of her mouth, the essence that is her, steals the strength from my knees and the air from my lungs. I'd gladly surrender everything to her if it meant I could live in this moment forever. Helpless, I groan against her lips, the sound ripped from the deepest part of me when her fingers grip my shirt pulling me closer. I want to rip the damn thing off—feel her skin against mine without any barrier between us. There's been enough of that, and I won't tolerate more.

I'm on the cusp of doing just that when she wrenches her lips from mine. One second, two seconds, three seconds pass as we stare at each other, our chests heaving. Then her eyes dart past me.

"What was that?"

What was what? I shake my head, tearing my eyes away from her pink, plump lips that glisten from the moisture I put there, trying to comprehend what she's talking about when a mournful howl cuts through my confusion.

That little cockblocker.

I take a shaky step back, and it's so fucking hard. Now that I finally have permission to kiss her, I don't want to stop. Then I realize I've been mauling her like a caveman in the doorway of my home, and I feel like an ass.

"I kinda did a thing," I say, stepping back, allowing her to, you know, actually enter my home.

"You bought a puppy?"

I'm helpless in her wake as she makes a beeline for the pen.

"No. I bought you a puppy."

"What?" she says, spinning around so fast that I almost bump into her.

"Well, I know with the whole food thing, you can't have him during the day, but he can stay with me when you have to work. Almost like a shared custody kind of a deal," I finish lamely, suddenly second-guessing myself. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now that Bailey's staring at me like I lost my mind, I'm thinking it might have been a decision fueled by exhaustion. I mean, who buys a puppy for someone before checking that they actually want one? An idiot. That's who.

"Kallan Reed. Are you trying to bribe me with a puppy?"

"Uhh, no?" I sigh. "Look, I realize this might have been a bit presumptuous of me, and if you don't want him, I'll take him. I like dogs...I've been thinking of getting one."

"Are you crazy? This is...this is perfect," she breathes, dropping down and scooping him from the pen.

"It's a husky," she says, cooing at him and giggling while he tries his best to lick as much of her face as he can.

I've never been so jealous of a dog in my life, but then I see the sweet tilt of her lips, and I'm lost at sea.

"Where did you get him?"

"Bumped into the owner when we stopped for fuel. He was on the way back from having their final inoculations done.

Saw this little guy, and he looked like a miniature version of White Fang.”

“You watched the movie?”

I nod. “Yeah, had some time on my hands. Read the book, also.”

“Wow, I’m impressed.”

“Read the one about Finn also. It was good. I tried The Black Stallion, but I won’t lie and say I finished that one.”

I did give it my best shot, though, because reading the books she loved while picturing a younger Bailey curled up in that overstuffed leather sofa made me feel closer to her.

“Yeah, because you’re not fourteen,” she chuckles, pressing kisses to the puppy’s head. “Have you named him?”

“He’s yours. You do the honors.”

She hums softly, biting her lip, and it’s all I can do not to replace her teeth with my lips.

“White Fang was named Mia Tuk. Tuk for short. Do you think that’s stupid?”

“No,” I say, giving the pup a scratch behind his ear. “I think it’s perfect.”

Rinsing the last cup, I turn to Bailey when I hear her footsteps.

“He’s sleeping,” she says with a silly smile. “He’s exhausted. Poor boy doesn’t know what hit him.”

She was worried that he might miss his mother and siblings, so we kept him busy all day. If I knew a puppy would be so much work, I might have thought twice before buying him. Maybe...

“Finally,” I mutter. I put the cup in the drying rack, and then I stalk towards her. I’ve been on edge all day, desire shimmering just under the surface, and I’m done waiting. I grab her waist and lift her onto the counter, pressing myself forward till I’m standing between her legs.

“Did you miss me?”

“More than anything,” she says, a slight tremble to her lips.

“Really?”

“Really.” She slides her fingers over my cheeks, tracing my jaw, her eyes following their path. I haven’t shaved for a few days, but by the darkening of her eyes, I don’t think she minds. “Every second of every day.”

“So many seconds,” I say, moving my head closer so that we’re breathing each other’s air.

