



PAPERCUTS

BOOK TWO

yours
cruelly

WINTER
RENSHAW

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Yours Cruelly
Paper Cuts Book 2

Winter Renshaw

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COVER DESIGN: Louisa Maggio, LM Book Creations
EDITING: Wendy Chan, The Passionate Proofreader
PROOFREADER: Sarah Schopick
BETA READER: Sarah Schopick

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Also By Winter Renshaw

THE NEVER SERIES

Never Kiss a Stranger

Never is a Promise

Never Say Never

Bitter Rivals

THE ARROGANT SERIES

Arrogant Bastard

Arrogant Master

Arrogant Playboy

THE RIXTON FALLS SERIES

Royal

Bachelor

Filthy

Priceless (Amato Brothers crossover)

THE AMATO BROTHERS SERIES

Heartless

Reckless

Priceless

THE P.S. SERIES

P.S. I Hate You

P.S. I Miss You

P.S. I Dare You

THE MONTGOMERY BROTHERS DUET

Dark Paradise

Dark Promises

PAPER CUTS

Hate Mail

Yours Cruelly

Dear Stranger (October 2023)

BOX SETS

The Best of Winter Renshaw

His & Hers

STANDALONES

Single Dad Next Door

Cold Hearted

The Perfect Illusion

Country Nights

Absinthe

The Rebound

Love and Other Lies

The Executive

Pricked

For Lila, Forever

The Marriage Pact

Hate the Game

The Cruellest Stranger

The Best Man

Trillion

Enemy Dearest

The Match

Whiskey Moon

Stone Cold

The Dirty Truth

Love and Kerosene

You or Someone Like You

Fake-ish (December 2023)

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Description

The message said, “Remember me?” But the sender was someone I’d rather forget.

Alec Mansfield haunted my memories like a cruel specter. In high school, he was my tormentor and the bane of my existence. When he wasn’t defying authority alongside my rebellious older brothers, he was sabotaging my dates and sending me “anonymous” messages signed YOURS CRUELLY.

Alec was merciless, an emerald-eyed devil spending his daddy’s money and wreaking havoc over our hometown like he owned the place, hating that I didn’t fawn over him like all the other girls did.

It’s been ten years since he left Sapphire Shores.

But now he’s back, working as an ER doctor at the local hospital, and in a strange twist of fate, we match on a dating app. I agree to meet up, but only because I want to tell him off for making my life a living hell all those years ago. But a few beers, one tequila shot, and a shared Uber later, I find myself about to have scorching-hot hate sex with my sworn nemesis.

The next morning, I leave his apartment, slamming the book shut on that chapter of my life forever.

Only a few weeks later, I discover our story has an epilogue—one that starts with two pink lines on a pregnancy test.

Turns out there's one thing more life-altering than hooking up with Alec Mansfield—like having his baby.

I

Stassi

I'm not one to call people losers, but the guy slumped over the bar, giving me sleepy-eyed come-hither looks over his beer? It's not looking good for him.

"You should go talk to him," Madison, my roommate-slash-ride-or-die, kicks me under the table. "He has this clueless Bambi thing going on. It's kind of endearing actually."

"Did you forget to wear your contacts again?" The guy has serial-killer eyes and a neck that rivals most giraffes. On top of that, his nostrils keep flaring like two ever-expanding black holes. I'm two drinks in, but I'm not that desperate. Not yet, anyway. "Maybe *you* should go talk to him."

She considers my suggestion, sipping her strawberry basil mojito through the stirrer straw. "I'm already dating Joe though."

I give her a look. Two random meetups and a screw in the back of a movie theater shouldn't constitute dating in my book, but then again, what do I know? I'm in a dry spell so arid it rivals the Sahara.

As if reading my mind, Mad says, "He's better than Bryson."

She's not wrong.

My last blind date—the one I got by swiping right—wound up having stale coffee breath I could smell from across the table every time he opened

his mouth. But that wasn't the worst of it. Throughout our date, he insisted on referring to himself in the third person. "Bryson Winward wants to order calamari. Bryson Winward would love to escort you home."

At first I thought he was trying to be funny ... so I laughed.

Turns out, he wasn't.

Before our appetizer had a chance to arrive, I faked an emergency phone call and ordered an Uber faster than a person could say "mozzarella sticks with extra marinara."

Every one of my last few dates has come in a distant second place to a book, a bubble bath, and a cold tub of Ben & Jerry's AmeriCone Dream.

"I don't know if I'm made for this dating scene anymore," I say. "I thought about looking into some convents."

"*Stassi.*" Tenley, one of my oldest friends, offers me a sympathetic look as she places her hand over mine. "You'll find the right guy when you least expect it. That's how it always goes. Once you stop looking—bam. They waltz into your life and you suddenly can't remember life before them."

Easy for her to say—Tenley resembles a Hadid sister, makes working at an award-winning, high-pressure law firm look like a cakewalk. On top of that, her problem is the opposite of mine. Every time she turns around, she's getting asked out by handsome strangers and turning them down because she's already married ... to her job.

I glance at old Googly Eyes, who is now picking his teeth with his fingernail.

"Anyway," I say. "I didn't come out to find a guy. I came to hang with my best friends."

Campbell, the only married one of our group, lifts a shoulder. "There's no unwritten rule that says you can't do both."

Best friends since kindergarten, I always imagined Campbell would be an old spinster-type, home on weekends with her various animals and eclectic interests. She's always been the quirky one with the oddball sense of humor.

Growing up, she rarely showed romantic interest in anyone, though in college she made out with a few guys. I didn't think she had a flirtatious bone in her body—until she showed up last year sporting a glimmering diamond ring, a mile-wide grin, and the most shocking news she'd ever delivered: she was engaged—and to a devastatingly gorgeous billionaire, no less.

I'm happy for her, but damn—talk about a plot twist none of us saw coming.

Now that Mad is seeing Joe and Tenley is too consumed with work to care about her personal life, I'm the only truly single one in the group, and there's nothing drunk friends like more than going to clubs and trying to set the single one up. It's basically a competitive sport in this neck of the woods.

I should've known this night out on the waterfront in downtown Portland was a mistake.

I hold up my hands. "Guys. I'm fine being—"

"*Right,*" Mad says, cutting straight through the lie. "We get it, Stass. You don't need a man, but you *do* need someone to keep your bed warm sometimes and spoil you with fancy dinners and the occasional weekend away. As your roommate, I'm officially making it my mission to find you one."

She starts scanning the place like the Terminator searching for John Connor, her eyes practically glowing laser-red. I don't tell her she's wasting her precious energy. Houlihan's used to be a popular hangout when we were at USM, but the youngest person here is easily ten years older than us. All the "cool" kids must have moved onto whatever the hottest new place is. Other than a couple of beer-bellied, balding guys at the bar and Bug Eyes, it's slim pickings.

I groan and slip out of the booth. "We need another pitcher."

The moment I step away, they lean together, whispering. I don't have to guess what the topic of their gossip is: *What can we do to help our poor, lonely, sad Stassi? She must be miserable. She needs to get laid. I don't know*

why she's being so stubborn? Do you think she's still hung up on Mason?

My phone buzzes as I'm placing my order at the bar. I glance down in time to spot an incoming message from my dating app.

I sniff a laugh.

Talk about divine timing.

I'm about to delete the app off my phone when I catch sight of what the message says.

DocMansfield: *Remember me?*

I wrack my brain.

The Doc part doesn't ring a bell.

But Mansfield?

The only Mansfield I know is Alec—a guy who, years ago, tore out my heart and used it for target practice ... amongst other things.

I refuse to believe I could've matched with *him*. We aren't even oil and water. He's some toxic chemical that will burn your skin right off your bones.

Thumbing to his profile to investigate, I find a photo of a guy lying back on what looks like a neon yellow surfboard, staring up at the sun, his rippled abs glistening like he just slathered them in tanning oil.

I vaguely recall swiping right on him, but only because he was undeniably hot and I was on my third glass of vino.

I swipe to the next photo and zoom in, noting his barely-there five o'clock shadow, polished aviator sunglasses, and disarming smile. That and his backwards Yankees ball cap.

I've always been a sucker for a hot guy in a backwards hat.

No wonder I swiped on him.

I flick to the next image—an upper body shot. Shirtless, of course. His cheeks are more chiseled in this one, and his muscled shoulders veer into corded steel biceps and finish with bulging veins that snake up his forearms. There's a hint of a tattoo, peeking up from the collar of his t-shirt. Though it was a little blurry, it showed promise. Plus, I must've seen the Doc in his

handle and my brain prematurely went, “*Oooh, Grey’s Anatomy in real life*” before I read the rest of it.

Shit.

I swiped right on Alec Mansfield.

There’s no way he’s a *medical* doctor though ...

Medical doctors save lives and help people, and Alex doesn’t have a obliging bone in his body unless you’re in desperate need of an orgasm and then he’s your man—or so I was told back in the day.

I refuse to believe someone so merciless and cruel grew up to be the kind of person people respect and admire.

I mean, people change all the time ... but Alec?!

Sure, he had the smarts for it.

The drive.

The pushy parents.

The abundance of Mansfield money to pay his way through med school.

But with all the hating I’d done on him before and after he moved away, I’d hoped karma would’ve smiled on me and bit him in the ass by now. In my mind, he was bald, sporting an extra fifty pounds, and working on his fourth marriage, living the kind of life no amount of spit could shine into something impressive.

The bartender pushes a fresh pitcher of margaritas over to me. I lay the cash on the bar, all the while contemplating what would be a good response.

Go to hell?

Screw you?

Die, loser?

But alas, I’m a public relations guru by trade and uncouth is not my style. Once the words are written and sent, you can never take them back and screenshots are forever, so I’ve always been extra careful.

The best response would be none at all.

The first rule in public relations is if you ignore a problem, nine times out

of ten, it eventually goes away.

But I'm not sure how or even if that translates to ... this.

My chest constricts as I pick up the pitcher, silently chastising myself for the hold my dickhead childhood crush still has over me.

Not only that, but now he probably thinks I still like him.

When I slide into the booth, the girls are talking about some trashy Netflix reality dating show, which apparently, is all Mad's life is about these days—when she isn't hooking up with Joe. I'm so in my own head that I'm not paying attention as I open my phone and type a response. While I should leave him on read, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't the tiniest bit curious about what became of my childhood nemesis.

Shutton07: *I wish I didn't. What do you want?*

The moment I hit "send", Mad reaches over the table and grabs the phone from my hand.

"Um, who's *that*?" She gawks at the photo, her jaw slack and her eyes as round as saucers. "You matched with *him*?"

She passes the phone around so everyone can see, and each reaction is some version of the same thing—oohs, aahs, gaping mouths, glimmers of excitement in their eyes. If Alec were here to see this, his head would swell so big he wouldn't be able to fit it through the door.

"Okay, Stas. You *have* to go on a date with him." Tenley grabs onto my arm and shakes it like her life depends on me completing this mission. She reads from his profile. "Listen to this. *File me somewhere between McDreamy and Pepper*. He's funny. You know, humor is a sign of intelligence."

Mad frowns. "I don't get it."

"He's a doctor." Tenley's gushing. "Like Dr. McDreamy and Dr. Pepper. Get it?"

"Don't you recognize him?" I ask.

She inspects the image on my screen closer. "Did we go to high school

with him? He kinda looks familiar.”

“Alec Mansfield,” I blurt out his name in one annoyed breath.

Tenley claps her hand over her mouth, passing the phone to Campbell, who appears equally as stunned.

“That’s Alec? And he’s a doctor now?!” Campbell’s jaw hangs loose. “Never would’ve seen that coming. Looks like his jokes are still lame though.”

Yeah, that stupid *McDreamy* one-liner sounds like one of the thousands of jokes he and my brothers used to toss around Saturday afternoons while playing video games in our basement rec room. I’m embarrassed to admit how many hours I spent sitting at the top of the steps listening, completely and utterly *captivated* while they talked about bodily functions, sports, and girls—not always in that order.

“Witty, smart, and good looking?” Mad fans her face. She didn’t grow up with us. She doesn’t know Alec from Adam. “I don’t care who this guy was in high school, you’ve landed the trifecta and you have to act now. Someone like this won’t last long out here. Competition is fierce, and the fact that he swiped right on you means he’s interested. That’s half the battle.”

“I don’t want him to be interested,” I tell them. “And I never would’ve swiped right on him if I realized who he was.”

“Okay, so he was a jerk back in the day. People aren’t allowed to change?” Mad asks. “If everyone judged me on my weird awkward teenage years, I doubt I’d be sitting at this table with you all. No offense. Not that you’re snobby or anything—I just mean, I was a strange kid and people tended to stay away.”

“Alec wasn’t *strange*,” I say. “He was an asshole. Big difference.”

“Mad has a point,” Campbell says, passing the phone back to me. “People change all the time. And yeah, he was a jerk back in the day, but now he saves lives for a living. Maybe he’s trying to make things right?”

With my phone back, I exhale, stare at his picture once more, and face the

fact that karma didn't do a damn thing these last ten years. If anything, it sidled up to him, probably blinded by his superficial charms, and granted him three wishes like some genie in a bottle.

Zooming in, I focus on his bewitching emeralds, the ones that'll cut straight through your soul if you let them.

Mad kicks me under the table. "So?"

I grab the pitcher and refill my glass all the way to the top, until it nearly spills over. My hand is shaking. This'll be my third, and I never do three drinks in a row without at least fitting a water or two in there somewhere, but this calls for an exception.

"Yeah." Tenley rests her chin on the top of her hand. "Are you going to go out with him or what? Let's get this show on the road. I'm literally getting secondhand butterflies just thinking about how perfect he is for you."

Perfect? *Ha.*

It's like she's conveniently forgotten the hell he put me through back in the day—then again, I didn't always share every little detail with them because I was too focused on trying to ignore everything rather than give it oxygen.

I shake my head. "I can't."

The girls look at each other before Tenley lifts a palm.

"I think you should strongly reconsider," Tenley says. "And I stand by what I said—people are allowed to change. This could end up being advantageous for you."

Spoken like a true lawyer.

"Advantageous how?" I ask, chuckling.

Maybe some people are allowed to change, but cruelty was basically Alec's entire personality. That and running the town. Breaking hearts. Scoring all the points in all the sports. And inciting general mayhem any chance he got. The boy was starved for attention, and every time he got some, he only wanted more of it.

Good or bad, the attention was all the same to him.

“In ways you probably haven’t even imagined.” Tenley winks. “At minimum, he’s obviously familiar with the human body. I’m sure he has ... skills.”

“Here’s the thing.” I’m about to dig my heels in, deep dive into a past I’d rather forget, and tell them there’s no way in hell I’ll subject myself to his brand of torture, when my phone lights up with a new message from him.

Before I can grab it, Mad snatches it away. “Oh my god—he wants to go out for drinks with you.”

My stomach falls.

I’m going to be sick.

“No,” I say without pause. “Absolutely not. I’d rather die. Seriously.”

Poor choice of words given that Campbell and her husband recently had a close call with death, but I cannot make myself clearer to these women.

“Why?” Tenley frowns. Doesn’t matter that we’ve been best friends forever; they’re all suddenly on Team Dickhead. “I’m sure he’s matured. You should give him a chance. He clearly wants to connect with you. That’s got to count for something. Maybe he wants to apologize?”

“You don’t get it. He ...” My words taper off as I think back to the worst of what he did. My freshman year of high school, when all my friends started getting boyfriends and I was wishing for once a boy would notice me. I just never expected that boy would be Alec or that he’d notice me in all the ways I didn’t want him to. Waiting on the front stoop, *hoping* ... I can’t finish my painful reverie. The humiliation stings, even now. “I can’t.”

“Too late,” Mad says, showing me the all-too-bubbly message that I’ve apparently sent to the bane of my existence.

SHutton07: *Sure, I’m free tomorrow. Houlihan’s at 8?*

I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to kill my best friend more.

2

Alec

SHutton07: *Sure, I'm free tomorrow. Houlihan's at 8?*

I'm standing next to my Tacoma in a sub-zero windchill, the walls of the Maine Medical Center's parking garage doing little to fend off the cold. I'd set my phone on the hood to dig in the pockets of my jacket for my car keys when that message from Stassi popped up.

Definitely not what I was expecting.

Fuck off probably would've been too nice for her, given the hell I put her through back in the day. Honestly, when I swiped right on her and sent a message, I wasn't expecting a damn thing. I was just taking a chance because I had nothing to lose. That and as much as I've tried over the past ten years, getting her out of my head has been damn near impossible.

Harder than graduating med school at the top of my class, even.

Once my truck is warmed up, I make the short drive out of Portland, up past Yarmouth, to my old hometown of Sapphire Shores, a bedroom suburb full of old-moneyed houses perched upon the rocky shoreline.

My family home was one of them.

While our house is still there in all its better-than-thou glory, my family is not.

After my graduation, my parents shipped me off to MIT and shipped themselves down to what they thought were greener pastures—North Carolina. Eventually, I joined them at Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, where I did medical school and my residency.

Then the shit hit the fan.

Turned out that the long arm of the law extends pretty far, even into the greenest of pastures.

With my father's assets frozen due to tax evasion and fraud and our reputation tarnished, I turned my sights elsewhere. It wasn't long before I finished my residency and was offered a position in the biggest hospital in Maine—one that just so happens to be a stone's throw from my hometown.

The decision to return here was bittersweet—partly because I'm not the kind of man who tends to spend much time glancing in the rearview, but also because there's a piece of me that never really left.

For better or worse, this town has my heart ... amongst other things.

This time, however, I live in a section of Sapphire Shores that would never grace the cover of *Travel & Leisure*—right off Route One, in a piece of crap condo complex that's sandwiched between a gas station and Ted's, a place that sells the crappiest pizza known to man.

Not exactly a step up, but I've got a *shitload* of loans to pay, and it was between this or a roach-infested rental with a cat-piss scented front porch.

Before I get home, I stop to pick up an entire pie from said crappy next-door pizza place, inhale half the thing in my truck because I haven't eaten all day, then I head inside to finish unpacking.

Everything's exactly where I left it—the downfall of living alone.

My two-bedroom apartment has a single bathroom, up a steep, twisting staircase, and a kitchen with puke-green linoleum and appliances to match. It has a basement with laundry and some sad excuse for a gym, the place drafty and in desperate need of patching and maintenance. Yesterday, I went down there and found a snow drift on the weight bench. After tightly packing a few

snowballs in my hands, I chucked them into the nearby utility sink and felt like a kid for all of two point five seconds.

Then it was back to reality.

Throwing the pizza box down on the counter, I head to the fridge, crack open a Sea Dog, and check my phone, re-reading Stassi's message for the millionth time.

I still can't believe she replied.

But *Houlihan's*? People still go there? Or is she hoping I'll go there and get my ass mugged? There's no real dangerous part of Portland, but that's probably the closest thing to it.

That's probably it.

She wants me dead.

I'm trying to think of something halfway witty to say, but nothing comes.

Jesus, you'd think by now I would've outgrown the plague of always getting tongue-tied around her.

I decide to test her.

DocMansfield: *I'm working the ER until 9 tomorrow. Meet you after?*

Her response comes before I can even put my phone down. She must be online.

SHutton07: *I didn't send that message. My friend did. I don't have any interest in seeing you.*

I smirk.

There's the Stassi I remember.

DocMansfield: *Harsh. Can I ask why?*

Pretty sure I know exactly why, but getting her to engage with me is half the battle, and I never lose.

SHutton07: *You don't know?*

DocMansfield: *Should I? It's been ten years. Lost track of your brothers years ago. How was I supposed to know you still had a bone to pick with me?*

SHutton07: *More than one bone. An insurmountable amount of bones*

actually. More bones than a person has time to pick, so ...

DocMansfield: *Really? That many bones? Are they big bones or little bones?*

SHutton07: *A multitude of sizes, but you should already know that being a medical doctor and all.*

DocMansfield: *My memory's a little foggy in my older age—care to get specific with some of these bones? Maybe start with the biggest and go from there?*

SHutton07: *Sure. Two words: Yours Cruelly.*

I shove half a slice of greasy, mostly-raw-dough pizza into my mouth and frown.

So she *does* remember.

It's a blur, those days spread among a full course-load of AP classes, serving as captain of the hockey team and clocking volunteer hours loaning skates at the rink, all the while trying to make myself look stellar enough to join the ranks of those at MIT, but of all those extracurriculars, my favorite had been one I couldn't put on my college application: tormenting the cute little sister of my two best friends, Aidan and Cooper Hutton.

Before Anastasia Hutton caught my eye her freshman year, she'd been nothing more than an annoying gnat that got in the way of our video games, always shouting, "I want to play," and grabbing for the controllers.

My parents were strict as hell and wouldn't let me have a game system when I was supposed to be studying for my future doctorhood, so I saw the Hutton's bratty kid sister as the one thing standing in the way of my only means of escape.

All of that changed over the course of one summer though.

I'd spent the second half of summer break in Europe with my grandparents, returning the week before my junior year of high school kicked off. As an early birthday present, my parents surprised me with a jet-black BMW 327—the wet dream car of every guy my age.

The plan was that I'd drive the boys to school and we'd be the talk of Sapphire Shores High. When my parents suggested I also give the little sister a ride since she was an incoming freshman, I said, in no uncertain terms, "Hell no."

Knowing how risk-averse my parents tended to be, I managed to convince them Stassi would be a safety issue, that she'd be messing with the radio buttons to distract me and trying to stick her head out the sunroof, so they let it go and never brought it up again.