“Too many seconds,” she breathes, and then I’m kissing her. Or she kisses me. I’m not really sure who initiates it, but our lips crash, connecting in a way it was always meant to.

Sliding my hands beneath her, I lift her off the counter. Four months disappear as I carry her to the bedroom, my focus on the here and now, on the anticipation of finally, *finally*, having the right to worship her the way she was meant to be worshiped. And so help me, Tuk better sleep for a long time because this isn’t going to be quick.

I reluctantly tear my lips from hers when I lower her to the ground, but I don’t have time to mourn the loss of them before we’re undressing each other, and holy shit.

The moonlight was made for her, bathing and caressing her body in an almost ethereal glow. I want to fall at her feet and worship her for the goddess that she is. For so long, I despaired that I’d ever get this chance. I’ve been starved, and she’s a feast that’s been laid out for me.

Picking her up, I lay her down on the bed, switching on the lamp before settling on my knees between her legs. It’s fast becoming my favorite place to be.

Finally, I allow my eyes permission to wander, taking in every valley. Every dip. I go slow, drinking in every inch of her, committing her to memory. The slender column of her neck. The jutting of her breasts. The dip of her waist flared into softly rounded hips. The shadowy valley between her legs. My eyes catch on the freckle interrupting the smoothness

on her breast, and I want to lean in and lick it. Soon. After I've looked my fill.

Her eyes stay fixed on me, taking in my every expression, the almost defiant vulnerability in them squeezing my heart. They're waiting for me to find fault with what I'm looking at, preparing herself for the rejection that will surely follow. Doesn't she know that she's perfect? I'll have to work on that. Show her that she's the most beautiful fucking thing in this world. Inside and out. I want to kill that fucker for making her doubt herself.

My senses are on overload, and if I don't do something soon, I'm going to explode from the pressure. But I need to take my time. I know our first time will be blazed in my memory for as long as I live, and I want to make it last.

Fuck, I ache.

The compulsion is overriding, and I reach out, running my hands down her neck, lingering to take in the motion when she swallows. I smooth them over her shoulders, continuing my journey down her arms, slowly caressing her pebbling skin, stroking my fingers between hers. I want to touch every single inch of her. Commit every touch to memory before I go any further. I move my hands back up her arms, over her shoulders, and down the front of her chest. I keep my touch feather light as I stroke down the slope of her breasts, to the sides, around, learning the shape of her. I realize I've been quiet for too long, too lost in her. But fuck, I'm in sensory overload.

Leaning forward, I cup her cheeks, looking deep into her eyes. I want to let go completely and drown in them. I never want to come up for air.

"You're so fucking beautiful." I keep my voice soft. I don't know if she sees it in my eyes or hears it in my voice, this reverence I feel for her, but the widening of her eyes, the moisture pooling in them, tells me she's finally starting to get it. How fucking lost I am for her.

"Thank you," she says, her breath leaving her in a shudder. She shouldn't be thanking me. She should be demanding it as

her due.

“*Never* thank me for telling the truth,” I whisper, my stare burning into her eyes, waiting for her agreement. It’s as if my words release shackles imprisoning her, and her eyes positively smolder, eclipsing the intensity in mine. Grabbing fistfuls of my hair, she tugs until our noses are almost touching.

“Kallan? You said you’ve spent a lot of time thinking of everything you want to do to me. If you don’t start showing me right now, you’ll never get a thank you from me. Ever.” Her voice lowers, the last word a breathless hiss, and I grin at the demand in her voice. That’s my girl. Fuck, it feels good knowing that she wants this as much as I do.

“You want my fingers on your pussy, Bailey? I whisper against her skin, kissing my way down her neck and pausing to lap at the freckle.

“Yes, please, yes,” she groans.

I stroke my fingers down her sides, my nails dragging along her skin. Her back arches, her breasts thrusting in the sexiest way, a mouth-watering offering I’m helpless to resist. Bending down, I suckle a nipple into my mouth, my fingers gliding over her sex, where I’m met with smooth, wet skin. Stroking and swirling my thumb over her clit, I ease a finger inside her, shuddering at the breathy noise that slips from her parted lips.

I’m so hard it’s painful.