So technically the first time I saw—*really* saw—Stassi Hutton was when she stepped off the bus that first day.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her no matter how hard I tried.

I was entranced.

Hypnotized.

She'd practically sprouted overnight, these long limbs and a heavenly waterfall of silky, sun-streaked blonde hair that bounced on her shoulders as she walked with her head held high. There were traces of the old Stassi, of course—she still wore braces and these big, clear-framed glasses that covered most of her face and looked more like lab goggles—but she'd grown.

She wasn't the bratty kid sister I remembered.

As the fall semester went on, it turned out Stassi Hutton wasn't just smart—she was brilliance itself. From the minute she came to Sapphire Shores High, she made waves. Teachers loved her, always gabbing about her in the hallways when they thought no one could hear them. Gushing over her latest English paper or how quickly she was catching on in advanced algebra.

Ever the overachiever, Stassi joined the Math club, Science club, chess club, and all the other academic groups she could squeeze into her jam-packed schedule, and she didn't care that those were for the nerds.

She even wrote a research paper that got published in some scientific journal, somewhere.

Every day, on my way to hockey practice, I'd see her in the computer lab

typing away like the nerd that she was.

Despite her brilliance and the fact that her study face (squinted eyes, serious expression, bitten lower lip) made my shirt collar tighten whenever I passed by, I was annoyed at her.

While everyone else played the popularity game at school, Stassi couldn't be bothered.

When all the other girls were selling their souls and their dignity to claw their way up the popularity ladder, Stassi couldn't care less about where she ranked. With her daily uniform of zero make-up, jeans and t-shirts, hair in a ponytail, and her true-blue best friends at her side, she was perfectly content to be in her own little universe.

And it wasn't just that she didn't want to play the popularity game—she thought *we* were idiots for even rolling the dice.

She *wanted* to be an outcast.

And she was an outcast ... with *confidence*.

Okay, maybe I was a little jealous, too.

I was the guy all the girls wanted.

The master of the game.

I didn't have to lift a finger and people came flocking my way, kissing my ass just to stand in my shadow.

I was a god and everyone else revolved around me.

And yet Stassi Hutton *didn't even look at me*.

Not once.

Not a single damn time.

After months of being ignored, I finally caved, offering to drive her to school—only to be told she preferred to keep riding the Nerd Express.

Tired of playing on her terms, I was desperate to get under her skin. At that point, any kind of attention—positive or negative—was a win for me.

It started with an anonymous email, something corny and barely fit for a middle schooler ... something like *roses are red, violets are blue, your*

glasses make you look like you're 82.

I followed it up with a bunch of anonymous texts I sent through this app I downloaded. Most of the time I said stupid shit along the same lines, but I always signed them the same.

Yours Cruelly, x.

I was used to her being unbothered by everything, so I didn't think she'd care. I didn't think she'd bat a single eyelash. No woman who'd go in front of the Math Olympiad wearing those little pi-adorned sweatshirts in public would give half a shit about a stupid rhyme.

All I wanted was a reaction.

A response of some kind.

Only the one I got wasn't what I expected ...

A few weeks later, Stassi traded in her goggle glasses for contacts.

Then she started to wear make-up.

Curl her hair.

Wasn't long before the braces came off.

And after that, every guy in school suddenly wanted her.

Being nice, pretty, *and* intelligent was a rare trifecta at Sapphire Shores high.

By the time my senior year rolled around, she'd met Jonathan, her first boyfriend—and the bane of my existence if only because he had the one thing I couldn't: her.

My plan had backfired.

I'd created a monster—a gorgeous fucking monster who still went about her life as though I didn't exist.

And in the process, I'd also created a monster inside *me*, one that obsessed about Stassi Hutton far too much than was healthy.

At some point during my senior year, I stopped sending those cruel messages and turned my thoughts toward MIT, if only because I needed a distraction or I was going to go insane.

After I received my acceptance letter, I thought for sure, with my future on the horizon, I'd forget her.

And then she did that damn thing ...

The night of my high school graduation, during a "Don't Let the Door Hit You In the Ass" party my parents had before sending me off to Boston, she leaned into me, almost casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if she hadn't spent the last two years pretending I was cellophane. At that point, I'd almost gotten over her. But I'd never been so close to her. I didn't know she smelled like vanilla coconut cake ... like something I'd want to literally devour.

And then she whispered five little words: *I know you're Yours Cruelly.*

I tried to play it cool, acting as though I had no idea what she was talking about. But her gaze held mine, and I fumbled over my words like some lovesick puppy, giving away my game.

She knew.

She knew everything.

She was onto me the entire time, all the while acting like I wasn't even a blip on her radar.

That was when I realized that it didn't matter if I went to MIT or somewhere on the other side of the world ... I'd be in love with Stassi Hutton for the rest of my life.

They say karma's a bitch, so it only makes sense that I'd slide into her DMs after all these years, only to be knocked back into place ten messages later.

DocMansfield: *I can explain ... if you let me.*

SHutton07: *No thanks.*

DocMansfield: *At least let me apologize.*

SHutton07: *What's the point?*

DocMansfield: *Closure. You're clearly still holding onto a lot of anger towards me. As a medical doctor, I can assure you that'll do a number on*

your health.

SHutton07: *Was that supposed to impress me?*

DocMansfield: *Impress you? Stassi, I simply care about your well-being. I took an oath. Do no harm.*

SHutton07: *I wouldn't trust you with my medical care if my life depended on it. I'd bleed out in a rat-infested alley before I let you so much as stick a Band-Aid on me.*

DocMansfield: *Damn. Well ... I deserved that. But I'd still like to apologize. How about one drink? Then you'll never have to see me again (unless you want to).*

SHutton07: *I don't know if there's enough alcohol in the world for me to sit through a meeting with you. And what are you bothering me for anyway? Why don't you bother my brothers?*

DocMansfield: *Unfortunately I didn't match with either of them. But I did match with you, so ... maybe that's a sign?*

SHutton07: *I don't believe in signs. Please do us both a favor and un-match me so we can both go about our ways and pretend like this never happened. Think we can agree it's for the best.*

I couldn't disagree more.

SHutton07: *Somewhere out there some vapid former cheerleader is waiting for a six-pack touting doctor to make her feel alive if only for one night. You're wasting your time here. Go find yourself a good time girl, get your rocks off, and if you see me around town, we're as good as strangers.*

She's got me there. Yes, originally, I'd been lonely, which was why I downloaded this app in the first place. Moving back to a place you spent your formative years in something no amount of prepping can prepare you for. It's not like they write self-helps books on the subject. Doesn't help that I never planned to come back in the first place. I've burned bridges and lost touch with all the people I used to run around with when I was younger.

Stassi's right ... I might as well be a stranger.

I'd been in town only a couple of days before I caved and went on the dating app to see what was available in the Sapphire Shores vicinity. I expected to see a handful of familiar faces.

But not hers.

The second I saw Stassi's trademark megawatt grin and silky hair the color of sunlight, my appetite for a meaningless quickie went out the window—not that it matters; with the way this conversation is going, I'm pretty sure sex of any kind is off the table.

Before I can respond, she messages again.

SHutton07: *Screw it. One drink. At 8:30. Houlihan's. And your apology better be good.*

For a second, I wonder if that's her friend writing for her again.

But then I realize I don't even care.

We officially have a date.

DocMansfield: *Deal.*

3

Stassi

I can't believe I'm doing this.

I'm sitting in the back of the Uber I called, Houlihan's on one side of me, the Portland harbor on the other, glistening in the moonlight. It's so frigid that the exhaust from the car makes a hazy cloud around me. My palms are on fire and my heart is beating so hard it's practically crawling up my throat.

Like a moron, I dressed up. I'm wearing a sweater dress that I only wear when I want to impress people. As if I care about this person.

Which I don't.

I stopped caring about Alec Mansfield a long time ago.

I made peace with his cruel ploys to get my attention.

I close *Charlotte's Web*, slip it into my purse, and exhale in an attempt to compose myself before I tackle this giant.

The driver, likely a local college student considering the nose ring and the just-got-out-of-bed look, glances in her rearview mirror. "You did say Houlihan's, right?"

"Yeah ..." Somehow, our old haunt looks way more intimating than it did, even just last night. "Just trying to get the courage to go inside."

"Blind date?" The girl's eyes widen with sympathy. "That's how I met

my boyfriend. You never know.”

I nod so I don't have to explain our complicated history; one I've replayed in my head more times than I could ever begin to count.

“You're my last ride of the night, so take as long as you want. I'll even stay out here for a few minutes if you want,” she says. “If he's a total troll and you want me to take you home, say the word.”

I don't tell her that Alec Mansfield in no way resembles a troll or that he has the opposite effect on women—they insist on running *to* him, as fast as possible.

The reason I'm rooted to the back seat of this Toyota Yaris is because I'm afraid of being one of them.

I check my phone. It's 8:29, now.

He might already be in there.

Then again, the boys used to say he'd be late to his own funeral. That's why I said 8:30. Not so much to make him go through the trouble of leaving the ER early, but because 8:30, in his eyes, might as well be nine. That and I figured if I got here before him, I could suck down a quick drink to steel my nerves before he got there.

My hand is on the door handle when I spot a tall form in a pea coat and scarf, striding through the shadows on Commercial Street, heading straight for the bar. I can tell by his confident lope, his hands dug into the pockets of his coat, and the hooded eyes squinting under the glare of the street lamps that it's Alec.

He doesn't see me, so I get a chance to really look at him. He has less facial hair than in that photo—just enough stubble to make him look outdoorsy and rugged. The baseball cap is gone—as are his wayward dark curls that used to toss around in the wind.

Also absent is the Panthers hockey jersey he used to wear 24/7—he's replaced that ratty, dingy old number 9 with a little more upgraded fashion sense, as evidenced by his plaid scarf, slim-fit dress pants, and loafers.

He stops outside the front door and checks his phone, sucking on the inside of his cheek—an old habit of his that made his mouth quirk up on one side in an unbearably sexy way.

Is he nervous to see me?

Contemplating his apology?

Checking a text from some sexy cheerleader he swiped right on after taking my advice?

I shake my head, refusing to get ahead of myself—or get my hopes up since those hopes have no business being anywhere but down when it comes to this man.

I was *always* such a sucker for that little smolder of his though. Sometimes I used to lie in bed and dream about how it would feel focused on me. That was before my junior year, when I learned that fairytales only happened to people with names like Rapunzel and Cinderella.

I shiver. “Oh. Um ... there he is.”

Predictably, my Uber driver lets out a low whistle as Alec opens the door to Houlian’s, holding it for a couple of cougars in short skirts who giggle their thanks.

“*That’s* your date?” my driver meets my eyes in the rearview. “Girl, he is *fine*. Get your ass in there.”

Gritting my teeth, I thank her and step out. Only the second I do, a cold burst of night air slips its way under the hem of my dress, more or less pushing me toward the entrance. I guess someone up there thinks this is a good idea? Because right now, I swear I feel my thickest fleece pajamas, some vanilla-spiked chai, and *Charlotte’s Web* calling to me.

Hugging my purse tight to my body, I brace against the wind and yank on the solid wooden door. It swings wide open, delivering me and a gust of snowflakes inside before slamming shut with such force it garners the attention of everyone inside.

So much for a graceful entrance.

Before my eyes can fully adjust to the dim lighting, a velvet voice says, “Hey.”

I glance towards the bar, where Alec’s standing, snowflakes in his hair, uncoiling the scarf from around his neck, looking like he stepped off the pages of the latest J. Crew catalog.

He slips his scarf off and leans in to kiss my cheek when I approach.

It’s awkward, because we’ve never greeted each other before with more than a grunt of hello and even then, that was rare.

I guess this is the new, mature, adult Alec?

Can’t help but wonder if *this* Alec would write cruel anonymous messages to an unsuspecting girl who didn’t have a mean bone in her body

...

His lips barely graze my cheek. Or maybe I don’t feel it because my skin’s numb from the cold. Good God, he smells like heaven though. Despite the fact that I’ve hated him for years, I have a momentary urge to lean in close and drag his intoxicating, masculine scent into my lungs one more time. Body wash. Soap. Cologne. Aftershave. I expected him to arrive in scrubs, smelling like bleach and antiseptic. Now that I think about it, he’s dressed for a date. Did he get off early and shower ... for me? Or is he meeting someone after this?

“I thought you’d be late,” I break the silence that’s lingered between us for a decade.

“I dodged out of work early.” He scratches above his brow, his eyes fixed on mine. “

I don’t know why that warms my heart a little.

But only a little.

It’s still frozen stiff at its core, just the way Alec left it a lifetime ago.

Realizing I’m staring googly-eyed at all his gorgeousness, I blurt, “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Unfortunately for you ...” He smirks as he motions me to one of the

booths in the back. It's a Sunday night, so while the place wasn't busy last night, it's practically dead tonight save for the two cougars sitting at a high table and a couple of old fishermen getting drunk at the bar. "So, what's new?"

I slide into the booth, sitting across from him as he shrugs off his coat to reveal an oatmeal-colored sweater that complements his subtle bronze complexion and clings to his toned torso.

Redirecting my gaze, I refuse to stare at those muscles.

I knew his biceps were perfection from his pictures, but nothing compares to their beauty in the flesh. I tear my attention away and pretend to be more interested in the random soccer game airing on the big television over the bar.

I hate soccer, but more than that, I'd hate for Alec to think I was ogling him for one second.

When I glance back, he's still waiting.

I sigh. "So ... I'm here. What now?"

I thought the whole point of this was for him to apologize, but how good is an apology when I have to ask for it? Not to mention, I didn't want to do this. At all. But after some contemplation, I decided closure might be good for me. That and I was curious to see what time had done to the man who made my younger years hell.

His rebellious green eyes glint. "Thought we could just stare at each other until we're drunk."

Same old Alec with his dry wit and smart-ass remarks ...

"Two people who hate each other," I say, "have no business getting drinks. I came for one reason and one reason only, so ..."

"Hate each other?" He sniffs, ignoring the true nature of this meeting. "We matched. That's like ... destiny."

"Yeah. I swiped right before I knew this particular brand of *destiny* sent me torture messages through half of high school."

"Come on. They weren't that bad." He waves it off before glancing at the

bar. “One second. Let me get a pitcher. We’re going to need one tonight.”

I watch him leave, wanting to hate him, but finding myself dangerously admiring the curve of his toned ass in his slacks—and I’m not even remotely inebriated. I haven’t had a single drop of liquor and already my inhibitions are playing a dangerous game of chicken.

This isn’t good.

Alec returns a minute later and pours me a glass of beer.

“So it appears,” he says as he sits back down, “that with the exception of those messages that were sent by a dumb seventeen-year-old who was trying to impress his friends—that I’m your type.”

I almost choke on my first sip. “Oh, come on.”

He doesn’t flinch at my reaction, keeping calm and collected as ever. “People change, you know.”

I take a vested interest in my beer, scooting it closer and taking a couple generous swills.

“I can assure you, you’re *not* my type,” I say.

He flashes his signature deadly smirk, his beer suspended halfway between the table and his mouth. “But you swiped right. That has to count for something.”

“Honest mistake.” I lift a single shoulder and purse my lips into an apologetic frown before taking another drink.

The cocky bastard gives me a doubtful look. “Or maybe it was a happy accident.”

I chuff, quickly realizing I’ve almost downed my entire beer.

I need to find something else to do, because the current options—drinking and staring at his infuriating beauty—are a deadly combination.

“Can I ask why?” He straightens his posture.

“You’re too short for me. Sorry,” I lie.

He lifts an eyebrow. “I’m six-three.”

“I need six-five, at least,” I say without pause.

“I see.” He’s doing it again. Using that tone of voice I always hated. Partially sing-song, an octave higher than normal. *I’m brilliant, and you’re an idiot.* “Because you’re all of ... what? Five-two?”

I glance over at the soccer game, feigning interest.

“Five-four,” I say. “And you have that ... thing.”

“What thing?” He lifts a brow, worry lines spreading across his forehead.

“That ... smirky thing you do. It’s annoying.” I’m lying again. The smirky thing is hot. Hotter than hot. Pretty sure if our lips touched while he’s doing that, I’d get third degree burns.

“Smirky? Is that even a word?” he asks. But I don’t answer. “So you don’t like my face—is that it?”

Anyone would like his face.

It’s a perfectly fantastic, flawless face.

“It’s not just your face. It’s the expression behind it. It says you think you’re better than everyone else. *Personally*, I think you got your head smashed against the boards a few too many times on the ice.” Against my better judgement, I top off my beer. The night is young and something tells me I’m going to need to stay relatively numb to get through it.

“Hmm. Okay, so, other than an insecure giant, what else are you looking for?”

He pours himself another beer, taking his sweet time. I imagine his steady hands stitching cuts and gently examining patients. It’s a jarring image given what I know about this man, and yet I can picture it so clearly.

“I don’t know that it concerns you,” I say. “If you’re mint chocolate chip ice cream and my favorite flavor is Rocky Road, there’s nothing you could say or do that would make you Rocky Road.”

His dimpled chin juts forward. “Never been compared to ice cream before.”

“Just illustrating my point,” I tell him. Words are kind of my thing.

While everyone expected me to go into a STEM-related career after high

school, I accidentally took a left turn along the way and fell in love with public relations. Back in New York, I was able to marry the two, working for a PR firm that specialized in promoting various STEM-start-ups. In fact, I was in the process of negotiating a big promotion when the whole thing with Mason happened. I couldn't get out of the city fast enough. I didn't want to be reminded of my philandering fiancé and the life I thought we were creating together. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I went home to figure it out—something I've still yet to do.

Alec's looking at me like he used to, like I'm that bratty little sister again.

"Okay, fair enough," he says. "But maybe I *want* to know. What have you been up to lately? How's your family?"

Ignoring the whole, *What-I've-Been-Up-To* thing, I sip my beer.

"My family hasn't been up to much. Aidan and Cooper work for the same lumber yard up in Lewiston. My dad sold the hardware shop and retired when Home Depot came in. My parents still live in the house across from yours. Er, your old one."

"Oh, yeah? Lots of good times there ..." His emerald gaze grows distant for a moment, as if he's reminiscing, though I find it difficult to believe Alec has a nostalgic bone in his body.

Our cranberry red Maine saltbox was perfectly nice for a middle-class family of five, and would've been absolutely *phenomenal* if not for one thing: the sprawling waterfront Mansfield manse, which was built when I was a little kid and entirely blocked our view of the ocean. It was all my parents could talk about until the Mansfields gave them free reign to use the walking path to their private section of beach.

Despite how beautiful and big Alec's house was, though, he was always over at our place.

Always.

My parents used to joke that he was their third son, and Alec lapped it up like a kitten to warm milk, which I always thought was crazy because his

mother was so glamorous and his father was so successful and we were so ordinary in comparison. While the Mr. and Mrs. Mansfield spent their Friday nights at the country club, my parents could usually be found at the bowling alley. Their vacations tended to be exotic and expensive and long. Ours tended to involve cramming into Mom's Dodge Caravan and driving for hours upon hours, eating fast food, and stopping at various roadside attractions and free national monuments.

Shortly after Alec graduated from high school, however, the Mansfields sold their mansion to a reclusive older woman who put up fences and fast-growing evergreens that made sure we never became good neighbors. By the end of the new tenant's first week there, she'd padlocked the gate to the beach path and plastered PRIVATE PROPERTY signs all over the place.

Alec fixes me with a stare, as if he's unwrapping everything I haven't said.

"What about you?" he asks.

"Me?"

"Yeah. What have *you* been up to?" The tone of his voice and the life in his eyes makes me think he's truly interested, that he isn't simply making small talk.

I answer with caution and give him the abridged version. "I moved out when I graduated from USM. My roommate, Madison, and I live on Main. In that old brick complex with the steel windows."

He doesn't need to know about Mason or my failed engagement.

It's far from being any of his business.

Alec raises an eyebrow. I think he's probably as shocked as I am embarrassed that I haven't made much of myself since graduating at the top of my class ten years ago. I've run into a handful of high school teachers over the years who made no bones about hiding their disappointment. If they knew the full story, maybe they'd understand, but it's not the kind of thing you talk about in passing.

I brace myself, waiting for him to ask why I threw my life away.

Only instead, he says, “Oh yeah. The one by Ted’s Pizza?”

“Is there any other?”

He laughs. “That’s where I live. What number are you?”

My mouth opens and for a long time, nothing comes out. There are eight condos in that little complex, formed around a quad. It’s not pretty. Not nearly Alec-Mansfield quality. With his upbringing, he’s all waterfront-mansions and top-floor penthouses and European chateaus. This must feel like a major downgrade for him.

“Why’d you pick that dump?” I ask because all of this feels a little too convenient to be coincidental.

He shrugs. “I needed a place. It’s close to downtown.”

There’s something behind that, something he isn’t telling me.

“Are you stalking me?” I ask, choosing not to mince words.

“Stalking’s not really my thing.” He’s pouring me another glass—my third.

But instead of stopping, I forge on, letting my curiosity get the best of me.

“So, what made you move back to Sapphire Shores of all places?” I ask.

“Guess part of me missed it.” He takes a careful drink.

“Missed *this* place?” I look around. Is he crazy? If I were him with all that Mansfield money and a license to practice medicine, I’d have left this hole-in-the-wall town and never looked back, not once. Aside from pretty sunrises and a close proximity to the ocean, it’s a dead end. This town is nothing but families that’ve lived here for generations upon generations. Maybe a cute downtown district and a handful of decent restaurants. That’s pretty much it. Everything else requires a drive to Portland. “Weren’t you in south somewhere? Georgia?”

“Close. North Carolina.”

“Oh, I get it. You missed being in a place where everyone worshipped you?”

“Nah. People worship me wherever I go.” His devilish glint returns in full force, sending an electric flash to my middle. “We’re getting low.”

Grabbing the nearly empty pitcher, he climbs to his feet and goes to get another one. My head is swimming. I’m tipsy. This is moving too fast while somehow managing to drag by at the same time. It’s got to be the alcohol messing with my perception of time.

I need to get control back, now.

Right now.

But the room’s spinning.

And I’m way past buzzed.

When he turns around and heads my way and the first thing I think is how I’d love to taste his lips instead of this damn bitter beer—I *know* I’m drunk.

I fumble for my purse, pulling out *Charlotte’s Web*. Cracking the spine at the bookmarked page, I pretend to be totally engrossed despite it being too dark in here to read a single sentence, and all the words are blurring in front of me.

After a moment, I look up to find his eyes on me.

Curious.

Assessing.

Almost taking me in like it’s the first time he’s ever seen me before.

“Don’t let me interrupt you,” he says, amused. I’m sure I look ridiculous.

My face flushes warm.

“I make resolutions every year,” I explain. “This year I promised I’d read a different classic for every letter of the alphabet.”

Alec nods, like he doesn’t seem surprised. After all, I’m the girl who dressed as Pi for Halloween three years in a row. He simply leans over and looks at the cover. “You’re on C?”

“What gave it away?”

His lips twist. “I don’t have much time to read for pleasure anymore.”

“I’m sure. *Doctor.*”

I'm expecting a snooty remark, like *and don't you forget it*. Instead, he points to the book. "That's your next one. *Doctor Zhivago*."

I almost forgot. He's so devastatingly handsome it's easy to lose track of the fact that he's brilliant. He wasn't a meathead who got into MIT on a hockey scholarship. No, my brothers said he could do complex mathematical equations in his head. He got a perfect 1600 on his SATs and landed some prestigious award for it. The fact that he knows about literary classics is as obnoxious as it is sexy.

I close the book. "I never liked Pasternak. Too depressing."

He raises an eyebrow. "You do realize you're reading a book where the title character dies and all her children run off and desert her ... right?"

I exhale, cocking my head. "Way to spoil the ending for me."

He cracks a smile. "You've never read it before?"

"Only about ... a hundred times." I give him a wink, which I didn't mean to do.

Oh, god—are we flirting?!

Damn drinks.

He gazes is heavier than ever, and I hold his stare despite not being able to feel my face. That heat that resided in my neck earlier is everywhere now, radiating down my extremities, bursting in my chest.

I'm drunk.

So drunk.

So drunk, in fact, that my heart does the cheesy pitter-patter thing every time our eyes lock from across the table.

I'd envisioned storming in here tonight, saying all the words I'd swallowed up years ago, then dashing out of here with my head held high. Now I'm all but glued to my seat, soaking in how strangely alive it makes me feel every time Alec looks at me like I'm the most fascinating thing he's ever seen in his life.

All I wanted to do was slam the book shut on this chapter of my life.

I wasn't expecting a plot twist of Alec Mansfield proportions.

4

Alec

This woman is going to be the death of me.

We end up sharing an Uber. The arrangement made sense, since we both live in the same complex, as fate would have it. Obviously, why pay an extra Uber fare? The only thing that I neglected to tell her was that I'd left my own car in the parking garage of the Maine Medical Center, and was expecting to walk back there after our little *meeting*.

Wouldn't exactly call it a date, considering how much she clearly still loathes me, and I never did get around to the apology. I kept waiting for the perfect time to work it into the conversation, but I found myself asking questions, wanting to know more about what she'd been up to and what she'd become.

Now we're sitting in the back of someone's Kia Telluride that smells overwhelmingly of pot, listening to UB40's "Red, Red Wine," and she's bopping her head a little, moving her upper half in slow figure eights, something I don't think I've ever seen her do—probably because she has no rhythm whatsoever.

She's singing a little, too, and I think I've heard wounded seagulls that sounded better—no offense to seagulls.

Still, it's freaking adorable.

And it means she's somewhat comfortable around me.

Hm. She *might* be a little more than tipsy.

I'm not drunk, but maybe she has that effect on me, because I've totally lost it. For some reason, watching her gyrate around has me growing harder with each passing stoplight, and I've suddenly got an overwhelming urge to silence her off-pitched notes with a kiss.

My cock strains, growing unbearably stiff, pushing harder against the inside of my pants the second she leans my way.

I steal glimpses of her from the corner of my eye, unable to stop thinking about what she would look like naked and on top of me.

Doesn't matter how many years have gone by or how much life has happened since the last time I saw her, turns out shoving my mad crush on her to the depths of my soul has only made it intensify.

It's like I'm in high school again.

Stassi Hutton is sitting *right next to me*, and has no idea how many nights I fantasized about gripping her hips, driving deep into her, how many times I dreamed about hearing her moan in pleasure with every thrust.

She stops dancing when she catches me watching her.

Shyly, she tucks a strand of silken hair behind her ear, and it's all I can do not to pull her against me and take her, right there. She's more beautifully oblivious than I remember. All grown up.

If Cooper and Aidan knew the thoughts I was thinking about their kid sister right now ...

"Are you going to get in touch with them?" she asks out of nowhere.

I'm a little worried she can read my mind. "Who?"

"My brothers."

"Eventually. Once I settle in. I just got here three days ago. You didn't see the U-Haul pulling in?" I ask.

"Must've missed it." She flashes me a curious look I can't interpret

because she's an enigma and always has been. "Don't tell them we saw each other. I might be an adult, and they might've moved across the state, but ... oh, Aidan even got married, did you know that? And Cooper's engaged. They both have their own families. But they still treat me like I'm three."

She's rattling on. It's adorable.

I vaguely recall receiving an invitation to Aidan's wedding years ago, but my mom was having an operation and with my father being locked up at some white collar prison facility, she needed my help with the aftercare. I thought about hiring a home nurse, but she wouldn't have it. She wanted me, her *doctor son*, to be at her beck and call despite her never being at mine when I was a kid ... but I digress.

I'd much rather have attended Aidan's wedding—if only so I could see Stassi.

But everything aside, I couldn't abandon my mother in her time of need. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not *that*.

She, fortunately, made a full recovery. But missing Aidan's wedding is something I've always regretted. I should've been there, celebrating with the Huttons.

"Wouldn't dream of telling them a thing," I say, taking in the way her icy strands gleam in the streetlights that shine through the rear passenger window. That hair was the first thing that got me all those years ago. It's like waves of sunlight and silk, the way it frames her pretty face.

She sighs and flops against the back of the seat, leaning so close that the side of her breast brushes my bicep. I haven't been able to stop looking at her curves since she walked in the bar, but now I get to feel them, too? Shit.

Probably a good idea I don't try to get in touch with Aidan and Cooper ...

Because if they knew what was going through my head right now?

They would kill me.

Then again, if they knew I was back in town and didn't reach out—they'd kill me anyway.

Damned if I do, damned if I don't.

"You still haven't answered me." I try again, because it's dark, and maybe she's drunker, now, if that's possible. She was purposely avoiding the question, and now I'm hanging on the answer. "What have you been up to all these years?"

She drops her chin to her chest and mumbles something.

"What?" I ask.

She exhales and clears her throat. "I thought I told you? I work at Ted's."

I stare, trying to find some other meaning of the words. "Wait. *You* make that crappy pizza?"

"It's not like it's *my* recipe." Stassi shoots me a look. "Besides, it's not *that* crappy."

"It is. I don't know how he gets the pizza to be both burnt to a crisp and raw at the same time."

"Hey, people drive from miles around for our burnt, raw pizza," she says with a teasing sniff. "Anyway, that's not all I do. Sometimes I substitute teach at the high school."

I bite my lip, refraining from showing judgement while silently wondering what the fuck.

She had everything going for her.

Ambitious, confident, and intelligent—the necessary requirements to become a success at anything in life.

"You went to USM, though, right?" I ask.

She nods.

"And you got a degree?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you go somewhere? Do something?"

Her nose wrinkles. "Not everyone can be a doctor, you know."

But she could've been one. She could've been anything she wanted to be. And yet, now she's behind a counter, making the most godawful pizza on

Earth.

It doesn't make sense.

Something had to have happened.

"Weren't you majoring in STEM or something?" I ask.

She looks at me sideways. "Yeah. I double majored in Chemistry and Math with a minor in Public Relations. How'd you know?"

I probably know more about her than I should. I need to tone that down so I don't come off like a creep.

"I don't know," I say. "I did come back a few times. I think your brothers told me."

"Mm hm." She doesn't buy it. "You always did take an unnatural interest in my goings-on."

"Me? Nah."

"Yeah, you did, which I always found to be ironic because you were Mr. Important. Everyone wanted a piece of you. And yet you still had time to write those nasty messages to me."

"Come on ... they weren't nasty, they were cringey at best."

"Agree to disagree."

"We can laugh about it now though, right?"

She peers at me through a fringe of dark lashes, her expression somber as if to illustrate there's nothing funny about those messages—then or now.

Perspective is everything, I suppose.

"So what the hell's keeping you here anyway?" I steer the conversation back to the important stuff.

She inhales a sharp breath, her cheeks puffing out as she releases it. One thing I know about Stassi is that she famously doesn't show a ripple. Not unless someone *really* gets under her skin. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time she comes off as infuriatingly unbothered.

Before she can answer, we've arrived at our building.

I slide out of the backseat and offer her a hand to help her out. She

doesn't take it but winds up stumbling into me anyway.

Wrapping my hands around her waist, I steer her away from the curb so she doesn't trip, but she brushes me off.

"Don't," she says, palms splayed in the air, braced against nothing. "And don't follow me. You talked me into meeting up with you under false pretenses, so this is where our night ends. Goodnight, Mansfield."

I stand back as she marches toward the apartment in the far corner of the complex, to a door hidden among snow drifts and drooping pine boughs. From the corner of her eye, she glances back a few times, as if she's trying to gauge my next move.

"Just so you know, I'm not stalking you," I call after her. "Since I, uh, live here too."

Stopping to grab my key from my pocket, I glance at her door. It's so close I could probably spit on her front doormat if there wasn't a giant pine tree between us.

Nevertheless, I keep my distance per her request, biding my time as I make my way to my apartment. A minute later, I'm turning the key in my lock, just about to go inside, when I hear her scream.

Stassi

“No!” I shout into the icy air, holding the stub of the key in my hand. “No. No. No ...”

I pound on the door despite knowing it’s no use. Mad drove up to Bangor to visit family earlier today and she’s not coming home tonight. I look at the crumbling stoop, the welcome mat buried under gray slush, and imagine trying to sleep there. Because right now, that’s my best option—that or Ubering to my parents’ house, but showing up three sheets to the wind on a Sunday night would surely send tears to my mother’s eyes and earn me an hour-long lecture from my father and it’s far too late to sit through one of those.

Plus, they worry about me enough as it is. No need to add to their list.

I slap my palm on the door in defeat before pressing my forehead against its cold metal façade.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong?” It’s Alec—because of course it is.

My knight in shining armor must have heard my call and now he’s here to save the day.

I point my broken apartment key at him. “Please just ... go home. I can handle this. I don’t need your help.”

His expression falls, as if he's somewhat sad about me not needing his assistance.

I mean, technically I *do* need help.

I just don't want his.

"Shit. Your key..." He looks at jagged silver stub in the moonlight, then crouches to look at the lock. "What, did it break in there? How'd that happen?"

"Does it matter how it happened?" I feel bad for snapping at him when he's trying to help, but asking pointless questions isn't going to fix this situation.

Grabbing my phone, I dial the landlord's cell—which is supposed to be on him twenty-four-seven, though I'm lucky if Frank answers it once out of every seven or eight times I call.

Frank Sangelo has slums like this all over Maine. He buys the cheapest material possible to keep these places running, including but not limited to these flimsy keys. And while he's probably nestling all snug in his Kennebunkport bed, right next to the Bushs' compound, all of us tenants suffer.

The phone rings six times before Frank's signature gruff voicemail greeting picks up.

The sliver of hope I'd had when I made the call vanishes as quickly as the falling snow when it hits a patch of warm sidewalk. He's never around when I need him. Not that I expected him to make the trip up the Maine Turnpike at this hour to help me out, but maybe he could've called someone.

"Were you calling the landlord or the locksmith?" Alec's phone is in his hand, as if he's ready to make a call if needed. Why he won't take a hint is beyond me.

"Landlord."

"Want me to call a locksmith?"

"I'm sorry, do you remember living in Sapphire Shores? This isn't

Boston. Everything closes by nine. Remember?”

He stoops again in front of the broken key situation, as if he’s expecting to fix it with his own bare hands or even telepathy.

For a moment, I wonder how it must feel to have succeeded so much in life, at anything you put your mind to, that you think impossible situations aren’t beyond your solving.

He jiggles the knob, working so diligently at it that for a second, I hold my breath thinking do-no-wrong Alec might *actually* fix it.

But then he straightens. “Yeah, no. You need a locksmith.”

What I *need* is a place to stay tonight, until morning, when I can finally call the locksmith or Frank to get me into my place.

I deflate when I realize the only option ... is him.

No, there has to be a better one.

I gnaw on my cheek.

The neighbors behind us are not exactly friendly. Ted’s Pizza, across the lot, has been shuttered since the dinner rush ended. I don’t even have a car to curl up in.

I’m screwed.

Alec opens his mouth, and I know he’s going to suggest it.

But I’m not going to fall for that.

It’s bad enough that I fell for his promise of apologizing.

Stepping over to the window, I wade into the knee-high snow and try budging it up.

Funny, everything in Frank’s slums is falling apart, and yet his windows are virtually impenetrable. They don’t even shudder in their decades-old frame.

Melting snow seeps into my shoes, numbing my ankles as I shove against the window in vain. I’m already cold, tired, and hungry. Now I’m going to have wet feet too.

“Come on.” He tugs on my coat. “You can crash on my couch.”

Me? Alec? Alone? Together? In his apartment? After a night of drinking? I wish I could say it was him I didn't trust, but if I'm being completely honest ... it's me.

"Thanks, but no thanks," I say.

"What are you going to do? Freeze out here? It's supposed to get down to twenty-degrees overnight."

Freezing is preferable to staying anywhere near him. I don't even want to think about what might happen if I entertain that. I'm still undoubtedly intoxicated, and Alec must know it from the way I've been singing, dancing, and stumbling around like a girl without a care in the world (up until a few minutes ago).

There's no telling what I'll do if he takes me home with him.

"Last chance. Going once," he says, half-teasing though I know his offer is solid.

I stare at my locked door, wishing I could somehow teleport to the other side of it.

"Going twice ..." he adds.

Using all my weight, I plow into the metal barrier with all of my might.

The only thing that happens is that I think I broke my shoulder.

"Ow." I massage the flaming burst of soreness radiating through my muscles.

"Is that a yes?"

Sobriety begins to wash through me with each second that passes, but even half-drunk me knows sleeping outside tonight would be both stupid and dangerous.

Letting my arms fall at my sides, I say, "Fine."

I follow him to his apartment, and once again everything is happening quickly yet in slow motion at the same time. It's like I blinked and here we are, standing outside his paint-chipped door, his keys jangling in his hands and my heart hammering in my chest like it's been doing all night.

Once we're in, he holds the door for me and turns on the light. It's what one could expect from a bachelor pad that's just been moved into—a pile of boxes surrounding a camel-brown leather sofa, and of course, an extra-large flat screen TV already mounted on the wall. There's a Ted's pizza box on the floor, and the place smells vaguely like Ted's when I open it up in the early afternoon.

My attention zeroes in on the small, misshapen sofa where I'm going to be sleeping if I'm not dumb.

Please, don't let me be dumb tonight ...

"Want a tour?" he asks.

A tour is good.

A tour is neutral.

A tour is better than all the other things that could potentially happen.

He proceeds to take me on one, though it's kind of silly. The layout is a mirror image of mine—small living area, kitchen in back, steep staircase to the only bathroom and two cramped sleeping quarters.

As I stand in the doorway of his bedroom, admiring the lack of décor—it's all boxes and a single mattress with a beige sheet and a pile of blankets, on the floor—he simply lingers, silently watching me.

He doesn't try anything.

If anything, he keeps a conservative distance between us.

But Alec Mansfield being a respectable gentleman has to be an act.

"So ... that's it." He stops and shrugs like everything's totally normal, like he can't feel the tension that's been marinating between us all night.

I fully expected him to be making some kind of move on me by now, and the fact that he's not has me feeling ... some sort of way.

My skin prickles with both anticipation and trepidation before quickly cooling off. Maybe I pegged him all wrong tonight. Maybe we weren't flirting. Maybe he wanted to get revenge on me by conning me into a "date" and rejecting me the first chance he gets. Though I haven't exactly made a

move so he hasn't exactly rejected me yet ...

Per usual, I'm getting ahead of myself.

While I've never told a soul in my life, I used to have the biggest crush on Alec—despite the hell he put me through. And right now, with all the beer coursing through my veins and him looking at me like he's equal parts mystified by me and reining in his true intentions ... a bunch of hot, sweaty hate sex feels like it might scratch an itch I've had almost my entire life.

An itch I've never been able to reach.

Until now.

“Nice place you've got here,” I say, marking the first time I haven't snapped at him in the last ten minutes.

Alec sniffs. “You were always a terrible liar.”

He's right. These places are about ten years from being a heap of rubble, on the ground.

Sucking on the inside of his cheek, his eyes squint into his trademark sexy smolder. With that single move, I'm feeling things in places I didn't know existed, things I could never accurately articulate despite my robust vocabulary.

“I'm really glad you came tonight.” Alec's voice is whisper soft yet full of confidence. “Half of me expected you to ghost me.”

“I should have.”

He chuffs.

“For the record, I only came because you promised closure,” I add. “If anything, I feel like you sliced open an old wound instead.”

Alec's head cocks to the side and I'm fully expecting him to make some kind of joke about being a doctor and stitching me up.

Only he lets that ship sail.

“I'm sorry,” he says.

“For what?” I ask, because any apology worth its weight should be specific.

“I’m sorry you mistook my desperate grabs for your attention for cruelty.”

His apology renders me speechless as he closes the space between us.

All he wanted my attention?

That’s all it was?

Why?

He could have any girl he wanted in school—and he did.

He had them all plus several from the next towns over.

“You seriously expect me to believe you were picking on me because you secretly liked me?” I let out a haughty laugh. “That’s the most cliché thing I’ve ever heard. If you wanted me, you could’ve just said so.”

“You didn’t want me though.”

If he only knew ...

“I figured any attention from you was better than none,” he adds. “And you’re right. It’s cliché. Tale as old as time. The schoolyard bully picking on his crush.”

Those words coming from that mouth is enough to suck the air from my lungs.

I was his crush?

I thought our dynamics were more along the lines of a cat torturing a mouse for the sheer enjoyment of it. He was a hot jock and I was a nerd. Had I been another guy, he’d have surely shoved me into a locker or given me a swirly. How could I have ever guessed in a billion years that he was *crushing* on me?

We’re mere inches apart now, his eyes scanning my every feature as if determining which part of me he wants to sample first.

Reaching out, he brushes a strand of hair from my shoulder, which sends an electric spray of goose bumps down the side of my neck.

“What are we doing?” He traces his fingers up my cheek, and every atom in my body stands at attention.

The fatigue settling into my icy bones earlier has now dissipated.

The fading warmth of his fingertips lingers long after it abandons my skin, like each one of them is branding me forever, and his emerald eyes are ablaze as his mouth moves nearer to mine.

Oh my god ... this is happening.

And the worst part is—I want it to.

I'm almost positive I willed this into existence because it's all I could think about from the minute I laid eyes on him from the backseat of my Uber.

His full mouth presses flat before it reaches mine, and I can tell something is warring inside him.

“Your brothers,” he begins, “if they had any idea you were here with me right now, if they had any idea the things I want to do to you ...”

He leans closer, so close that there's no way to mistake his intention. And then he hovers there, giving me a second to say no, that I don't want it, but I'm so consumed by this moment anything I could possibly think or say is stuck in my tongue-tied mouth.

Without another word, Alec closes the distance between us, crushing my lips with his. My body melts into his as he grabs my waist and pulls me against him. I'm powerless. A rag dolls. A mess of jumbled thoughts and emotions that make perfect sense and no sense at the same time.

Light and heat ignite all over my body. His mouth is soft, inviting, but his kisses are anything but. Tangling his hands in my hair, he tips my head back further and commands my kisses, no hesitation at all. I try to gasp, but he catches it and holds me still for his onslaught.

My entire body quakes.

Our eyes hold and he claims my lips on his terms—harder, unrelenting, and unapologetic.

My body responds by becoming even more liquescent against his, and he steers us closer to the mattress.

We fall down in a heap of fevered kisses and greedy, roaming hands.

Hiking my dress up, I straddle him. He sits forward and lets me pull off his t-shirt. That tattoo is bared to me—a caduceus, of course, with a little heart. I feast my gaze on his strong torso, settling at the V of his waist, a dark treasure trove that disappears under his waistband. I've never wanted to taste anything as badly as I want to taste him.

Alec grips the hem of my dress, lifting the entire thing over my head as I shake out my hair, unclasp my bra, and cast it aside. It lands on a cardboard box somewhere in the dark depths of the space that envelops us.