“Fuck, if you keep making that sound, I’m going to come before I’m ready,” I groan, thrusting shallowly.

Adding another finger, I curl and pump them both inside of her, picking up speed when she moans, bucking against my hand.

“Kallan, please,” she begs, panting.

“Please what, baby?”

“I want to come so fucking bad.”

“Just listen to that dirty mouth.”

I grin, pulling out my fingers, sucking them, and savoring her flavor. It's not enough. I want to lower my head and feast. *Not now. The next round*, I promise myself. I can't resist the need to be inside her. To feel her warm heat surrounding me, strangling my cock. To feel her skin sliding against me as we move together. I've waited too long for this.

I pause long enough to grab a condom from the bedside drawer. It was a drowning man's dream when I bought them.

Her eyes are hazy as she watches me roll it on, and I almost come on the spot when her tongue darts out to lick her bottom lip.

Next time. Next time I'll see those lips wrapped around my cock. Feel the slide of her tongue as she caresses me.

Shifting between her legs, I lower over her, keeping my weight on my elbows. My cock is aching to feel her stretch around me.

"You're going to give me everything," I whisper against her lips.

"And I'm going to take everything," she says, her eyes fierce before capturing my mouth.

Her moan and my groan mingle together when I slide into her. She fits me like a fucking glove, and if someone told me I'd actually died and gone to heaven, I wouldn't argue. Winding her arms and legs around me, she forces me down until there's not a sigh of space between us.

We rock together, our tongues tangling, hands restlessly touching, her heart beating against my chest, echoing the drum of mine.

It's slow, it's sensual, and it builds and builds until she's the one to break first.

"Harder," she murmurs, soft moans tearing past her lips as I pick up my pace. They echo in time to the headboard tapping against the wall, and I swallow them down, tasting them against my tongue.

Angling my body, I thrust harder, deeper, picking up speed. I've sunken into the most primal part of myself, lost to everything but the taste of her on my lips, the heat of her body yielding to me, the sounds of skin slapping against skin.

I'm lost to everything but her.

With a small cry, her body stiffens, shuddering around my cock; her moans the sweetest music as she comes.

It unleashes the animal in me, and I want to roar in victory that *I* did that. *I* made her come so hard she's gasping for breath. It spurs me on, and I push myself above her, driving into her harder and faster, sweat rolling down my back.

My balls tighten, the pressure at the base of my spine building and building until it explodes, detonating a wave of pleasure so intense, shooting up my body, my muscles spasming from the overload of sensations.

My arms give out, and I roll over, taking her with me. I should get up and take care of the condom, but we're still connected, and I need a minute to hold her. To look at her.

Her hair is messy, her body sweaty, and she's never been more beautiful.

"That was," she says, pressing a kiss to my lips. It's meant to be a quick one, but I tangle my fingers in her hair, holding her to me as I deepen the kiss. I'm like a starving man, and all I need is her taste to survive.

When I finally release her, we're both breathless.

"That was?"

A wicked grin spreads across her face. "Almost as good as getting a puppy."

My chuckle starts slowly, but then I'm laughing, and in a flash, she's under me again.

"Is that so?"

She hums, her eyes glinting while her fingertips trace my face. "It's close, but Tuk wins by virtue of cuteness."

"Cute," I scoff. "So you'd rather have cute than this?"

Keeping our eyes connected, I settle back between her legs, rolling the condom off and dropping it on the floor. Clean-up can come later. Right now, I'm hungry. Bending down, I suck a nipple into my mouth, giving it a soft bite and a lick, watching in satisfaction as it pebbles.

"I don't know. I'm still not convinced," she lies, her voice hoarse.

"Seems like I have my work cut out for me," I say, moving down her body."

"You do," she breathes, jolting when I press an open-mouthed kiss to her clit.

"Seems like it's going to take time to convince you."

I follow the kiss with a lick. She tangles her fingers in my hair, her legs falling open. "You know what that means, right?" I say, looking up at her.

"What?"

"I'm keeping you forever."