He cups my breasts, each of them fitting generously in his palms. "Jesus, Stassi."

I pull myself against his bare chest, warm skin against warm skin, and he groans, low in his throat.

My thoughts exactly.

His hardness presses through his dress slacks, grazing my core, emboldening me. Grinding into him, I run my hands down his chest. He retaliates by thrusting his tongue inside my mouth.

Once upon a time, we warred with words and silence.

Tonight, however, our bodies are doing all the talking.

His deft hands glide down my sides as he makes his way to my ass, grabbing a generous handful before slipping his fingers under the lace edges of my panties.

I open my mouth to moan in anticipation, but it all gets lost when he slips a finger inside me.

A shuddery breath escapes my lips.

I can't remember the last time I had a man inside me, but this isn't exactly the comeback I could have ever predicted.

"I can really feel how much you hate me," he says into my ear, his voice cocky and teasing.

If you'd asked me yesterday how I felt about Alec, I'd have said without a doubt he's my least favorite person to ever exist on this planet (after Hitler

and Genghis Khan and the like, of course).

But if you asked me right now? I'd probably mutter something nonsensical because this man has the Midas Touch and my body is betraying every hate-filled thought I've ever held about this man.

In fact, it's practically screaming his name.

By the time he glides another finger inside me, I'm doubled over, moaning, spreading my legs over him to give him better access, grinding against his hand, desperate for more. He holds me there, his eyes locked on mine, pumping his fingers in and out of me, until I lose all reason and my thighs tremble, and I'm breathlessly begging him not to stop.

He lifts a free finger to my mouth, tracing it along the pillow of my lower lip, so I let my tongue slip out to taste it. God, he tastes good—like beer and salt and a cocktail of feelings that have no business being in the same room together.

He leaves his finger there so I suck it in.

He watches, mesmerized.

Between my legs, he adds the pad of his thumb, letting it graze my clit, stroking it slowly.

I throw myself against him, fingers digging into his muscled flesh, grabbing on for dear life as I lose every last ounce of control I so foolishly thought I had.

He ducks his head, his warm mouth skimming my hairline and his breath hot on the top of my head. Dipping his head lower, he presses a kiss against my neck, nuzzling his way up until he gently bites my earlobe.

Returning to my mouth, he kisses me all over again.

Aftershocks ripple through me, my clit is swollen and sensitive, but my body craves more. I reach for his pants, unbuckling them, sliding the zipper down and tugging his slacks over the magnificent curve of his perfect ass. I take in his angled V and the little path of dark brown hair, pointing its way downward. Tugging down his silk boxers, his hardness springs free, ready

and erect in my hand.

He's hard as a rock.

For *me* ...

His girth fills my entire palm and then some. I'd heard rumors of his size, but I never believed them. Lots of guys say lots of stupid things in high school. But apparently these rumors were true.

"You sure you want this?" he asks, though it's almost not quite a question, like his ego wants to hear me say I want him. Correction—*needs* to hear me say it.

"Want it? Yeah." I wrap my hand around it, pumping its generous length. "But can I take it? That remains to be seen ..."

Every man likes to hear how big he is, but in this case, I'm not trying to flirt.

Okay, maybe I am.

A little.

But I'm also being honest, because holy shit.

His eyes glint, like a man getting his cock and ego stroked at the same time. I'm sure every woman he's been with must have told him the same, because it's undeniable. He's probably got an entire mental catalog filled with reactions he's committed to memory over the years.

I'm expecting him to have some sort of witty comeback, only instead he reaches for his pocketed wallet and retrieves a condom, which he tears open with his teeth—all the while never taking his hungry eyes off of me for a flicker of a second.

One arm still around my waist, he slips the condom on one-handed, then lifts me up, cradling my ass in his arms. I wrap my legs around him, feeling the massive hardness pressed between us.

Dragging his lips to mine, his tongue delves into my mouth as I buck up against him, begging for more as he plunges his tongue into my mouth again and again.

I wrap my arms around his neck, tighter, letting out a shuddery gasp the second his tip touches my entrance. Tilting my pelvis forward, I draw in a breath in anticipation.

He tests, once or twice, finding just the right spot before plunging in, hard, at once, tearing an animal growl from my throat.

Holy mother of God.

Every muscle in my body tenses.

The burning of pressure of his sheer size is quickly followed with a flood of relief like nothing I've ever felt before.

My head falls back as my body accepts his over and over. He holds me up as he pushes deeper into me and then begins a slow, maddening thrust, all perfectly controlled. He doesn't seem nearly as lost in this experience as I am. He's focused, present, unnervingly so. Almost as if he doesn't want to forget a single detail—meanwhile, I'm ninety-percent sure I'm passed out drunk and dreaming. Any minute now, I'm going to snap awake and find myself leaning, shivering against the frozen metal of my locked apartment door.

Only the undulations of feverish pleasure ravaging my body couldn't possibly be a dream.

They're unapologetically intense, and I feel them everywhere, all at once.

It's only moments before I feel myself tightening around him. The tight stretch makes my orgasm retreat for a moment, but when his thumb begins to rub my clit again, it comes back with a vengeance. I press a muffled scream against his neck as I clench around him, and my nails sink into his shoulders as ripples of earth-shattering gratification explode between my thighs.

But he's not even close to done.

Already, I've come twice, but maybe he's looking for a world record, here.

In his moonlight drenched bedroom, Alec looks like an animal, his face rigid with raw concentration as he plunges his hardness inside me, slow,

steady, deep, hard.

“You feel so fucking good,” he breathes against my ear. “Come for me again.”

Even if I wanted to—and I do—don’t know that I physically can ...

But even as I’m thinking that, I feel the fire building inside me again.

The tension is overwhelming, sensations bursting through me, making it impossible to hold them back another second. I fall against him, crushing my mouth to his and kissing him with abandon, the world going dark and blurry around me.

He rips his mouth free, grabs my hips, and stares into my eyes with those enchanted, Oz-like eyes of his.

“There you go,” he growls, pulling my hips into his and pushing deeper inside me. “Come with me.”

I meet his thrust with an explosion of pleasure, my eyes rolling back to the sky, fireworks exploding behind my eyelids. More screaming. The only indication that he’s enjoying himself comes when he lets out a low groan and releases inside me, gripping my hips and tensing around me, the veins in his neck and arms tense and throbbing.

“My God ...” The words are a soft breath, more to himself than to me.

My scream fades to a whimper, and just when I think he’s done, he rocks into me, stroking my swollen clit in new ways and I’m coming *again*. This time, I can’t find the voice to scream anymore. I let the smaller ripples lap over me, like a stream, and moan in absolute, blissful pleasure.

I collapse against his chest, my body heaving. I feel like a completely boneless mass as I settle into him, resting my cheek on his collarbone as small aftershocks course through my body.

“Holy shit,” I say, shell-shocked. I’ve come before, sure. Even twice and three times in a single experience. But this man has basically turned me into an orgasm-machine, where I don’t think I can stop this, even if I tried.

It occurs to me in that haze of lust that I’ve broken through a barrier and

can never go back again: I've had sex with Alec Mansfield.

I wanted closure tonight.

What I got was so much more ...

Either way, it's over now.

We can't do this again.

Except ... the way he's looking at me makes me think it's not even close to being over. The insatiable yet curious intensity washing over his handsome face suggests we might just

be getting started—at least in his mind.

He doesn't let me go. He lifts me, still impaled on his cock, and turns me over, licking at my throat, igniting another round of ... hate sex.

I'll worry about the consequences tomorrow.

6

Alec

That was the most vivid, fucked-up dream I've ever had.

That's what I'm thinking as I roll over on my mattress, my eyelids pried open by the morning sun slashing through the blinds.

Rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands, I try to wake up enough to figure out what time it is. It's got to be late morning, and I don't remember setting my alarm last night. I said I'd go into the ER early today, covering for another doctor.

I reach out a hand, groping on the hardwood floor. That's where I usually leave my phone when I go to bed.

Only it's not there.

I haven't been at the Maine Medical Center long enough to be able to get away with being late. I might have charmed Dr. Burns during the interview, but he's not the kind of guy who'll take any kind of unprofessionalism from a new hire.

I sit up in bed, and at the same time, I hear something—a female groan from somewhere underneath the sheets beside me.

Unless that wasn't a dream.

Of course it was. It had to have been. No way in hell could that have

happened.

But as I push aside the sheets and spot the waterfall of blonde hair, it all comes back to me.

It *did* happen.

Despite it feeling like some kind of fever dream, too good to have been real—it was.

“Stassi?” I say, groggy.

She lets out another little mumble and rolls on her side.

I sit there, slack-jawed, every last touch, stroke, kiss cycling through my mind—all of those things, done with Anastasia Hutton.

My dream girl.

Clarification—my dream girl who has forever hated everything about me.

Our clothes are in random piles around the room, draped over boxes, tossed on the floor. I locate my slacks on the ground. A suspiciously rectangular bulge tells me I never bothered to take my phone out of the pocket—rare for me. Reaching, I grab it and check the time.

It’s 8:30 AM. and my shift starts in half an hour.

“Shit,” I mumble.

I leave the bed in a whirlwind, grab a quick shower, and throw on a fresh change of clothes. When I get back, Stassi’s still there, sleeping peacefully. She might have said she hated me last night. Over and over again, if I remember correctly. But right now, she looks so much like an angel. I don’t want to wake her. Selfishly, I want to hold onto this good feeling as long as I can. Once she’s up, there’ll be no telling how she’s going to react. For all I know, she’ll be sucker punched with regret for taking things too far. But in my defense, it wasn’t like I planned any of it. All I wanted was to see her gorgeous face, catch up, and offer a long-overdue apology.

I might have been a son of a bitch in the past, but my intentions were originally pure.

Regardless, I wasn’t going to leave her last night to sleep outside in the

cold, so I did the right thing by inviting her in. What happened after that was never on the docket, but for some reason, we both seemed intent on making it so.

I wanted it.

She wanted it.

And it was fucking magic.

Best night of my life, if I'm being honest.

The kind of night a man would sell his soul for just to experience all over again.

Sober, hung-over Stassi might feel differently though.

Leaving her sound asleep and buried under my covers, I head out. It's only when I get outside and see an empty parking spot that I realize I left my car in the parking garage.

Icy wind slaps my face as I stare at the spot where my wheels should be.

Yanking my gloves off, I grab my phone and order yet another Uber.

Pretty sure I'm keeping them in business around here now.

While I'm waiting, I check my watch every two seconds—I'm already late. Then I think about what's upstairs in my bed. Every fiber of my body wants nothing more than to strip down and crawl back in, next to her, naked, our legs intertwined as we inhale the soft, heady scent of arousal and skin.

I climb the steps and quietly head inside to check on her, greedily wanting one more fix of this image in case it never happens again—because odds are it won't.

Stassi hasn't moved. She looks so comfortable, lying there, dreaming.

I pile her purse and clothes on the edge of the bed, find a piece of mail on the counter, and scribble her a note on the back of the envelope:

Stassi,

No roses are red in this message. But last night was a shock.

Anyway, here's the number of someone who can fix your lock.

Sorry, couldn't help myself.

Yours Cruelly,

A

P.S. Had to go to work—see you later?

I look up the number of the nearest locksmith with the best ratings and include it on the bottom of the note, then fold it and place it on top of her clothes.

Outside, a car honks.

Stassi doesn't stir.

I jog downstairs and climb into my waiting Uber.

“You having a good morning so far?” I attempt to make small talk with the bristly older man in a fedora who drives with his hands at ten and two and his speedometer clocking five miles below the speed limit at all times.

I know I am ...

He mumbles something I can't make out with the heat on full blast.

I lean back, close my eyes, and replay last night like a movie in my head—anything to keep from thinking about the wrath that awaits me once I show up late.

The great thing about the ER during the day is that it's dead. Overnight, they might get a couple of ODs, a suspected heart attack, an old lady with symptoms of pneumonia. Things like that are typical. But those patients are usually resting comfortably when I arrive, waiting to be transferred to another floor.

Today, though, the ER is so quiet that no one notices I'm twenty minutes late.

Damn. With all this luck I'm having lately, maybe I should buy a lottery ticket?

“Good morning,” Dr. Burns greets me. He's coming out of triage when I arrive. “Slow shift so far. Hope you brought your Sudoku.”

Dr. Burns is a fixture at Maine Medical Center. He's in his early sixties, on the verge of retirement, and he's one of the board members who

interviewed me for the position.

I'm relieved he doesn't mention my tardiness.

As he briefs me, I think back to the way Stassi decorated my bedroom, lying there, tangled in sheets that snaked around her creamy thighs.

I'm going to need something a lot stronger than Sudoku to occupy my mind during these next twelve hours.

If I'm lucky, maybe someone will come in with a hard case. Nothing life-threatening of course, but something with such a strange set of symptoms that it'll take a lot of mental focus and a handful of consults to narrow it down. Nothing like a good medical mystery to occupy a busy mind.

Except my first patient of the day is a five-year-old little boy named Timmy who shoved a Lego up his nose. After about fifteen minutes of excitement, encouraging the boy to snort it out, I fill out the discharge forms and my mind goes right back to what's sprawled out in my bed.

Though, as I check my watch, I realize she's probably not even there anymore. It's after noon. She probably got my note by now and vacated my apartment. I bet she even had the locksmith do his magic, and now she's back at her place.

Stealing a glance at my phone. I check the app for any messages.

Nothing.

She's either A—regretting the whole thing or B—pissed at me.

Or C—all of the above.

Probably C.

But I didn't do anything she didn't want me to do. She'd looked up at me with those puppy dog eyes, begging for me to take her.

I did what any guy would've done when the woman of his dreams is pleading for him to extinguish the ache between her thighs ... though I probably didn't do what a guy who was best friends with her brothers *should* have done.

By the time my first break rolls around, I escape the confines of the

hospital and head to the sandwich shop on the corner. I'm paying for my turkey hoagie when a familiar voice behind me says, "Well, look what the tide washed in."

I scan the line behind me, searching for a familiar face. And I find it. In the form of Cooper Hutton—Stassi's oldest brother.

My childhood best friend.

Playing it cool, I collect my change and tuck my sandwich under my arm before sidling up to him and giving him one of our old handshake-high-five combinations. Funny how easy it is to pretend that barely a day has passed since we last talked, even though it's been years. I was always worried he'd written me off for not keeping in touch, but judging by the grin on his face, he seems happy to see me.

If he knew what I did to his sister last night, that grin would be flipping upside down faster than I'd have time to dodge his famous left hook.

I never meant to drift apart from the Hutton brothers, but unfortunately that sort of thing is all too common after high school when everyone goes their separate ways and gets lost in the busyness of their new lives and routines.

"Hey, what are you doing here, man?" I say. "Thought I heard you were up in Lewiston?"

Cooper's looking a lot different than I remember. He traded in the clean-cut hockey player look for full-on lumberjack. He's older, hairier, his long, sandy-blond hair stuffed under a wool beanie, a full beard practically touching his chest. Heavy flannel, faded jeans, work boots.

He nods, his face a hardened mask. "Had some business down here. Asses to kick. You know."

I stiffen. Is my ass on that list?

He couldn't know.

Not already.

Could he?

He and Stassi were close, but I can't imagine they're so close she'd call him up two seconds after I left her in my bed and give him a full rundown. *She* was the one who said she didn't want them to know.

Cautiously, I venture, "Oh, yeah?"

He reaches down to grab a bag of jalapeño chips. I notice he's put on a few pounds since our high school days. Back then, the three of us used to work in sync on the ice, like we shared a mind. I sure as hell hope we don't share a mind anymore ...

"Yeah. Had to drop off a shipment." He runs his hand along the side of his jaw before stroking his beard. "Aidan's going to go apeshit when I tell him you're in town. What are you even doing here anyway? Your folks moved, what, like ten years ago or something?"

"Just moved back. I'm working in the ER."

He finally grins, and I relax. "No kidding? When were you going to tell us, asshole? You got a place?"

"Yeah. By Ted's."

His eyes go wide. "The pizza place? You know, that's where Stassi lives."

I play dumb. "Really? Small world."

"You haven't seen her around?" He arches a single brow, skeptical.

Avoiding the question, I say, "I just moved in four days ago."

"Oh, yeah." He claps me on the back. "Big doctor and all. You're probably busy as hell. But we need to get together. Soon. Go out for some brews. Maybe do some lobstering. Sound good?"

I nod, wondering how far he'd kick my ass if he knew what I'd done last night, that I was balls deep in his sister and she was loving every minute of it.

"Yeah, of course," I say.

We trade numbers, though it turns out, I already had his. It hasn't changed. And I'm sure he had mine. There just didn't seem to be any reason to communicate when we were in totally different universes.

“I’ll definitely give you a call, man,” he says as he walks to the front of the line to order.

“Take care,” I say.

“Rah, Panthers!” He suddenly shouts from the other side of the small place, turning the heads of every person in line. He pumps his fist in the air, and I respond with my own half-hearted pump. Haven’t heard our fight cheer in ages. Didn’t think I’d ever hear it again, honestly.

After Maine Medical Center made me a job offer I couldn’t refuse—agreeing to pay off all of my loans after five years of employment, I fully intended on laying low, not making any waves, and biding my time until the next thing came along—whatever that would be.

I thought I’d closed the old chapter of my life.

But four days in, it seems we’re already blowing the book wide open—or are we penning a surprise sequel? Either way, I’m counting down the hours until I can find out what comes next.

Stassi

It takes me a full minute to realize where I am.

As the cottage cheese ceiling above me comes into focus, I realize the rust-colored water stains on it are different than the ones in my bedroom.

Then I realize the mattress is a whole lot softer than I'm used to.

The covers feel different too—lighter, airier.

Blinking, I sit up and notice the plethora of sealed cardboard boxes.

Leaning against the wall is a wooden case filled with a collection of hockey pucks and some old Panthers memorabilia.

Alec ...

It all comes crashing back. The drinks. The Uber ride. The stupid broken lock. The panic of having nowhere to stay. And Alec, my knight in shining armor, coming to the rescue, saying I could sleep on his couch—only that's not what I did.

I slept with Alec Mansfield.

Who is ... gone?

But that's exactly something he'd do—deposit his seed then jet off before the bed can get too warm.

God. I hate him. And I'm an idiot.

“Alec?” I call out. “You home?”

I scan my dim surroundings. He’s not in bed. Not anywhere in the room—unless he’s hiding in one of the boxes. Knowing how fond he was of pulling cruel, immature jokes on me, I can’t even put that past him.

I listen for footfalls, shifting floorboards outside the room. Nothing. And I doubt someone like Alec, big old ego-from-hell Alec, is downstairs making me coffee and eggs and bacon.

I inhale deeply, just to make sure, exhaling without so much as a whiff of breakfast being prepared. All that fills my lungs is the faded scent of soap, which means he probably got ready and left for work while I was sleeping.

The fact that he couldn’t be bothered to say goodbye speaks volumes.

What the hell was I thinking?

Why didn’t I just call my parents to pick me up and stay at their place?

Why didn’t I call Tenley?

Had I not swallowed my pride and taken the easiest way out of my problem, none of this would’ve happened.

Then I think of the way Alec had kissed me, the way he’d electrified my body in ways I didn’t know it was capable of—and all those prickles from last night come back in full force, making me shiver with the thrill of it.

It was good, better, even than sex with Jonathan, which rarely disappointed.

Sex with Mason had been good too—mature, the romantic, rose petals on the bed, wine and firelight kind of sex. It was a bit over the top, but it still felt special even if it wasn’t mind-blowing.

But until now, I’ve never known sex like this. I didn’t know I could come so many times in one night. My body aches, but in a delicious sort of way. This was everything—raw, emotional, scorching hot.

If only it hadn’t been with Mr. Yours Cruelly, of *all* people.

My heart jams in my throat as I think of Cooper and Aidan.

Then I think of Alec, and that wicked gaze he fixed on me as he plunged

inside me, again ... and again. Another shiver of excitement starts to course its way through my nerves, but I hug myself, stifling it.

This was just a one-off. An alcohol-fueled mistake.

I scoot toward the edge of the mattress and find that my clothes are piled neatly at my feet.

There's a rectangular envelope set atop them.

I reach for it, but hesitate.

I've seen this kind of thing before. It was never just texts or emails with Alec. After a while, "Yours Cruelly" became bolder, more brazen, changing it up every so often. Maybe he was growing bored or maybe he wanted to keep me on my toes for his own sick reasons.

I never asked.

Back in high school, sometimes I'd find these little slips of paper in my locker. Other times, I'd find them stuffed under my bedroom door. Once I found one stuck in the basket of my old dusty bicycle.

Only now I freeze, and my fingers shake—much like I used to do.

I don't have a good track record where notes from Alec are concerned.

Sometimes they were funny, other times needlessly cruel. Maybe I should have crumpled them and tossed them in the trash without so much as thinking about reading them, but for whatever reason I never could.

I always wanted to know.

Perhaps, deep down, for some screwed-up reason, I was hoping that one of those notes would finally be a nice one, that the old cliché of the boy bullying the girl at the schoolyard because he liked her ... would be us.

I was always wrong though.

His notes were heartless until the very end.

Deciding I still need to know, especially after last night, I reach forward and scan it, quick, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Stassi,

No roses are red in this message. But last night was a shock.

Anyway, here's the number of someone who can fix your lock.

Sorry, couldn't help myself.

Yours Cruelly,

A

P.S. Had to go to work—see you later?

The tension death gripping my middle softens, and I exhale softly.

That was ... refreshingly kind.

And damn it, it's even charming.

I was wrong about him bouncing as soon as the sun came up—because at least he took the time to find me a number for a locksmith. If he were just using me, I don't think he'd go to that kind of effort—unless he just wanted to get me out of his apartment.

That's the thing with Alec—you never freaking know what he's thinking.

Before I can give the man too much credit for turning over a new leaf, I get dressed and call the locksmith. Then, as I wait—I convince myself it's because I have nothing better to do, but I'd probably do it even if I was pressed for time—I stroll casually around his apartment, peeking in opened boxes and checking out the things he's already unpacked.

It's been a decade since I saw him last, and I'm curious to see the kind of person Alec Mansfield has become in that time.

By the time I'm finished, I determine Alec is ... a typical guy. He's been in town four days, and yet the only things he's unpacked is a few articles of clothing, some toiletries, his laptop, and his television set. And yes, that is a tire in the corner of his room—God only knows why—and he does have a hockey puck collection. I bet he uses them as coasters, like my brothers do. He clearly hasn't used the kitchen yet—his fridge is empty save for a couple of Chinese takeout containers and a bottle of coffee creamer. His trash is full of junk mail.

A couple of framed pictures are propped up next to the sofa, one of which is a photograph of him on some white-sand beach, tanned, muscles rippling. I

return it to its place and glance at the next—his diploma, from Wake Forest Medical School.

Never in a million years did I expect Alec to be a doctor of all things.

I'd be lying if I said it wasn't sexy—the idea of this handsome, muscled guy saving lives.

Though whether he's doing it for his ego or out of the kindness of his heart remains to be known.

Moving on, there's one box open, full of books. I pull on a flap and notice his high school yearbook. My brothers have the same copy, all the Alec pages probably wrinkled in places from all the time I spent drooling over him in secret.

The spine cracks when I open it, as if Alec has rarely taken the time to reminisce about his good old days. But I know this book by heart. Almost every page has him on it—captain of the hockey and rugby teams, homecoming king, prom king, class president, voted most likely to succeed ...

The smile in his senior photograph is so confident it practically leaps off the page, all while those emerald eyes grab you and pull you in.

Everyone loved him.

Everyone wanted to be him—or at least bask in his limelight.

Even now, I can't understand how it was possible to feel two entirely different emotions about a person. I adored him like all of his groupies, though I'd never let on. Knowing he was the one sending me those messages ... it both thrilled me and made me despise him more and more.

That's probably why I have a multitude of stomach-turning emotions swirling in my gut—disgust and raw, carnal, animalistic need.

Maybe it's because I'm a grown woman now.

I feel like I can stand up for myself to anyone, which makes a dalliance with him easier to stomach no matter which way it goes. Then again, maybe I'm making excuses for myself, trying to justify last night's piss-poor, beer-

driven decision.

I came back to Sapphire Shores to avoid drama or interpersonal conflict of any kind.

The last man drained me of every last damn I had to give ... except for one, apparently.

And I gave it to Alec the first chance I got.

I turn to the underclassmen section and look at the photograph of myself, cringing as I recall those old glasses that took up most of my face. I used to think they made me look serious, intelligent. Then there was my metal-mouth. While most kids got their braces off after two years, I had the privilege of having mine for three and a half years to the day. And what was with those bangs and that triangle-shaped hair? Why didn't anyone tell me how ridiculous I looked?

Oh, wait—Yours Cruelly told me.

I got my act together by sophomore year, which was when I started dating Jonathan.

But I still can't believe my mother let me out of the house looking like that.

I'm so busy paging through the rest of the yearbook that I don't even hear the locksmith truck pull up. The next thing I know, my phone's ringing.

"I'm here," the guy barks when I answer.

"I'll be right out."

I feel free as I leave Alec's place, silently promising myself I'm never going back there again. Even if it was the most fun I've ever had in a man's bed before, no good can come of us going for a reprise. Our past aside, I clearly have horrible taste when it comes to men and he's got heartbreak written all over his handsome face.

I skip down the stairs to find a short, grizzled old man in a skull cap at the door, already inspecting the broken lock. His pants are low on his hips, exposing the gray band of his Hanes underwear as well as an inch of his butt

crack.

I show him the key, still on my keychain. “It just broke right off.”

He’s less than amused by my story, just lets out a *humph* and gets to work.

It’s got to be single-digits out, but with nowhere to go, I sit freezing on the front stoop of Alec’s place while the locksmith does his thing. I check the time, knowing that I’m supposed to start at Ted’s at two. By one, I’m getting a little nervous. As much as I’ve been airing out here in the cold, I still smell like Alec. I can feel him on me, which is not helping me in my quest to forget about him.

I *desperately* need a shower.

“How much longer do you think it’ll be?” I ask the man nicely as he stalks to his truck.

He grunts and throws open the door to his vehicle. “Got to go back to the shop to get a part.”

How does he not have all the parts in his truck?

I sigh as he drives away, then look at my fingers which are turning a pale shade of purple. Frostbite?

I prefer having to go to the ER—for obvious reasons. So with my proverbial tail between my legs, I go back inside Alec’s place and sit on the edge of the couch, trying to ignore the memories of last night that flash back every time I look around.

It even smells like us.

In my young naivety, I used to fantasize about kissing Alec. I used to dream of being in bed with him, skin against skin, and how amazing it would be. I wanted him to stare into my eyes like I was the only woman on Earth, whispering words of love.

Alec didn’t whisper words of love or stare at me like I was a precious jewel, but he still managed to blow every one of those fantasies out of the water. Easily.

I should've known he'd be good at sex. He's good at everything he puts his mind to. Probably things he *doesn't* put his mind to, too. I wonder if he even tried to make me feel good, or if it just *happened*, because he's this miraculous creature who turns everything he touches to gold.

Then I wonder why I'm even thinking about it.

My phone buzzes, and I fumble excitedly for it, happy to have something to take my mind off Alec.

It's a message from my brother.

Cooper: *Guess who I ran into in downtown Portland today? Alec Mansfield. Remember him?*

My stomach drops.

Of course that had to happen. Cooper asking whether I remember Alec shows just how clueless he was about his best friend's tormenting of me. My brothers used to give guys hell whenever they showed any kind interest in me. But when it was Alec tearing my heart to shreds? They were fine with it. That or they had no idea.

Stassi: *Vaguely.*

Cooper: *Here's the crazy part. He told me he lives in the same complex as you.*

Now I can't help but wonder what else Alec shared. Did he tell him that he saw me? That we spoke? That we went out for drinks? That I wound up in bed with him? It's impossible to know if Cooper's bluffing and I'm not about to test him.

Then again, if Cooper knew anything, he wouldn't simply be texting me.

He'd be here now, in my face, asking me what the hell I thought I was doing.

Meanwhile, Alec Mansfield would likely be nothing more than a human-shaped stain on a Portland sidewalk.

I gnaw on my lip, trying to think of a good response. Nothing comes.

Stassi: *Oh. Small world, I guess.*

I return outside when I spot the locksmith pulling up. Ten minutes later, I'm the proud recipient of a shiny new key that actually works.

"Perfect, thank you so much." I wiggle the doorknob a little as he hands me the second set of keys. "You can send the bill to my landlord. His name is ___"

"I need a credit card. We don't send bills. Everything's due at the time of service." He points to his truck, where that exact line is clearly printed below the logo. Who the hell includes the fine print as part of their logo?

"Oh, okay, um." I reach into my purse and pull out my long-suffering card, hoping there's room on it for the hundred bucks and change that this is costing. I guess I'll just have the landlord reimburse me.

After a nerve-wracking minute or so, the card goes through.

I take the bill and go inside, rushing upstairs and taking the hottest shower I can in the few minutes I have before my shift.

Afterwards, as I'm taking a photo of the bill to send to the landlord, my phone buzzes with a notification from the dating app:

BogeyLuvr: *Hey, wuzzup.*

I stare at it. There are all sorts of things wrong with it. First, I think a bogey might be something in golf, but I can't help seeing *boogie*, as in *booger*, and that he loves them—which is gross. And *wuzzup*? Is that supposed to be short for what's up or is he throwing back to that old Budweiser commercial from decades ago? In my humble opinion, it's worth the extra effort to not sound like an idiot who has no grasp of the English language or at the very least, modern pop culture.

Nothing bodes well for this conversation.

Actually, nothing bodes well for the app as a whole.

So far it's been nothing but guys like this ... save for one ... which I've already established was a huge, raging mistake.

As much as I've beat myself up over it all morning, I take a second to remind myself about that closure I was seeking.

Isn't that what I wanted?

And isn't that exactly what I got?

I thought it would feel different—like an exclamation point or a period and not three dots and a whole bunch of question marks.

Holding my finger on the app, I wait for the icon to start shaking, and then I press “delete.”

With that done, I let out a sigh of relief and go into the bathroom to finish getting ready for my shift.

That terrible pizza's not going to make itself.

Alec

“I think you’re looking good. Nothing broken, which is a good sign. A little whiplash. Pain might be worse tomorrow, so take some Tylenol if you need to.”

I’m filling out the umpteenth discharge papers at the tail end of my twelve-hour shift, my eyes so tired I’m seeing double. At this point, I’m running on fumes.

Twenty-nine minutes, and I can blow this joint.

“You mean, you’re not going to admit me?” My patient frowns, crossing her arms. “The last time I had a car accident, I was admitted for twelve days.”

I nod and check her chart on the tablet. No previous files come up. “I see. When was that?”

“1973.”

“Ah, things are a little different now. Medicine has changed. There’s not much more we can do for you in here. Most people would be more comfortable in their own home, so—”

“I know what this is. It’s *fraud*. I know your type. You just want to collect my insurance money and send me on my way.” She wags an aged-spotted, waxy finger at me. “Are you even a real doctor? You look young.”

“I can assure you, ma’am, I’m a *real* doctor,” I say, not looking up from the paper, wondering if she’s going to ask me for a certified copy of my medical license next. Or perhaps a photo of me in my cap and gown, graduating from medical school.

“Well, I demand to see your superior. I want to be admitted.” She scoots back slowly, making herself comfortable on the cot. Unfortunately I know this type of patient all too well. If you don’t give them what they want, they’ll slap a slew of one-star reviews on every doctor website they can find on Google and then they’ll call every supervisor and administrator, working their way up the chain until they finally feel validated.

“Fine.” It’s not like she’s demanding controlled substances. “I’ll send my colleague in for a second opinion.”

I head out, telling one of the nurses, Valery, to have Dr. Burns stop in for a consult—not that he’ll tell her any different. The nurse, who is probably fifty, giggles like a schoolgirl and touches my arm flirtatiously.

“What’s that, Dr. Mansfield? You losing your charm already?” She winks, keeping a straight face as she sips from the straw of a pink Stanley tumbler.

Smirking, I say. “You tell me.”

I wink at her and stride down the hall, checking on patients. The females all straighten their gowns and mess with their hair as I enter their rooms. It’s something I’ve grown used to, though it never fails to amuse me.

It’s ironic—someone in their darkest hour can still muster up the strength to notice me, but Stassi’s never been able to give me two seconds of her attention (until last night). It might have taken twenty years, but it’s a win worth celebrating, all things considered.

In fact, I should thank her. I’m tired as hell from not sleeping last night, but the sheer thought of her and all the things we did has been keeping me going. I can’t stop thinking of getting home and seeing her again—even if she slams her door in my face. Even if I know she still probably hates

everything about me. The thought alone of seeing her in passing gives me *life*.

What I wouldn't give for one more night with her.

A sequel.

A grand finale.

My pulse kicks up every time I think of all the ways this could play out.

Running into Cooper should've scared me senseless, but now that I've had Stassi, now that I've had a taste—I want more. And that craving is overpowering any good sense I have.

Growing up, Cooper and Aidan used to give so much shit to any guy who so much as expressed an ounce of interest in their little sister. Dickhead Jonathan was the only one they let slip through, for reasons I'll never understand.

Over the years, I watched them shove guys into lockers and trashcans, key their cars, or corner them in the bathroom, towering over them with menacing stares and profanity-laced threats. Hell, I even joined in a time or two—for reasons of my own. Mostly they were guys I'd caught checking Stassi out or talking like they had a chance in hell with her.

I'd like to think Aidan and Cooper are different now.

We're all adults ...

But I've been gone a long time.

While *I've* changed, I can't know for sure if they have.

The nurses sneak glances at me as I walk to the locker room to hang up my white coat. There's one in particular, Cherry—yeah, that's her government name—who has been begging, giving me bedroom eyes since my first day here. She's cute, giving me a dimpled grin as she takes her purse out of her locker and slips into an oversize pink puffer jacket with a white fur hood.

She's cute.

But she doesn't hold a candle to Stassi.

“Where are you off to now?” she asks me in a femme fatale voice that matches her sultry gaze.

“Off to sleep.” I yawn.

She chuckles through her nose, even though I wasn’t trying to be funny.

My bed and I have a date, one I’m really looking forward to. But I’ll forgo the sleep if I can convince Stassi to join me again.

“Same.” She sidles up to me. “Want some company?”

“You’d hate my bed. My mattress is on the floor. And I hog all the covers,” I say. “I toss and turn a lot, too. Sometimes I even talk in my sleep. I’m told it’s kind of creepy.”

“Oh.” Her coy expression fades. “We’re actually talking about sleep?”

“What else would we be talking about?” I play dumb. I easily could’ve flat-out turned her down, but since I’ll have to see her at work on a regular basis, I didn’t want to make things awkward.

During my residency, there was never a shortage of nurses and doctors throwing themselves at me. It was like Grey’s Anatomy, but in real life. But it didn’t matter how hot and heavy things got, Stassi was still the last thing I thought about every night and the first thing I thought about in the morning.

Since I left Stassi this morning, I’ve been thrilling over the image of her among the things in my apartment, wondering if my sheets smell like her ... if she got that lock fixed ... if she’s thinking about round two as much as I’ve been ...

It may not be realistic, but I’ve even found myself fantasizing about coming home to her after my shift. She’s naked (or wearing nothing but one of my old medical school t-shirts) and waiting for the next round. I’m sure that scenario has a snowball’s chance in hell of coming true, but every time that thought plays in my mind, it sends a rush of blood between my legs.

Cherry watches me gather my things, hesitating on purpose I’m sure, like she’s waiting to walk out with me and hoping I change my mind.

I motion to the office. “I’ve got to talk to Burns before I head out.”

With an exasperated sigh, she tears off, leaving me alone by the lockers. The Burns thing was a lie; after this never-ending shift, the last thing I want to do is stick around here one second longer than I have to. I pull out my phone. If I'd been smart, I would've asked Stassi for her phone number. Then again, she'd have probably said no.

Right now, all I have is the app. Opening it, I navigate past all the messages from women who've matched with me, searching for a new message from Stassi.

Nothing ...

Pulling up Stassi's profile, I scan it for a little green circle next to her name—a sign that the user is online. But hers is grayed out. Underneath her profile are the words: *Last active 2 days ago*.

So she hasn't been active since ... the last time she messaged with me, before we met up at Houlihan's, implying she isn't even remotely interested in getting in touch with me again.

After all, I have a dozen messages on the app from beautiful women who want to sleep with me, a plethora of nurses fighting for my attention, and Cherry, who probably would've given me a blow job on the spot if I asked.

And yet ... Stassi.

Before I can think too much about it, I type in:

DocMansfield: *Hi.*

Then I stare at it, waiting for something to happen.

A minute passes, then two and three and five.

I yawn, my body reminding me I need to get home and catch up on sleep.

Same old Stassi: untouchable, unreachable, unbothered by me—all the things that used to drive me wild about her ... and still do.

It's only a matter of time before we run into each other around the apartments, and I've come too far to throw in the towel. I'll work my charm (even if it never worked on her before). I'll show her I'm no longer the cruel and arrogant boy she once knew.

I'll prove to her that I'm worth the risk.

I'll replace the bad memories with good ones.

I'll love her harder than anyone's ever loved her before.

Stassi

“Order up!”

I drag my tired behind from the dining area to the counter, where a freshly made pepperoni pie is waiting for me. Ted’s smiling at me appreciatively, which tells me he isn’t going to be paying me overtime. “Smile, Stassi. You look miserable. What gives?”

My friends have always told me they could read my mind by looking at my face.

If looks could kill, our latest customers would probably be dead already.

Oops ...

But I can’t bring myself to smile. I’m dead on my feet. It’s fifteen minutes past closing, and of course Ted felt the need to cater to some USM frat guys who strutted in two minutes before I could flip the sign on the door to CLOSED.

I was at least glad for the chance to pawn off some of the old pizza in the display case on them, and then I wouldn’t feel shamed into eating it myself since I hate letting food go to waste. But of course, they were wise to that. Their curly-haired, douchey leader, who clearly thinks a lot of himself, said, “We don’t want any of your old shit. Make us new pies. Two of ‘em. Extra

cheese, extra pepperoni. Green olives on half of one.”

No *please*. No *could you*? It was a command.

One of the other guys blew the paper top off his straw, and it hit me in the chest, landing right between my boobs. He immediately cheered, “He shoots, he scores!” And the idiots around him laughed like baboons.

I crumbled the wrapper and handed it back to him with a fake smile. They’re lucky they don’t have Margie or Tiffany or their food might be garnished with a side of spit.

“Hey, we were only having fun,” one of them yelled at me, throwing his hands in the air as I walked away.

I am so done with this day. I don’t care if they don’t tip me. Which, probably, they won’t. I remember college and how all my friends used to have that fearlessness, like the whole world was in the palms of their hands. They drove too fast, drank too much, lived on the edge. They did crazy things, not worrying about the consequences. I’d never felt that way. Not after Jonathan, when I’d learned that some things could never be undone.

But I’d always envied the kind of freedom that came with giving zero fucks about anything.

It’s the same kind of freedom I envy in Alec. He was always taking risks, leading the charge on the craziest ideas, and my brothers just followed along because they idolized him. They once stole Alec’s father’s boat and went MIA for an entire weekend. Another time they road tripped down to New York to see the Big Apple drop on New Year’s Eve. They were always going on adventures, living every day to the fullest.

Alec had been able to escape this place, to move away, to experience *life*.

Meanwhile, what have I done? And what will I ever do?

Once upon a time, I was close to having made something of myself. I had a good job in Manhattan, a decent apartment that I shared with the man I was going to marry and a promising on the horizon. My whole life was ahead of me—until it wasn’t.

These frat guys may be douches, but it doesn't matter. Their options are limitless. They can be anything they want to be.

Ten minutes later, I bring their fresh pies over, set them on the table without a word, and turn to leave.

"Hey. Girl." I glance back to see the curly-haired one staring at me, holding up the pizza cutter. "Aren't you going to serve us?"

Girl? What the hell? "Are your hands broken?"

He gives me sad, pleading eyes. Not even close to Alec's emeralds, but I can imagine other girls falling for them.

"I'd really love if you'd do it.." His voice is teasing and he's stifling a laugh. "You're the professional here, not me."

I almost think he's trying to flirt, but seeing that he's barely out of high school, the art appears to be lost on him.

And I'd really like to shove my fist up in your face, I think, but it's suspiciously silent behind me. I know Ted is hanging on my every word, just waiting for the opportunity to fire me. And it's not because he hates me or I'm unreliable or bad at my job—he thinks he's enabling me. He dislikes that I'm not doing more with my life than serving pizza day in and day out.

Unfortunately, *my own* options are limited. I need this job to pay my rent. And I don't have the money to buy a car seeing how I sold the one I had before moving to New York a couple of years back.

I'm stuck—for now.

Unless I want to move in with my parents—which I don't.

The weight of Ted's stare anchors my back, so I grab the pizza cutter and start slicing, my movements short and clipped. The guys are smirking, enjoying every second of this.

"You're so good at this," Curly says.

"Yeah, she's really good with her hands," another guy chimes in.

The rest of them snicker.

Stale alcohol scent fills the air around the table. These guys are

hammered.

I roll my eyes and ignore them, but just as I'm about to leave, Curly reaches behind me and tries to squeeze my ass. I side step his attempt, though my heart is racing and my skin is boiling all the same.

"I'm sorry," he says with a sideways smile that reeks of cheap beer. "I'm an ass guy and yours is perfect. I couldn't resist."

I'm done.

Snatching a nearby glass of ice water, I dump it into Curly's lap.

"Hey, hey, hey," he recoils, hands in the air as his friends cackle.

Heading behind the counter, I tug off my apron and toss it at Ted. "I'm leaving. Now."

"You know," Ted says with hard look in my direction, "If you worked in an office or laboratory or something, I doubt this kind of thing would happen."

My middle finger is cocked and ready, but I remind myself how much I need this job, so I keep it in my holster.

"Just sayin'," Ted adds.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say so that he knows I'm quitting this shift, not my gig.

"Wait. Here." He piles a few boxes of cold pizza—the pizza no one wanted—into my arms. It's always the same—eggplant and broccoli. I have no idea why he even makes it. Maybe he just likes the smell? Ted's weird like that. But it's free dinner, so whatever. "I'll have a word with those boys."

"Can you snap their photo and put it on the wall of shame while you're at it?"

"We have a wall of shame?" He scratches his salt-and-pepper temple.

"No, but we should."

I step out into the biting wind and push against it as I make my way across the parking lot and to my place. There's a Tacoma in front of Alec's place—it's been there since this morning and I noticed it had North Carolina

plates. I'm guessing it's his, and there's a light on in his living area, so he must be home.