EPILOGUE

TWENTY YEARS LATER

“Do you think I should go?” I ask, running my fingers through Kallan’s hair. It’s still a bit on the longer side and just as tousled as when we met. The years have added a touch of gray and a few wrinkles around his eyes, but he’s still the most handsome man on the planet.

Sitting outside on our porch, surrounded by family is my favorite place to be. Lately, though, more often than not, it’s only Kallan and I. And Finn. The kids are always off doing something on weekends.

“I think you might regret it if you don’t,” his voice rumbles.

I last saw Quinn at Nathan’s wedding more than fifteen years ago, so I was taken aback when Nathan relayed his request. He had an apology in his eyes, but there was an unspoken plea as well. One I don’t know that I can deny.

I sigh, and Kallan’s arm around my shoulder tightens, snuggling me more securely into his side.

Chloe throws me a look, and even from this distance, I can see the cry for help in her eyes.

“Stop staring at them.” My voice is chiding, but my insides are all warm and squishy.

I couldn’t have asked for a better father for Chloe and Mason. Or a better husband. He’s devoted his life to this family. He’s led by example, teaching Chloe never to settle for less and showing Mason what it means to be a man. That’s why I’m not worried. Chloe has her head screwed on right.

He's shown me what it means to have a family.

I never made peace with Mom. I didn't invite them to my wedding. She made her disapproval of moving on from Quinn clear, and I didn't need that in my life. She tried reaching out when Chloe and then Mason were born and again before she passed away. But I was stubborn. I wasn't interested in what she had to say. I still don't know why she loved me less than Amelia and Cody, and I guess now I'll never know. I wonder about that sometimes, and it's that that's making me consider Nathan's request.

He makes a sound deep in his throat, pulling me from my trip down memory lane. I turn his chin toward me and press a kiss to his forehead, hoping to smooth the lines of his scowl.

"I don't like it."

"They're just friends."

"You really believe that? We were just friends, remember?"

"And look how that turned out."

His eyes soften, and then he's leaning in and kissing me. I'd never understood the saying "being kissed senseless" until Kallan kissed me. Until I experienced his, *set my body on fire, toe-curling, time-stopping, who the hell cares where I am*, kisses.

After twenty years, he still kisses me senseless.

All too soon, he pulls away, his attention caught by a deep laugh. Five minutes after Chloe and Brody spread the blanket next to the lake, he parked his ass on the porch, and he hasn't moved since.

"Where's Finn when you need him," he mutters, his face falling back into a scowl.

We were heartbroken when Tuk passed away. He could never be replaced, but Finn eased a slice of the hurt his absence left.

"She'll be eighteen soon. You're going to have to let go at some point. Besides, Brody is a good boy. Piper raised him

right.”

“Nobody’s good enough for Chloe,” he states with conviction.

I sigh, rolling my eyes. The first night back from the hospital, he stood staring at her in her crib—the beautiful crib he made—and declared that nobody would ever be good enough for her. He still hasn’t changed his mind.

“So, you think I should ago?” I ask again, secretly wishing for a different answer. If he tells me he doesn’t want me to go, I won’t. Nothing in this world will ever make me do something that can hurt him.

“Baby,” he says, compassion softening his eyes. “You don’t owe him this. You don’t owe him anything. It’s your choice, but I think you should. For your sake. Not for him.”

I STOP MY car outside Orchard Park. Taking a deep breath, I wipe my sweaty palms on my slacks. I’m a jumble of emotions, and I’m procrastinating. I know I am.

I hardly ever think of that time. While I was going through it, it felt like my world was ending, but time and the love of the best man a woman could ever wish for healed the many wounds inflicted by his betrayal.

I love Kallan more than I thought possible. I love him more than I ever loved Quinn. The only thing in this world that can compete with the love I have for my husband, is the love I have for my children.

But Quinn was a big part of my life. Almost all of my childhood memories are wrapped around him, and that’s what’s making me procrastinate.

Just do it, Bailey. The quicker you get this over with, the quicker you can get home to your family.

Pep talk over, I gather my courage and walk into the building. The lady at reception has a friendly smile as I give her my name and then settle on one of the chairs. The area is bright, clean, and welcoming. Not a bad place at all.