Not that I've seen him.

Not since that night.

I know doctors work weird hours, but it's odd we've yet to cross paths, not once.

Then again, I've been purposefully avoiding him, rushing out of the house as if the place is on fire, rushing home like I accidentally left the curling iron on.

Maybe he's doing the same to me.

Maybe he's come to the same conclusion I have—that what happened was a mistake.

As I step into the warmth of my apartment and look around, I'm staving off thoughts of his arms around me, his warm skin flush against mine, the ungrounded electricity rushing through me with his touch. It was fun in the moment, but it's over.

I'm content in my cozy, imperfect little life.

I've got a job, a place to call home, and all the soggy eggplant pizza a girl could want.

Things could be worse.

I'm about to sit down on the couch and devour my dinner when I notice a red thong on the coffee table. Then I spot two half-empty wine glasses and a trail of clothes leading to my roommate's door.

On cue, there's a loud female moan, and then some intense banging that rattles the pictures on the wall.

Oh, Mad ...

I haven't even seen her since she came home from her trip to Bangor, but apparently things are still going strong with Joe. Or maybe not. Mad's never been one to hold back during sex. Even lousy sex—everyone in our dorm heard it. She has a mouth made for porn films and she's not afraid to use it.

Grabbing the TV remote, I flip to some reality dating show everyone seems to be obsessed with these days, and I turn up the volume.

I'm stuffing my mouth with pizza, mindlessly scrolling through my phone, when a text pops up from my mom.

Mom: *Sunday dinner at one!!*

Some things are certain, like death and taxes—and my mom's Sunday dinner. Oh, and her penchant for using double-exclamation points in her texts. Dinner has always been at one, around my parents' dining room table, and it's always consisted of spaghetti and meatballs. There's usually a lot of lively conversation and fun, especially now that my brothers have families of their own. I've always shown up, exactly on time. I don't think I've ever missed. And yet, my mom always feels the need to remind me.

My parents are the nicest people on Earth, so I don't complain and I never cancel, even if I don't feel like going half the time. I always come back overstuffed and overstimulated. Every once in a while, I wouldn't mind having a quiet, lazy Sunday all to myself.

But I can't break my mother's heart.

Stassi: *Wouldn't miss it!*

On second thought, maybe it would be better if I *did* miss this one. The thought of sitting across the table from my brothers, pretending I didn't have mind-blowing sex with their childhood best friend, is going to be uncomfortable—especially since I tend to broadcast my thoughts on my forehead.

Maybe I'll wear a hat.

Cut some bangs.

Keep my head down.

Because one thing I know for sure, is that Aidan and Cooper would blow their gaskets if they knew all the things Alec did to me ... and how much I enjoyed it.

10

Alec

Ships in the night.

That's what we are.

Another twenty-four-hour shift later, and I've yet to see Stassi.

But I hear her.

Good *god*, do I hear her.

Whoever the guy is, he's lucky as hell. Morning. Night. Any time I'm home, it seems they're going at it. And she obviously likes him from the way she's been carrying on. She wasn't nearly that vocal with me, which leads me to believe either she was faking it for me or she's faking it with whoever that jackass is that's occupying her time.

When I pull up to the complex in my Tacoma, her lights are on, but there's no sign of her outside.

I'm convinced she's avoiding me—that she maybe even has a boyfriend. Maybe they were on a break and that's why she was on the app? Perhaps she feels so guilty over what she did that she's *really* making it up to him. She clearly had a good time with me. Why else would she be avoiding me like this?

We had drinks. We flirted. We had a good fucking time.

There was clearly chemistry and attraction.

From the driver's seat of my truck, I stare at her door. I contemplate knocking on it, but then decide against it. She might be in there with her boyfriend. And I don't want to seem desperate (even if I am). Besides, I sent her that message on the app and she never responded. She hasn't been active on it for days. If she wants to find me, she knows where I am.

The walls are already shaking by the time I go inside my apartment. It's like they're going for a world record. Each rhythmic rattle ratchets my pulse a notch higher. While I attempt to make a turkey sandwich, I hum an old Nirvana song to try to tune them out, but nothing helps. A minute later, I'm eating my half-assed dinner but tasting none of it.

Everything around me has turned to red.

Tapping the music icon on my phone, I pull up a favorite playlist and head upstairs to shower, turning the water almost all the way hot to wash all the hospital grime away. But even the whoosh of the shower water and throbbing bass line of my music aren't enough to drown out the moaning.

The second I turn off the water, I hear a crash.

Slinging a towel around my waist, I go to my bedroom where a bunch of boxes that had been resting against the wall I share with Stassi's apartment have spilled over, leaving all of my framed photos and degrees in a mangled heap on the ground. A picture of me on the beach in North Carolina stares up at me. Under that, my diploma from med school is lying beneath shattered glass.

I've never been one to frame or display my accomplishments. I know what I've done, I don't need any reminders. The only reason I have this is because my dad framed it for me shortly before he was arrested. He wasn't interested in any of the other trophies or awards I won. Just this one. Once I finally had it, once graduation was over, he pretty much lost interest in me all over again.

I pull the paper out from the matting, roll it up, and toss the frame aside.

Then I shove the diploma in one of the boxes, careful not to step on the various shards of glass everywhere.

Over the course of ten minutes, my apartment went from shithole to royal shithole.

But so far, I haven't had the patience or desire to unpack it and make it any better, and I'm not about to start now. This place was only supposed to be a stepping stone until I could find a townhouse or condo to call my own. The real estate market here is slim pickings, nothing available besides McMansions with too much space than one person needs or quaint fixer-uppers. The last thing I want is a second job in the form of a house.

Stepping over the mess, I find a pair of joggers and an old hockey sweatshirt and throw them on before heading down to grab another bite to eat. A grown man can't live off turkey and bread alone.

It's been the same song and dance since I've arrived here. I keep opening up the old fridge, expecting it to be magically stocked with food though it never is—probably because I haven't hauled my ass to Shaw's to pick up some basics. I'm not about to do *that* now, either. I just spent a full day on my feet, dealing with sprains and chest pains and influenza. I need fast. I need easy.

I open up the Uber Eats app and scroll the limited offerings which serve as a reminder that this is Sapphire Shores, not downtown Boston. The two places that deliver out here have an hour-long wait, at least.

The moaning and banging next door is rising to a fever pitch, intensifying the molten-hot jealousy already flooding my veins.

I drag my hands down my face and make the decision.

Either I sit here, starving and green with envy as some asshat rails the woman of my dreams ... or I go to Ted's.

Crappy pizza wins this battle.

Grabbing my wallet, I head across the parking lot. Only the second I open the door, I see *her*. She's facing away from me, but I'd know that blonde

waterfall anywhere, even when it's tied up in a ponytail. She's wearing a red visor and apron, her hands moving, folding pizza boxes with care, efficiency, and precision.

The second she turns and locks eyes with me, it suddenly strikes me.

Didn't she mention something about a roommate?

Feeling a second wind coming on, I can't help but smile.

Stassi, however, does not.

Her eyes flick away from mine, to the old guy behind the counter. He must be giving her an order, because she nods tightly and rushes to grab a red frosted plastic cup, filling it with Mountain Dew from the fountain machine.

I approach the counter, mere feet from her as she continues filling several glasses without looking up. Diet Coke. Sprite. Mr. Pibb. Sunkist Orange. Ice water. One after another.

"Hey," I say after a quiet couple of beats. "Long time, no see."

But Stassi doesn't acknowledge my presence. Instead, she plants the cups on a black tray, hoists it against her hip, and heads to the dining room where a family is sitting at a booth poring over their menus. She places the cups in front of each of the diners, before asking how everyone's doing. Her voice is as sweet as pie and she rattles off a few recommendations and specials before engaging in a bit of friendly small talk.

She can pretend I'm not here all she wants, but I've never backed down from a challenge and I'm not about to start.

I waited practically my entire life to have sex with this infuriating goddess—I'm sure as hell not going to let her ghost me now.

Plus I'm starving.

I observe Stassi some more, gauging the situation. Aside from her Ted's t-shirt, she's wearing black and white Adidas Sambas and a short black skirt that highlights her long, creamy legs ... which only serves to remind me of the way those legs had felt, hooked around my hips.

Once again, I replay the whole scene in my mind's eye, getting a thrill

when I remember the way her breath shuddered as she was tight up against me. I could tell she was nervous and out of her comfort zone, but she quickly let loose, softening and unfurling and letting her guard down with every fevered kiss.

For once, I'd thawed the ice princess.

I can do it again—and I will.

I just hope it doesn't take another twenty years.

“Can I help you?”

The male voice jars me out of my thoughts. I turn to the counter to find the old man staring me down. Upon closer inspection, I realize it's Ted. He's got less hair and more belly than I remember from all the times we used to come here after hockey practice, but there's no mistaking it's him.

“You want to order something or what?” His wild-eyed stare makes me question if I'm the insane one here.

I steal a glance at Stassi, who's still chatting with that family, tray tucked under her arm. “Uh, yeah,” I say. “I just need a minute to decide.”

“Well, if you want to dine in, have a seat. Stassi'll be over to take your order. Otherwise this is for takeout orders.”

Back in the day, everyone placed their order at the counter, took a number, and found a table. While Ted's shitty pizza hasn't changed in years, I guess the protocol has. Either way, it's a win in my book.

I wander over to a table for two, in a secluded corner, and slide into the booth, prepared to wait all night if I have to.

Knowing Stassi, that's exactly what I'm going to have to do.

11

Stassi

“That man has a lot of nerve,” I mutter to myself as I turn the pizza order into the kitchen.

“What?” Robbie, our lead pizza maker today, scratches at his hair net.

“I was talking to myself.” I clip the paper to the line and slide it down. If Alec thinks he can just waltz in here in those low-slung sweats and faded sweatshirt that hugs his muscled shoulders ... if he thinks he can swagger in here with that disarming smile and his sultry gaze pointed in my direction ... if he thinks he can grab a table and force me to talk to him ... he’s got another think coming.

Because he didn’t figure on Markie, Ted’s wife, being here today.

When it comes to men, Markie is a bitch on wheels. Ted might think he’s the head of his namesake pizza parlor, but Markie is the neck that turns the head. A little Italian tornado with long French-manicured fingernails, blood red lipstick, and a nest of wild dark hair piled on top of her head, she’s a force to be reckoned with and she’s particularly protective of the women who work for her.

Had she been here when Curly tried to grab my ass, she’d have promptly escorted him outside by his balls. This morning, all I had to do was casually

mention the obnoxious frat boys who'd traumatized me during my last shift and how her husband had brushed it off, and Markie was incensed.

She yanked Ted to the side, and within seconds the two of them disappeared in the back room. When Ted came out, his shoulders were hunched as if he'd just gotten the ass-kicking of his life, and he refused to so much as look in my direction for hours.

"Who's the smug Versace-model-looking asshole in the corner?" Markie nudges me. "The one that won't stop staring at you. You know him?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Don't worry, honey. I've got this one." Clearing her throat, she throws her head back and saunters over to him, pen and pad in hand. The disappointment that befalls his handsome face when he realizes I won't be his server is priceless.

As patrons file in for the dinner rush, I do my best to ignore the fact that Alec takes his sweet time eating his pizza. At the rate he's going, the man must be sawing off the tiniest bites and chewing them at least twenty times before swallowing. Pretty sure he's on his third refill, too.

Two full hours later, and he hasn't moved. Not once. Not even to use the restroom.

"Have you ever seen anyone eat so slow before?" Markie says to me as we prep the kitchen for closing. "It's like he's eating in reverse or something. I swear there's more pizza on his plate than when I first brought it out to him. How's that even possible?"

I chuckle. It's funny. But it's also obnoxious because he's wasting both of our time.

Yes, we hooked up, but if it meant anything to me, if I wanted a reprise, I'd have reached out to him by now.

"How do you know this guy anyway?" she asks.

"We grew up together," I say. "He was best friends with my older brothers."

Markie's dark eyes flash. "That's how I met Ted, believe it or not."

"Did Ted make your high school years a living hell? Did he write you mean letters and make fun of how you looked?"

The lines around her lips deepen as she frowns. "No. Not at all. Ted was a sweetheart, believe it or not. I never would've married him if he did shit like that. Why's this guy bugging you now? After all these years?"

Million dollar question.

"I hooked up with him the other night," I confess with a sigh. "I was drunk and I thought ... I don't know what I was thinking. I wasn't thinking. That's the problem. It was a mistake. I think he's hoping it'll happen again, but it's not going to."

"Was the sex bad or something?"

I roll my eyes. "I wish."

Markie shrugs. "You're young. You're beautiful. He's young. He's handsome. Nothing wrong with having one of those ... those friends with benefits kinda things ... what do you guys call it these days? A situationship? Who says you have to date him? Just have fun."

From the other side of the restaurant, Alec works on his final slice of pizza, stopping every so often to watch whatever is on the television in the corner. Before, it was the nightly news. Then, I changed it to a rundown on the stock market's performance. After that, a documentary on cheese making. I purposely tried to find the most mind-numbingly boring channels possible. Now it's an infomercial for something called the Pure Wick—a female urine collection system, which he's oddly engrossed in at the moment.

In an effort to speed him up a bit, I grab the remote and turn the television off.

"Someone needs to put the poor guy out of his misery." Markie slings a bar towel over her shoulder. "Should I tell him or do you want to?"

"It looks like he's almost done."

After a few more minutes of watching him savor every bite as if he's

some restaurant critic, I approach him. “Hi.”

I don’t smile. I don’t pretend to be happy to see him. If he hasn’t gotten the hint by now, that’s on him.

“Hi.” Alec peers up, as if surprised to see me. “You’re not my waitress.”

“Unfortunately you took too long and your waitress died.”

He snickers. “My condolences. Where should I send the flowers?”

He can be charming when he wants to be, but I’m not falling for it again.

Pulling the wireless credit card scanner from my apron, I say, “I’ll be your cashier when you’re ready.” And then I hold my palm out flat, waiting for him to hand me his card.

Alec puts his nibbled-to-death pizza crust down and shakes his head. “This isn’t exactly the hospitality I was expecting from such a legendary establishment, but okay.”

He wipes his mouth on a napkin before reaching for his wallet and handing me a metallic gold debit card.

“I’ll leave,” he says, “But only after you answer one question.”

I swipe his card and type in the total before turning the machine towards him to complete the transaction.

“Why didn’t I hear from you?” he asks before punching in a tip amount and entering his pin.

I tilt my head. “*Hear* from me? What did you want me to do, scream through the wall?”

He sets the napkin down. “No, trust me, I get enough of that from that roommate of yours.”

He hands the machine back, and I print two receipts—one for him and one for the store. I almost choke on my spit when I see he’s left me a \$100 tip. I don’t know whether to be flattered by his generosity or offended that he thinks I can be persuaded with money. Not to mention, Markie was his server, not me. The tip is all hers.

“I messaged you,” he says. “You never responded.”

“I deleted the app.”

“Why would you do that?” His brows knit and the tone of his voice suggests it’s a move he’s taking personally.

Typical Alec—still believing the world revolves around him.

“It’s complicated,” I say, even though it isn’t. He was my sworn enemy-slash-secret teenage crush, and I hate-fucked him purely to prove to myself that I could get him out of my system once and for all. At least that’s my story and I’m sticking to it. The end.

“Oh, yeah? How so?” Leaning back, he rests his arm comfortably across the table, his attention focused on me like he’s not going to let this go.

It’s ironic. For being such a woman magnet, you’d think he’d know that *It’s complicated* is universal female-speak for *I don’t want to talk about this with you*.

I exhale, handing him his receipt.

But for some crazy reason, Alec mistakes my sigh as a sign that I want to pour out my heart to him because he pushes the chair next to him out with his foot and motions for me to sit.

“Tell me about it,” he says.

What does he think we are, friends? We will never be that. Can never. My brothers were his friends. That’s as close as we will ever be—save for when he was *inside* me.

But barring that ...

I shake my head. “I have to take out the trash.”

“You’d rather take out the *trash* than sit next to me?” He winces. “Or are you referring to me as the trash?”

“For a learn-*ed* doctor, you ask some pretty dumb questions.”

Alec grins. “I was teasing.”

“Jokes are supposed to be funny.”

“Ouch.”

I’ve just worked an entire shift, nearly half of it with him sitting in the

dining room, watching me. I'm all out of witty comebacks.

"Look," I say, "I just want to lock up and go home."

As I finish speaking, the OPEN neon sign buzzing in the window over his head goes off, and Markie starts rattling the keys from behind the counter. She's making a show of the closing process for my benefit, and I love her for that.

"Okay, fine. I can take a hint." He returns his card to his wallet and slides out of the booth. When he stands, he towers over me, his chin just above the top of my head. The soft woody scent of his body wash fills my lungs and for a flicker of a millisecond, I'm taken back to that night.

Snapping out of it, I grab his dirty dishes, spin on my heel, and run them to the kitchen.

As I slip the dishes in the soapy water in the sink, Markie leans over. "Is that guy still bothering you? Do you need me to walk you home?"

"No," I tell her. He's not technically bothering me. And he's not going to attack me in the parking lot. But I'm probably going to be up all night thinking about what he messaged me, and that's *definitely* going to be a bother.

"You're a terrible liar. I can see it all over your pretty little face." Markie taps my hand. "I've got this. Head out the back and I'll finish locking up."

"You sure?" I lift a brow.

She chuffs, annoyed at my question, and places her hands on her hips. "How about just saying thank you and getting the hell out of here, huh?"

"Thank *youuu*." I make a quick exit out the back, jogging around the perimeter of the parking lot and all the way to my door before Alec has a chance to step outside the restaurant. I chuckle at the likelihood of Markie stalling him with mind-numbing small talk.

Regardless, this is for the best. I can't risk him thinking we're friends now.

We never have been.

And we never will be.

12

Alec

The kid perched on my exam table is breaking my heart.

He's all awkward angles, adult-sized feet, hands to match, and rail-thin legs and arms. I'm having sympathy growing pains just looking at him. His voice cracks as he moans on the examination table, doubled over and clutching at his stomach. Halfway between a kid and a man, he smells like sweat from the playoff basketball game he'd been playing right up until the pain hit him, straight in the gut.

"We're going to lose," he groans as his mother watches helplessly, squeezing his hand. "They need me."

That's appendicitis for you—which I suspect he has. One minute, you're on the top of the world, even running down the court, about to make the game-winning shot. The next minute, you're in a heap, thinking you're about to die. Same thing happened to me when I was twelve.

Back then, Cooper and Aidan had to carry me from the beach where we'd been scavenging for clams. The pain was so severe, I literally thought I was dying. I couldn't take a single step without folding over in agony. It was truly the scariest day of my childhood. My parents were gone on a luxurious trip to the Maldives with a few other couples from their country club: the

Wakemonts, the von Wittens, and the Townsends. I'd spent two days in the hospital, in severe acute pain, thinking I was going to die and would never see them again. If Mr. Hutton hadn't rushed me to the ER that first day and Mrs. Hutton hadn't stayed by my bedside the entire time, I'm not sure how I'd have gotten through that whole ordeal.

When my parents got the news, they didn't drop everything and jump on the next flight home. They came home exactly when planned, a week later, after the worst of it had blown over and I was on the mend. When I asked them about it, they said they knew I was in good hands and that the Huttons had been updating them daily. To them, that was sufficient enough. They weren't worried—which surprised me because I thought a parent's number one job was to worry about their kid.

Until then, I'd naively thought they'd always be there for me. In my young and narrow view of the world, what I saw in movies and television, that's what parents did. After that experience, I realized that in their extensive list of priorities, I came in a distant second to expensive cocktails on some foreign beach.

"Hey, champ," I say, trying to get him to lay back on the table so I can perform the exam. I note the team name on his basketball jersey. "The Devils are going to be fine. What position do you play?"

"Center." He flinches in pain, sucking in a deep breath.

"Ah, nice. All right, you're important. But what's most important is that we get you better so you're kicking butt in the post-season. Okay?"

He snuffles, nods sorely, and wipes a tear from his eye. I can tell he's trying to be a man, to hold it together despite the pain. Been there, done that.

"Now," I say, gently easing him back onto the table. "Let me check things out here, okay? I know it hurts. Just bear with me for one second and then we'll get you something to ease the pain."

He does as I say. I perform the abdominal examination and it's just as I suspected—his pain worsens as I move my hands from his navel to his lower

right abdomen.

“Ouch!” he groans through clenched teeth.

“I’m ninety-nine percent sure we’ve got some good old-fashioned appendicitis going on here, but we’re going to order a CT scan to make sure. Once we confirm, we’ll get you into surgery. You’re going to feel as good as new in a matter of hours, bud. I promise.”

Calvin’s mother gasps, though I’m not sure what she was expecting.

Did she think we’d give him some painkillers and send him on his way?

I give her a reassuring smile. “Mrs. Humphrey, there isn’t a more routine surgery than this one, and our general surgeon is one of the best in the state. We’ll get Calvin in there right away, and he’ll be fine.”

I look over at Kendra, a nurse, who nods and heads off to submit the scan order and call down to surgery. Calvin’s tears have since dried and his expression is now somber but accepting. I give his foot a gentle squeeze before typing my notes into the tablet.

“Any questions?” I ask when I’m done.

The kid shakes his head. His mother is still stunned and silent, decked out to the nines in school spirit wear. I get it; she didn’t have this on her to-do list for the day. All she wanted was to cheer her kid on as he helped his team get the W, but appendicitis doesn’t care about things like that.

“All right. Let’s get you something for the pain in the meantime,” I say. “Any known allergies?”

“Just eggs,” his mother finally speaks.

“Ah, good. Fortunately there are no eggs in our pain meds or anesthesia,” I offer a lighthearted wink that goes unappreciated.

As I leave, I think more about the time I had to go through that horror. My parents had never left me alone before, but they’d decided I would be fine for a couple weeks with the Huttons watching over me. I was basically their bonus kid anyway.

And at first, everything *had* been fine.

More than fine—I was in heaven.

I got to live under the same roof as Stassi, tormenting her first thing every morning and last thing every night.

Not to mention, Mr. and Mrs. Hutton were the parents I'd always wanted—they let their kids do things for fun, not just with the aim of getting into a good college. They were relaxed, silly, and actually had lively conversation around the dinner table. Played cheesy board games, for crying out loud.

My parents moved around the house as if they were two planets in totally different orbits. If they ever accidentally went into each other's orbit? Major explosion. And they were known to overreact—any little mistake I made became a major calamity whenever they heard about it. So more often than not, when I was in my own house, I was creeping around it, on eggshells.

But Mrs. Hutton had taken my little medical emergency in stride, putting me at ease with comforting words as she rubbed circles along my back, and Mr. Hutton cracked jokes as he drove me to the ER. Afterwards, they'd all sat around my hospital bed, just ... being with me.

And they never left my side.

Even though I grew up with every privilege a kid could ever dream of, the Huttons made me feel more like a part of the family than my parents ever did.

I suppose I wasn't very brotherly to Stassi, though.

Not then, and *especially* not now.

But she hasn't been very kind to me, either. I haven't seen her since she ditched me at Ted's. She deleted the app, so I don't have any way of getting in touch with her, unless I want to slip a note under her door or send her a Morse code message, knocking on the paper-thin wall that separates us. Not that it'll do any good. Something tells me that as long as I live right next to her, she's going to keep on finding ways to avoid me.

I'm not proud of myself, but last night, while home alone, I put my ear to the wall and listened. I knew that she was home and that her roommate was out because I saw them leave. I just wanted to know what Stassi was up to.

Which I think brings me one step closer to being a stalker.

After a minute of faintly listening to some angsty, acoustic playlist she was playing, I crept myself out and stopped.

I'm a doctor, damn it.

People respect me.

I don't stalk beautiful women who hate me—I save lives.

By the time lunch rolls around, I head to the locker room to grab my coat so I can get something other than cafeteria gruel. On my way, I pray I don't run into Cherry. After last night's shift, she all but tried to put her hand down my pants.

Ordinarily, I'd have been all over that.

Now the idea of being with anyone other than Stassi repulses me.

Maybe if I'd have specialized in psychiatrics, I'd understand all of this shit better, but alas, that was never my calling.

The second I slam my locker shut, I happen to catch Kendra, curled up in the corner, mindlessly munching on green apple slices while her nose is buried in a book—some bodice-ripper with a buxom blonde and a barely-clothed Fabio-looking guy on the cover.

“Good book?” I ask, remembering Stassi and her little reading challenge. She was always such a nerd, but damn if seeing a pretty girl reading isn't my biggest turn on. My horny teenaged self would have all sorts of fantasies of us getting it on in the library. The computer lab. Doing *experiments* in the bio lab. I never knew anyone could make reading so fucking *hot*.

“Eh.” Kendra pops another apple slice in her mouth. “It helps to pass the time.”

I wonder if Stassi has finished *Charlotte's Web* yet. Probably. And then she'll move on to ...

Huh. It dawns on me, what I need to do.

Instead of going out to the sub shop, I make my way to the parking garage. The shops of downtown Portland are pretty removed from the Maine

Medical Center, so I have to park in the garage by the public market and walk a few blocks to the nearest book shop, *A Likely Story*. This indie shop is small and so crowded with books that I have to crab-walk sideways down the aisles in order to fit. It doesn't bother carrying the latest books from the hottest bestsellers—it's mostly classics and used books. I go to the P section and search out Pasternak.

Nothing. No *Doctor Zhivago*.

I meander to the counter. I'm the only person in the store, and the older gentleman sitting behind the desk, who must own the place, is reading a copy of Dante's *Inferno*.

"What can I do you for?" he asks, licking his finger before turning to a new page.

"You don't have *Doctor Zhivago* by chance, do you?"

He frowns. "Believe it or not, I don't have every book ever written in this shoebox-sized store. Crazy, right?"

I'm fluent in sarcasm, but I'm short on time.

"Okay." I force a smile. Twenty minutes ago, I could've given two shits about Pasternak. But now, much like the woman haunting my every thought, it's become my mission. I'll secure that damn book or die trying. "Do you know where the next nearest bookstore is that might have it?"

"Nope." He flicks to another page.

"That's great. Really helpful."

I start to back away when he says, "I can order it. Have it shipped to you."

I'll have to forgo the instant gratification, but it's an option.

"Yeah, sure. Let's do that." I reach for my wallet as he chicken-pecks at the keyboard of an old laptop.

The machine is thick, with a loud fan, and probably older than I am.

The man exhales, staring over his reading glasses at the results. "Paperback? Hardcover?"

“Hardcover.” I decide Stassi is the type to keep books once she’s read them. “Thanks.”

As I pull out my card to pay, he turns the computer screen toward me. “Take your pick.”

There are a number of hardcover editions. Most are under twenty bucks, but I scan down to the bottom one, which is, for some reason, \$327.

It’s signed. First edition.

Stassi’s a book nerd. She’d probably get off on it. I point. “That’s the one.”

He looks over at it, impressed. “All right. Address?”

“201 Main Street, Apartment C, Sapphire Shores.”

After about a half hour, he finally gets that in. “Looks like it’ll arrive on the 2nd.”

“The 2nd?” That’s two weeks away. “Can you get it to me faster?”

He fixes me with a look. “You’re really desperate, aren’t you?”

“It’s a gift for a friend.” Not that I owe him an explanation.

“I can get it here in two days if you pay rush shipping,” he says as he adjusts his glasses, “but if you ask me, that book’s overrated.”

So I’ve heard. “Rush shipping is fine.”

“Okay, your dime.” He takes my credit card.

\$327 plus twenty dollars shipping later, I have another excuse to talk to her, even if only to prove that while *Doctor Zhivago* might be overrated, *this* doctor isn’t.

Stassi

“You look like a hermit crab.” Mad plops down on the sofa next to me.

I’m sitting in the cocoon of my giant wearable velour blanket, trying to read my book and enjoy my freshly poured Diet Coke before the ice melts and waters it down. “Your point?”

“Don’t have one. Just making an observation,” she says with a shrug. “Also, you’ve worn that same outfit every day for a week.” She lifts her palms. “Just another observation.”

“I’m surprised you have time to notice all of that between you and Joe the Sex Machine going at it like rabbits ...” My wearable blanket is the greatest thing ever. And the pajamas under it are triple-thick fleece. My slippers make my feet look like little pancakes. “Anyway, I’m not a crab. I’m adorable. Like a walking teddy bear.”

“If you say so.” She grabs the TV remote and turns on one of her favorite crappy reality dating shows. I try to ignore it, but eventually the hot couples looking for love grab my attention. Especially when they start making out with each other at random.

I squint at the screen as a couple streak across the screen in the dark, naked, jumping into a hot tub. “What is this?”

Her eyes are so glued to the screen that at first, I don't think she heard me. Then she mumbles, "Match-a-Rama."

"What's the hook of this one?" Not that it matters. All of them are essentially the same.

"They can't talk the entire time. They have to make their connections in other ways."

I tilt my head. No wonder there's no dialogue. Just a lot of tongue-wrestling and splashing around naked in hot tubs.

"Do people who go on these shows actually think they'll find meaningful, lasting love?"

She shrugs. "It's probably better than meeting people randomly on an app."

Touché. Look what I've found on the app. Nothing but trouble.

"Where's Joe tonight?" I ask.

"Business trip in San Diego. Some people have all the luck." She picks a piece of eggplant off the pizza and licks it. "Ugh. I need real food. You think if I called China Wok, they'd deliver fast?"

I shake my head.

She gets up and grabs her phone anyway, disappearing into the kitchen to make the call. When she returns, she pokes at the pizza. "I ordered extra noodles for you."

"Thanks. Why didn't you go with him?"

"Joe? I wish! I couldn't get off work, which is bullshit. No one's buying or selling right in the dead of winter but my boss wants me there just in case ..."

I smile. She works for a tyrant real estate agent down in Portland, posting listings and picking up his slack.

"So Joe asked you to go with him?" I ask "It's that serious?"

She lifts her pizza off the plate, the melted cheese leaving a long string that she scoops up with a finger. "I don't know. It's better than nothing."

Better than nothing? She's the one who's been sounding like she's been having the best sex of her life, every night, so much so that I feel like I haven't seen her in two weeks. And it's better than nothing?

"Okay ..."

"I mean, he's cute and everything. Sort of. He has a comically big chin. But from the nose up, he's a solid seven. Maybe an eight," she says, blowing on the pizza. "Speaking of hot. What I want to know is, who's the guy that moved in next door? Did you see him?"

I'm surprised she's noticed. She's been so obsessed with Joe.

"That's the doctor. Doc Mansfield," I say. "The one I matched with on the app. Remember?"

She blinks and tosses the pizza down, uneaten. "What? When were you going to tell me?"

I give her a look. "When have I had a chance?"

"Oh." She smiles. "So wait ... he's the guy you knew when you were a kid? Your brothers were friends with him? You said he tormented you ... ?"

"Uh-huh." I look back at my book. I don't want to talk about it.

"He moved in next door ... why? Did he know you lived here? Is he stalking you?"

"No. I think it was just fate laughing at me."

She rubs her hands together greedily. "Details!"

"Nope. There's nothing to tell."

"So ... you didn't wind up going out for drinks then."

Oh, no. We did. And much, much more. But I'm certainly not telling her that. I lift my book higher and pretend to be engrossed in it, even though there's drama breaking out on the television and everyone's stripping down to wedge themselves into the hot tub.

"Sad," Mad sighs, shaking her head. "I can't believe he lives right next door. What are the chances? And you're single. He's single. You matched. It feels like a wasted opportunity."

“Hmm,” I mumble. It doesn’t feel like that to me.

In fact, it feels like an opportunity I overindulged in.

But the man’s already occupied far too much mental real estate in my life.

I refuse to think about him anymore.

The episode ends on a cliffhanger, making it look like an orgy is about to ensue. It switches to the next one in the series, and a recap.

Mad runs for the stairs. “I’m gonna get my PJs on, too. Answer the door if my food comes.”

“Sure thing.”

When she’s gone, I reach over and take a taste of the pizza, little tendrils of fake cheese slipping down my chin.

There’s a knock at the door.

China Wok must be stepping it up. That or they’re slow tonight because this is a record.

Holding my finger between the pages of my book as a bookmark, I shuffle over in my pancake slippers, trying not to trip over the extra layers of fabric of the giant, zebra-striped wearable blanket hanging from my body.

“Your food’s here, Mad!” I shout as I reach for the door handle, yanking it open. “Did you pa—”

I freeze as I discover it’s not China Wok.

It’s Alec.

This is unfair. He looks amazing. His hair is just-showered wet, and I can smell his intoxicating aftershave from here. He’s wearing a peacoat and scarf, flurries of snow dusting his shoulders, like the male lead of a Hallmark Christmas movie.

He’s holding a blue box that at first I think is something from Tiffany’s— but then realize is just some folded scrubs.

“Uh ...” I start, as I realize that I’m wearing the ugliest ensemble known to man. Actually, if I’d thought about it for months, I probably wouldn’t have been able to scrape together a more horrific outfit.

“Hey,” he says, and then his brow wrinkles and he starts to wipe at his chin. “You ...”

Me ... what does he mean, *me*? He’s trying to tell me something, but damned if I know what it is. Probably something along the lines of, *You look utterly hideous*.

Then I realize he’s gesturing to tell me I have something on my face. I feel there, and sure enough, I have dried pizza sauce crusted on my chin.

Lovely.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” I woodenly state the obvious.

“Yeah. I know. Sorry if I’m bothering you.”

The only bother is that I never expected him. Yes, we live next door to one another, but he’s never been so bold as to knock on my door. Why? And more importantly, why *now*?

“It’s fine ... I just thought you were Chinese.” I fold my arms. “So ... can I help you or ... ?”

I sound like an idiot. I’ve clearly been stuffing my face with pizza, and now I’ve just moved onto Chinese takeout. He must think all I do on my days off is sit on the sofa, looking like a homeless person as I stuff my face with bad food.

“Just wanted to drop this off.” He hands the folded scrubs shirt at me.

Confused, I don’t make a move to take it. Why does he want to give me some ratty hospital scrubs? “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s not the shirt—it’s what’s inside the shirt. I didn’t have time to wrap it. So ...”

Wrap it? So it’s like a gift? Why is he giving me gifts? For some reason, that makes me even more suspicious, because a gift from Alec can only be something like exploding cigars or those fake packets of gum that shock your finger when you take a piece, but I accept it anyway. There’s something hard and heavy inside. “Thanks.”

Unfolding the scrub shirt, I find a beautiful, hardbound copy of *Doctor*

Zhivago.

Now the pieces are falling into place. Points to him, for remembering. And there are no mousetraps in sight. I open it up, expecting it to be in Pig Latin, or something, but it's not. It's an actual, real gift.

"Oh ... wow." I trace my fingers along the timeworn pages.

When I look up, he's rocking from toe to heel on his feet, his hands in his pocket, smiling. "Your D book. I figured you were ready to move on."

I nudge aside the fabric of my wearable blanket and produce the book, wrapped around my other hand. *Dangerous Liaisons*. "You're too late. I already did."

He winces, mock hurt. "Ah. That's quite a departure from a book about a humble pig."

"Well, yes. Variety is the spice of life." I crack open the spine of the book again and notice the signature scrawled on the title page, and my eyes bug out. "This is a signed first edition."

He nods, proud of himself.

Okay, now I'm really confused. What's his game? Why is he trying to charm me, of all people? How could he possibly benefit from getting into my good graces? I mean, he already got laid. If a conquest was what he was looking for, he can cross that off the ol' bucket list. What else could I give him other than crappy free pizza?

And what could he give *me*, other than a heart broken worse than the first time he shattered it? He's a bull and I'm the china shop. He's pizza and I'm pineapple. We have no business being together, no matter what stupid ideas he has in his head.

I can't feed into this, whatever *this* is.

I glance back into the apartment for a moment and see Mad quietly but wildly flailing her arms, gesturing and mouthing that I should let him in. I shake my head slightly, pull the door closed a bit more so that Alec won't see her machinations, and clear my throat.

“Thank you for the gift. I have to go to bed. Goodnight,” I say stiffly.

His eyebrow lifts. “Before Chinese?”

“That’s for my roommate. Goodnight,” I repeat more forcefully.

“Ah.”

As I start to close the door, I expect he’ll argue. Because don’t we *always* argue?

But he simply says, “All right, Stassi. Goodnight.”

Guilt sinks its teeth into me as I shut the door. I feel terrible. He gave me this thoughtful gift and I was abrupt. Also, a jerk. As I lean my back against the wall, I hear him go to his place and close the door. Immediately I begin thinking of all the ways I could’ve played that better—starting with a wardrobe choice that doesn’t make me look like a bag lady.

“You know, you’re making it worse,” Mad says.

I look over to see her staring at me, shaking her head with disapproval.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I just know guys,” she says as I go to the couch and collapse next to her, carefully placing his gift on the coffee table.

I stare at her, waiting for the punch line. “Oh, you do? How did I not know you were the wise Knower of Men? Before Joe, you used to say that you were going to be a crazy spinster lady.”

Before Joe, we had a lot more in common. She and I used to agree that guys, as a whole, sucked, and that one should always proceed with caution around them. But apparently, Prince Charming Joe has completely changed her mind.

“Well, I’ll still be crazy. Anyway, I thought you were going to bed?”

“No. I just told him that so he’d leave. I’m going to read another chapter of my wonderful D book and eat all your noodles,” I declare as if it’s an edict handed down from on high, opening up my book with great flourish. But something she said gnaws at me, and I can’t stop thinking of the way he’d looked at me, those emerald greens piercing me deep. “What did you mean

by I'm making it worse?"

She shrugs. "He's going to chase you even more because you're playing hard to get."

I snort and glare at *Doctor Zhivago*. I don't know if I've ever disliked a book more, but I have to hand it to him—it's one hell of a gesture.

"He can chase me all he wants," I say, "but he's never going to catch me."

Alec

Well, that was pointless.

As I step into my cold, empty apartment, I curse myself. I'm out \$350, and for what? Did I really think Stassi would be so overwhelmed with gratitude she'd jump into bed with me for Round Two? Over a *book*?

Truthfully, deep down, I wasn't expecting much more. Stassi's too complicated to be wooed by a thing like that. That's why I stopped by the liquor store on the way home and got a six-pack to keep me company tonight—I knew Stassi wouldn't be.

I go to the kitchen and crack open a Sea Dog, taking a long, thirsty gulp.

Dread starts to seep in as I imagine spending tonight the way I've spent the last eight: alone.

Growing up, I was always the life of the party. The one people gravitated to. The fun didn't start until I arrived, and it ended as soon as I left. I had a steady stream of girlfriends all through high school. I was never good at being by myself. But these past few weeks before I moved back, that's exactly what I've been, and it's gnawing at me.

The dark, seventies-paneled walls that surround me feel like they're closing in.

Beer in hand, I escape to the balcony in the back, overlooking the quad. No one goes out here, especially since it's winter and single-digits. People use their outdoor spaces as storage for their snow-covered grills and bicycles and whatever other shit doesn't fit inside their place. All I have out here is a shaky lawn chair left behind by the previous tenant. I brush off the snow and sink into it.

I should've known one night of fun and a signed book wouldn't be enough for Stassi to change her mind about me. They say actions speak louder than words, but those emails and notes I gave her all those years ago have done a hell of a lot of damage.

Despite all the shit I gave her back then, I wasn't *always* awful.

Once, I'd noticed her in the computer lab, typing away while I was on the way to a hockey game. She was a studious freshman and this was before the whole Yours Cruelly thing started. I'd tapped on the glass to get her attention, but that didn't work. So I came up behind her and gave her a little goose, and she jumped sky high.

"What are you doing?" I'd asked, teasing, like we always did with her.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she'd snapped and went right back to work.

I'd been a little taken aback, since she never used that tone with me, but then I figured she was just in a mood.

So I'd watched her for a little while, remembering the times she used to tag along after us, always wanting to be in our shadow. We'd called her Static Cling. I thought I'd be nice. I said, "I'm going to the game. It's the last home one before the championship. You want to come with? I'll drive you to the rink and then you can get a ride home with your brothers."

I swear she looked at me like I had horns sprouting from my head. "Now why would I ever do that? With *you*?"

I can't remember when it changed, when she stopped wanting to be with us all the time and decided to go her own way. But she looked at me like I

was a piece of shit on her shoe. I hadn't been able to change her mind then when she was fifteen—and I sure as hell am not now that she's a full-grown woman.

Getting her into bed with me a couple weeks ago wasn't about changing her mind. She did what she wanted to. Always. And who knows why she did it. The woman has always been an unsolvable riddle.

Maybe she fucked me as an FU to her brothers.

Maybe she fucked me to show me what I couldn't have, ever again because she hates me.

A signed book isn't going to change that.

It's cold, my breath puffing out in a white cloud, but the beer warms me. I tilt my head, looking toward her balcony. There's an old cruiser bicycle there, with a big basket—like the one Stassi used to ride around the neighborhood, up and down the cul-de-sac that ended at the ocean. We used to hum the Wicked Witch of the West theme music whenever she pedaled by.

God, we were assholes.

I have to wonder if things would be different had I taken an alternate approach to her. I could've been the wholesome boy next door, the kid who held open doors for her, saved a seat in the cafeteria for her, and treated her like a princess. But Cooper and Aidan wouldn't have allowed me to be that guy. On the surface, I might have looked like their ringleader, but that was because I knew how they wanted me to act to her. Plenty of guys at school had tried to be sweet to Stassi, and they always got their asses kicked in return. It's not that they wanted guys to be assholes to her, though—they just wanted to be the only ones who had *any* contact with her, good or bad. And I was honored to be admitted into their inner circle—I was one of the select few allowed to give Stassi Hutton shit, so I wore that badge with pride, taking advantage as often as possible.

Until Jonathan.

That lucky bastard prick didn't know how good he had it.

As much as I loathed the guy, I could see what Stassi saw in him. He was good-looking, generally well-liked, and had a way of wrapping people around his finger—teachers, coaches, girls. Two years younger than the Hutton boys and me, he was a naturally talented athlete. He was varsity from freshman year and probably could've been NHL if he'd wanted it enough. The kid was smart, too—he was a shoo-in for valedictorian his graduating year. Cooper and Aidan had taken a shine to him right away, brought him under their wings.

In a lot of ways, he was a lot like me.

But what I've never been able to understand was how he was able to convince Aidan and Cooper he was good enough for Stassi.

Maybe because he was a fake piece of shit.

I even tried to tell them that, but it was like talking to two brick walls. They didn't want to hear it. They were too blinded by his charms to be able to see him clearly. I tried to point out all his red flags until I was blue in the face, then I stopped wasting my breath.