It doesn't take long for someone to come and collect me, and I'm surprised when we walk outside.

"Mr. Foster enjoys being outside for an hour or two on sunny days," she says with a smile.

We walk down a manicured path until we get to an area with a pond. Off to the side is a large tree with a bench that's being occupied by a lady who must be one of the staff. She doesn't hold my attention. It's the man sitting in a wheelchair across from her that's staring out at the pond.

Seeing him is a punch to the gut. I saw his mom at the end, and I thought I'd emotionally prepared myself for it, but watching him, I realize there is nothing that could have prepared me for this. When I picture him, I still see that young, vibrant, thirty-year-old.

He's a shell of who he used to be.

Life can be so incredibly cruel. The cruelty of it makes the residual resentment fade away till all I'm left with is compassion. With a smile, the lady gathers the papers in her lap and walks a short distance before settling down on a different bench—far away enough to give us some privacy.

"Hey," I say softly, settling on the now-empty bench.

Quinn's head turns slowly, and his face lights up, a smile trying to form on his mouth. "Bails, you came."

"Of course, I did."

"Nathan said he gave you my message, but I wasn't sure you would."

I wasn't sure I would either, but I'm glad Kallan convinced me to come. The silence stretches while he stares at me. What do you say to the man who you once loved, who once was a huge part of your life, the one who's now dying?

"It's nice out here," I eventually say, taking in the manicured gardens with winding paths.

"It's not bad."

Silence descends again, and I'm just about to throw out some or other inane observation about the weather when he clears his throat.

"You're looking good, Bails."

I want to cry because there's no way I can say, "Thank you, you're not looking too bad yourself." The disease that's ravaged his body has left him a shell of who he used to be, and it's so fucking unfair. So fucking unfair that he had to watch his mom succumb to this and now have to experience it himself.

"Thank you," is what I say because there's not much else to say.

"Is he good to you?" he asks, tipping his face to the sun.

"The best."

"That's good." Melancholy drenches his words. "Nathan told me you're happy. But I'm glad I can see it with my own eyes."

Through the years, I've picked up on bits and pieces about his life, but Nathan knew not to tell me much. I wasn't interested. I know he never married and that he'd been very active in his daughter's life. But that's about it.

"And you? Do you have anyone special?"

He shakes his head, looking back out over the water. "Apart from my daughter, Kayleigh, no. There's been a few women over the years, but nobody I'd call special. There's only ever been one of those," he says, looking back at me.

I shift on the bench, not wanting to relive the past.

"So, that's her name, Kayleigh?"

His smile is as wide as he can make it, pride shining in his eyes. "Yes. You must see her, Bailey. She's so beautiful. And smart."

"That's good." I share his smile because it's the same smile I've smiled over the years when talking about my children.

He closes his eyes, slightly tipping his head forward. “I’m so damn tired all the time, Bails, but when I close my eyes, I can’t sleep. So, I dream. Do you believe in Heaven, Bails?”

“I do.” I nod, my throat closing up.

“When I dream, I dream about the summers we spent on the farm. The time when Mom was still alive, and life was easy. I dream of us riding our bikes down the dirt road. Swimming in that freezing pond. Telling scary stories around the fire at night. In every dream I have, it’s you and me. That’s what I want my Heaven to be.”

I look to the side, dashing a tear from my cheek.

“Don’t cry for me, Bails. I don’t deserve your tears. I’ll be seeing Mom soon. And Gramps.”

“I’m so sorry, Quinn,” I say, swiping at another tear. I was so determined to be strong.

“Every year on your birthday, I sent you a birthday card.” He sighs, picking at the blanket draped over his legs. “I sent it to our old apartment. I couldn’t pick up the phone and call you, so I sent you a card. I could have sent it to your store, but the apartment was the last place we were happy together. The last place I was truly happy.” His eyes cloud and he looks out over the pond. “I wonder what happened to them. Did someone read them, or did they just throw them in the trash?”

I keep quiet because he’s musing, lost in his thoughts. Even if he was expecting an answer, I wouldn’t know what to say. I spent my life looking towards the future, hardly ever dwelling in the past. I loved Quinn. I did. I thought we had a love that would last a lifetime. But life had a different plan for me. It took everything I thought I knew, had, and loved, and ripped it away. What it gave back was infinitely better. The love I had then, pales in comparison to the love I have now.

And it’s tragic that he never found that with someone else.

“Never mind that,” he says, shaking his head, looking tired. “I asked to see you for a reason.”

He waits for my nod before he continues. “I want to ask something of you. I know you don’t owe me anything, and I

have no right to ask but I'm going to ask nonetheless."

"I'm not robbing any banks for you, Quinn," I say with a shaky smile, trying to lighten the moment.

"No, no banks," he says, his lips trembling. "I want your forgiveness. I know what I did to you is unforgivable, and I've regretted it every single day of my life. It's been so many years, Bailey, and I hope that somewhere along the line, you've been able to find it in your heart to forgive me."

I take a few moments to compose my thoughts. I want to give him my honesty, not platitudes that I think he'll want to hear.

For your sake, Bailey, Kallan's voice echoes in my mind.

"At the time, I was hurt, really hurt. And sometimes, it still hurts. But we were friends first, and that's what I remember when I think of you now. It's not healthy to hold on to hate and anger. So, yes, Quinn. You have my forgiveness."

In a way, he also has my gratitude for freeing me to love someone else.

"Thank you." He breathes out a shaky breath. "You always were a good person. The best."

Movement catches my eye, and I see the nurse glancing at her watch and getting up.

"I think our time is over," I say as she approaches us.

"It's time for my napless nap," he jokes, but I can see the fatigue in his body.

I stand up, and he catches my hand. His fingers are so cold, his grip weak, and I tighten my fingers around his, trying to lend him some of my strength. "Thank you, Bails. For coming." His throat works, but he keeps his eyes on mine. "You have given me the greatest gift."

I'm not sure how, but I somehow summon the strength to keep the tears from my eyes, knowing that this will be the last time I see him.

“You are most welcome, Quinn. And it was so good to see you.” It’s the first lie I’ve told him, but it’s a necessary one. I don’t want him to know that it breaks something in my soul to see him like this.

“Bailey,” he calls as I’m walking away. “I don’t want to be forgotten.” His voice hitches, a plea in his eyes.

Walking back, I cup his cheeks and press my lips to his forehead. I close my eyes, inhaling deeply. “There is no way you will ever be forgotten.”

Because no matter what happened in the past, Quinn doesn’t deserve to be forgotten.

Kallan’s waiting for me when I get home. His eyes are intense as they study my face. Without hesitation, he opens his arms, wordlessly embracing me. It’s good that he knows me better than I know myself because all these emotions I’m experiencing have any words I could say jumbled up into a tight knot. And then I break. I’m in his arms, the safest place I could ever be, and I know, I know, that he will hold me and care for me without judgment, without selfishness.

The sobs that wrack my body feel like they’re torn from my soul. All the hurt, betrayal, and pain Quinn caused me fade away. It’s not that man I’m mourning. It’s my childhood friend, the boy that was so full of life. The one with the crooked smile, the skinned knees, and the dirt streaking his face. The one that was so full of life. The one who has to say goodbye to his child much too early.

Wrapped in the warmth and comfort of the man I love more than anything, I allow myself to grieve, knowing that he won’t judge me for that. That he understands.

Once the tears have dried up, he takes my hand and leads me to our bedroom, where he slowly undresses me, pressing me down onto the bed.

Then he worships my body, the awe in his eyes when he looks at me just as strong as the first time. We move together

while he uses his words, his body, and his whole soul to show me how loved I am.

I have no regrets. I don't want any do-overs or take-backs. I would endure what Quinn put me through a million times over because it made me stronger and wiser.

But most importantly; it gave me Kallan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siena Sloane is a mother of two beautiful daughters and four furry children.

Growing up, she'd sit on her windowsill (especially on misty, rainy days) and dream up stories, which she would then write down the old-fashioned way—with pen and paper.

Reading them now makes her cringe, but that is where her love for stories started.

When not writing, Siena can be found with a book in one hand and a cup of coffee in another, lost in some or other fictional world.

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