Shortly after that, Jonathan ratcheted things up a notch—at times, I'm certain, to spite me.

He knew I was onto him.

Which is why he had zero problems snorting coke in front of me in the locker room or bragging about sending dick pics to random girls on his phone. He knew if I ever opened my mouth, no one would believe me anyway. But everything took a turn for the worse the night that I found him getting head from Tori Meltz behind the bushes at a hockey house party. And when I asked him what the fuck he thought he was doing?

Jonathan *laughed* at me.

He told me I was a pussy, a third-rate hockey player, a nobody.

He told me I was jealous of what he had, that I was so green, it was all over my face.

The worst part? He was goddamn right.

Because to this day, I know it should've been me.

And if it had been, things would've been different.

It's not nice to speak ill of the dead, but Jonathan Cole was a fuckhead—a fuckhead who managed to maintain his phony mirage for almost three years until the drowning accident that took his life.

After that, it didn't feel right to tell Stassi what I knew.

Especially after what happened that night.

He might have been a fuckhead, but he didn't deserve to die.

Stassi

I wake with a stomachache the next morning.

Part of it's the noodles. I ate way too many of them. But part of it is also my insufferable *neighbor*.

I roll over in bed and look over at the copy of *Doctor Zhivago*. I'd wanted to throw it straight in the trash, but the book nerd in me couldn't do that.

It's a first edition! Signed!

I bet anything Alec knew that. He knew that I'd have to hold it dear. He wanted to plant a reminder of him, front and center in my life so that while I may be able to close the blinds and ignore him whenever he walks outside, I can't ignore what's right in front of my face.

Grabbing the book, I shove it deep under my bed.

But damned if it doesn't start to feel like the beating heart in that Edgar Allen Poe story.

Maybe I can give it to someone? Return it to the bookstore and give him his money back?

It'd be the right thing to do. But until I can get to Portland, I need to keep it *somewhere*.

Pulling it out, I stalk around the house, looking for someplace to keep it.

Eventually, I settle on the unused cabinet above the refrigerator. It's not used because neither of us can reach in there. I have to drag a chair over to the fridge in order to access it. Then I shove the book in there and wipe my hands together.

Done.

As I'm standing at the coffee machine, congratulating myself for having disposed of the Doctor Zhivago threat for the time being, I look over at the front door and notice a white triangle sticking out from under the front door.

I hop from the chair, contemplating it like a foe I need to take down. As I get closer, it looks more and more like the thing I feared it was.

A note. I can see the lines on the paper. It's folded in half, and whoever wrote it pushed too hard because I can see the imprint of the words inside. A single word is written on the outside.

Stassi.

Oh no.

I do as I usually do when I receive an Alec note. I freeze. My fingers shake.

Then I grab it and tell myself I will not care, no matter what he says. He does not matter to me. I am rubber. Whatever he says will bounce right off me.

Roses are red, violets are blue

I can't stop thinking of the other night, up for round two?

Yours Cruelly,

Alec

PS—My number is 555-262-8825

Contrary to what I'd hoped, the words do not bounce off me. I absorb them fully, like a sponge, unable to keep the heat from creeping into my cheeks and ... other places.

Crumpling the letter in my palm, I toss it in the trash and go to grab my coffee.

“What was that?” Mad says, sweeping into the kitchen in her bathrobe, hair wrapped in a towel.

“What was what?” I say casually.

“You were killing that paper. And you’re all red,” she says, marching over to the trash and lifting the lid. “Let me guess. It’s from McDreamy or McSteamy or whatever he calls himself?”

Before I can argue, she fishes it out and reads it. “Wait. Round *two*?”

I wince.

“Round two implies there was a round one. You slept with him, and you never told me?” She’s pouting now, horrified that I’ve broken the best friend code. “What’s wrong with you? Was he that bad?”

“No. He was that *good*.” I slump into a chair at the kitchen table, wanting to cry. Because now I’m thinking about it. And up until now, I’d been doing pretty well at moving past it. Now, it’s right there in my face.

“What? Then what’s the problem?” she shouts at me. “You’re crazy for not wanting to have some fun with him! Why wouldn’t you? Because *Dangerous Lesions* is so much better?”

I stare into my coffee. Mad was never much of a reader. “*Liaisons*.”

“Whatever! You know what you are? Boring.”

I look up. “Harsh.”

“Yes, but it’s no way to live life, always playing it safe. You’re not willing to take a risk, because you know what I think? You’re afraid of happiness.”

She’s right about that. I won’t take risks, but not because I’m afraid of happiness. I’m pretty much convinced happiness just won’t happen, for me no matter what I do. Look at Jonathan. Look at my last ex, Mason. With each of them, I thought I’d found true, everlasting happiness.

I was wrong.

And odds are Alec Mansfield isn’t going to be the one to break the chain. He’s already put new dings in my poor heart, a heart already so fragile from

being broken and patched up again. If I let him get any closer, it'll never recover.

“You don't understand. Having fun with this guy is like playing with fire.” I push away from the table and stand. “Anyway, I don't want to talk about this anymore and I have to shower.”

Mad looks up at the clock. “I thought you said you're working the afternoon shift. You don't have to go into work for three hours.”

“I know, I need a *cold* shower.”

As I stomp off, I try not to think of that round two. But of course, it's all I think about. More delicious hate sex with Alec. Kissing and biting and sucking and having orgasm after amazing orgasm with that hot piece of man flesh. A total risk. He knows too much about me, and he knows my weaknesses. He knows when I have my guard down.

A memory floods in as I run the water, trying to get it hot. My first few months at Sapphire Shores High were the worst. I didn't fit in with anyone outside of Tenley and Campbell. My parents had suggested that Cooper and Aidan show me around and try to help me fit in, but at the end of the day, I wasn't interested in being friends with anyone in their circle. When I wasn't with my two best friends, I spent most of my time buried in the computer lab, working. Grades felt like the one thing I could control. It wasn't long after that, though, that I'd started getting all these terrible anonymous messages from Yours Cruelly, starting with, *Roses are red, violets are blue, your glasses make you look like you're 82.*

It was the lowest point in my life.

And then a text message pinged my cell.

It was something innocuous at first. *Hi*, I think.

And the sender had a local area code, but it wasn't programmed in my phone.

I remember looking around, wondering who'd sent it. But I'd been alone in the room. The person send a second message after that, something like,

How are you doing?

I know, I was silly. But I was alone. Hardly anyone spoke to me. They thought I was nerdy. And I guess I was. So this anonymous person, paying attention to me, excited me. That person seemed to care about me more than anyone else in my life. They asked me questions about who I was, what I liked. They cared about me. I was naïve, never thinking the person could hurt me.

Eventually I started to think of that person as my friend. My only friend. I even told them about Yours Cruelly.

They told me that people were just jealous because they saw something in me that they didn't have. They told me I was beautiful. They told me they stayed anonymous because they were afraid of rejection. As if I, the major reject, had the capacity to reject anyone?

And then they asked me to the homecoming dance.

By then, we'd been chatting for weeks, telling each other the intimate details of our lives. According to him, he went to school with me, saw me in the halls. He played sports, but wasn't really jazzed by any of them. He felt like he was in a prison, bound by peoples' expectations of him, so he couldn't reveal himself to me. I felt like we understood each other. I'd never been in love before, but that felt like it. Butterflies and all.

So I said yes, that I would love to go to the dance with him. I even turned down Rob Conrad, who cornered me in the cafeteria after months of sneaking looks my way. He was cute and I'd have said yes if I hadn't already committed to someone else. Rob seemed crushed, but I was so excited about finally meeting my mystery guy I didn't have time to worry about it.

But the next day, my mystery guy went silent.

I texted him, over and over again, thinking I'd done something wrong.

The dance came and went. I even dressed up for it in case he showed up and I sat on the stoop outside, *hoping* as hard as I could as my brothers, Alec, and their dates took pictures in the front yard.

Months later, I finally pieced it all together. I figured out who that anonymous person was.

I also realized I had done something wrong: I'd been born into his best friends' family.

I'd always had the suspicion that Alec was Yours Cruelly—cold, evil, unfeeling. But he was also my anonymous texter, too—sweet, understanding. *Bound by peoples' expectations of him.* I knew how his parents rode his back about academics. *Played several sports, but not really jazzed by any of them.* Alec was captain, but he was always self-deprecating. He always gave more credit to my brothers, said they were better.

The biggest giveaway though?

The messages, emails, and DMs all stopped at the *exact same time*, right before homecoming.

I wasn't sure what was worse—falling for a faceless stranger and getting ghosted? Or realizing I fell for yet another one of Alec's cruel ploys. As much as I hated him, I cried my eyes out every time I thought about what he did and how he stood in front of our house taking homecoming pictures with Carlina, the prettiest girl at Sapphire Shores High.

Eventually, I'd moved on.

And I *have* moved on.

Alec Mansfield is never going to make a fool out of me again.

16

Alec

After over two weeks of living in Sapphire Shores, I finally break down.

I drive the ten miles to Shaw's.

When I lived in Winston-Salem, I had a choice of places to shop. All of them had huge organic food sections, coffee bar, salad bar, a bank, a place to get your dry cleaning. One even had a liquor store inside it, in case you wanted to get loaded while doing your weekly stock-up.

But this supermarket is frozen in time. It hasn't changed in the eighteen-or-so years since I last set foot in it. It's full of all the staples—Cheerios, Chef Boyardee, Wonder Bread. There's nothing new or edgy about it. The carts are old and rusty, the linoleum is scuffed, the refrigerated cases beaten and noisy. There are even actual aproned workers there to check customers out, instead of a bunch of self-service aisles.

I'm standing in the aisle, staring at the Strawberry Fluff and remembering the last time I had that, when someone squeezes behind me, accidentally bumping me with her cart as she grabs a jar of grape jelly.

"Whoopsie! I'm so sorry, honey," she says kindly, giving my arm a squeeze.

"No problem," I mutter, moving closer to the shelves when it suddenly

hits me. I know that voice.

I turn to look at the older woman. Her hair is shorter and she looks even smaller than I remember, but I'd know her anywhere. She has Stassi's crystal blue eyes.

"Mrs. Hutton?" I venture.

She looks up, confused, and her mouth drops open. "Alec? Is that you?"

My grin widens. "It is. How are you?"

Her eyes flood with tears and she claps her hands excitedly.

"Oh, my goodness," she says, her voice but a whisper. She shoves the cart away in her effort to get close to hug me. Despite being barely five feet tall, her hugs are strong and tight and full of love. "It is so wonderful to see you, Alec."

She holds me for a really long time. I wonder if she's thinking about my childhood appendix incident. She'd been so calm and collected—the whole family had, making jokes to put me at ease—but later, she'd told me she'd never been so scared in her life. I wasn't just *like* a member of their family—I *was* a member of their family. Mrs. Hutton couldn't have been more concerned about me if I'd have been one of her own.

"So funny, I was actually just standing here, thinking about your strawberry fluffernutters. You made the best ones," I tell her.

When I pull away, there are tears streaming down her face. She has to pull off her glasses and dab her eyes with the tissue she always keeps in her pocket. Then she pulls away and holds me at a distance so she can just admire me, as if I'm her beloved artistic creation. I can tell she likes what she sees, because for once, she's speechless.

Then she seems to backtrack and finally comprehend what I said.

"Oh, my. Yes, you three would eat three, four of them in one sitting. Almost ate me out of house and home. I probably kept this place in business with all the Fluff I bought for you growing boys." She looks down at the display of it, then back at me, beaming. "I'm just so happy to see you. Cooper

said you were in town.”

I nod. “It’s great to see you. I meant to stop by, but—”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve been so busy. Knowing you, moving in, big doctor, I’m sure you have a lot on your plate. You’re working at the hospital now, Cooper said?”

“That’s right. I’m a hospitalist, in the ER.”

She pats her heart, and the tears spring to her eyes again. My parents were proud when I got my white coat, but I don’t think they were half as emotional as this. “Oh, I knew you would. You made a plan, and you stuck to it. You were always so smart, so driven. You always accomplished whatever you set out to do.”

“Well ...” I nod, not sure I should tell her that it helped to have both parents swearing they’d disown me if I did anything else.

“Do you like it? Being a doctor, I mean?”

“Pays the bills,” I say with a shrug. “But yeah, it’s good. Really good. I always liked the part about helping people. How’s Mr. Hutton?”

“He’s great. Happily retired now. He’ll be tickled you asked about him. He had to sell his business in town. Got run out by that Home Depot. Has a little trouble with his heart, but nothing too bad. We can’t complain,” she says, speaking a mile a minute, as is her style. “Your parents are good, too? Still living down south? Are they planning to come on up? Would love to see them sometime. Lots to catch up on.”

“Yeah, same old,” I say, deciding it’s not the time to talk of my father’s legal and financial troubles. “I don’t see them visiting anytime soon.”

“They like that warmth, huh? Can’t say that I blame them.”

Something like that. Actually, even if he could, my father would have a lot of balls showing his face around here after what he did. A lot of people suffered because of his mishandling of their retirement funds—some of them losing much of their life savings. His only saving grace is that most of the people he scammed are probably dead by now.

She taps her chin, thinking. “Ah, I remember what Cooper said. Something about you moving in near Anastasia? Are you living in Sapphire Shores?”

“That’s right. I live in the same complex, as fate would have it. By Ted’s. The pizza place?”

“Of course, of course.” She claps her hands again. “That’s wonderful. Really wonderful. Have you seen our girl?”

Our girl. She’s probably talking about her and Mr. Hutton, but I can’t help thinking she means *all of us*. All of us Huttons. She belongs to us, and we should all be looking out for her. If only I’d done a better job of that when I was younger.

“Once or twice,” I murmur, bristling as if she can see right into my thoughts. She wouldn’t like to know what else I’ve been doing with her daughter, because it isn’t exactly a family activity. “I guess we’re on different work schedules.”

“Ah. I suppose it’s good she’s working, even if it is just at that pizza place. She has to keep active. You know, I’ve been a little worried about her ...”

I raise an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“Oh, I hate to talk about it. But us moms, we worry. And she’s just been a little directionless since her engagement ended last year.”

“Engagement?” This is news to me.

“You didn’t know? I suppose you wouldn’t, being down south. We really did lose touch, didn’t we? Well, poor Anastasia, she won’t talk about it much. His name was Mason. They dated in college and he treated her like gold. They were living in Manhattan and seemed so happy, I really thought this was it for her ... and then it ended. I don’t really want to speak more on it, but I think she’s been afraid of getting too close to anyone, ever since ...” She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter. I think it’s great you’re there to keep an eye on her. You will, won’t you?”

I nod. How can I possibly say no? I will *try* to keep an eye on her, even if she doesn't want to be seen by me. "I'll do my be—"

"—I just worry. She doesn't even have a car," Mrs. Hutton continues. "She Ubers everywhere, and I always think those are dangerous ..."

I don't have time to get a word in edgewise, but I don't mind it. Mrs. Hutton is the fluttery type, who moves on from one topic to another without stopping to take a breath. But everything she says is sweet and shows what a big heart she has.

We're impeding the flow of traffic, so we start to walk together down the aisle. I have everything in my basket, anyway, so I listen politely as she talks about Aidan and Cooper and their families and her grandchildren. Then I help her put her groceries on the conveyor and load them back into her cart.

When I finish paying for mine, we walk toward our cars. I notice she still has a blue minivan. She'd driven us to a thousand hockey practices in a van just like that one—I think it might even be the same one.

As I help her load her trunk, she says, "Thank you so much, Alec. You'd think I'd buy less, since it's just me and Mr. Hutton, but I always go overboard for our Sunday dinners. Remember those?"

I laugh. "How can I forget? You made the best meatballs. Sometimes I still dream about them."

"You're so sweet. It's a secret recipe, I—" She suddenly gasps and grabs my arm. "Oh, I have a great idea."

I smile as she squeezes my arm tight. "And what's that?"

"You have to come to Sunday dinner. Meet the grandkids, my daughters-in-law. Actually, Cooper's just engaged, but to the most darling girl, Abby. She's a dental hygienist, and already part of the family. It'll be such a hoot. You're not working, are you?"

"No ... but ..." I hesitate, because as much as I want to be there, as much as I wouldn't dream of letting Mrs. Hutton down, I know someone who won't want me there at all.

Mrs. Hutton shakes my arm a little. “Now, don’t say no. You don’t need to be polite. You’re our family. And you’d be doing us a huge favor. I hate when Stassi has to take those Ubers. So you can drive her. It’s perfect.”

Perfect, except for the fact that I don’t think I can get Stassi into *my* car unless I kidnap her and throw her in the back.

But that’s a small obstacle. The book thing was a failure. It felt wrong, forced, like I was trying too hard. The note didn’t get any response, either. Put it all together, and I bet she thinks I’m coming on too strong.

Then again, this might be just what I need—an opportunity to get a captive audience in Stassi and show her that I’m no longer that asshole she remembers.

“Of course, I’ll be there.” I smile.

“Wonderful.” She hugs me again. “1 pm sharp!”

“I’ll be there.”

“Can’t wait!” She claps again, bouncing up and down on her toes. The little woman always had more energy than she seemed to know what to do with. “With Stassi?”

I nod, thinking, *Maybe*. I’m not sure if I can work that miracle unless it involves duct tape.

But I’ll sure as hell give it the old college try.

Stassi

I sniff the air, sure something's burning.

Then I crack the door to the oven and check on the cakes for my whoopie pies, my contribution to our Sunday family dinner. The light's broken, and the old contraption never heats evenly, so it's always a crapshoot whether anything made inside it will be baked well.

They're still wet, which is good, and I've got plenty of time before I have to leave.

I let out a sigh of relief and check the recipe. It's not a new one for me, and it's just my family, but for some reason, I'm nervous. I've been walking on eggshells around them for the past year ever since my engagement ended. It's something I've told them time and time again that I don't want to talk about, and yet, they keep insisting. They know Mason cheated, and I called off the wedding. But that's literally all they know. And it's not that there's more to it—I just don't see the point in hashing it out, digesting it, or trying to pick it apart. Anymore, though, I get the feeling they think I've gone off the deep end.

Maybe I have.

I'm not the girl I was a year ago, the one who had it all together. Great

job. Great apartment in Manhattan. Loving fiancé who couldn't wait to marry me in a beautiful wedding we'd planned at his grandmother's place in Amagansett.

Of course I was happy when we were together, I was none the wiser.

And naturally, I've been hurting since everything fell apart.

But I'm still here. Still kicking.

Except even a year later, I can't go a few days without one of my family members calling me, asking if I'm okay as if I'm recovering from major surgery. Before, I used to love family catchups. But anymore, more often than not, I don't respond to their texts, and I let their calls go straight to voicemail.

As I'm debating whether to call my mother back—she's called me three times this morning, so something must be up—the phone rings again.

Make that four.

This time, bracing myself, I answer. "Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"Oh, hi, honey." her voice is perpetually as bright and cheery as a sunny summer day. "Were you out earlier?"

"Yeah, I um, went for a run ..." I lie, since she always seems disappointed that I no longer keep up with my exercise schedule.

"A run? Outside? It's twelve degrees. You need to be careful—"

"There's a treadmill at Ted's," I blurt, which is just about as dumb as saying I went to the gym. There are no gyms around here other than the sorry excuse for one in the basement-slash-laundry room of my quad, and Ted's about the unhealthiest person you can imagine, evidenced by the cup of lard he uses to grease every pizza pan.

"Oh, that's nice. Speaking of neighbors, that's why I was calling you."

My stomach drops. She couldn't have. My mother never goes anywhere unless it's grocery shopping at Shaw's.

"Why didn't you tell me that Alec had moved in right next to you?" she asks.

“What difference does it make?” I play it as casual as I can.

“What difference does it make? You know Alec was part of the family. I had no idea he’d come back and moved in right next to you. I had to find out from your brother.”

“It must have slipped my mind,” I fib again—Alec has been running laps in my mind like he owns the place. “I get the sense he’s pretty busy, working at the hospital. I only ran into him once ...”

“Well, I wanted to make sure to call you so that whatever dessert you make for tomorrow, you make extra.”

My belly nose-dives again. “You invited him to Sunday dinner?”

“Of course. I ran into him in Shaw’s while I was shopping for the food, and I couldn’t not. He’s so grown-up. So handsome. A real MD. And here is the best part ...”

She pauses for dramatic effect, and all I can do is brace myself for the “best part”, the cherry on this shit sundae. “What?”

“He offered to drive you, so you won’t have to Uber.”

I clench my teeth so hard they could crack. I *don’t* worry. Not about that, anyway. Taking Ubers is perfectly fine with me. But for some reason, my mother harbors this unnatural fear that, despite me taking every precaution, my Uber driver is suddenly going to decide to take me to a remote place and murder me.

But even if I did get into an Uber with a serial killer, I think I’d find that preferable to driving the ten miles down the road in the company of Alec Mansfield.

I groan. “Mom. I don’t need to go with him. I don’t even know why you invited him.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know, because it’s a *family* dinner, maybe?”

“And he’s *family*. You’re making it seem like you don’t like him?”

Bingo. I don’t. “Family doesn’t disappear for ten years and never try to

get in touch with you.”

She lets out a little *humph*. “That’s interesting, dear. Because I get the feeling if I didn’t keep calling and texting you, you would’ve disappeared a long time ago too.”

She has a point, but I have no response.

“Look, Anastasia. I know that Alec used to give you a hard time, in the old days. But you’ve both matured, have you not? You’re adults. He’s a *doctor*, for goodness’ sake. He’s not going to be a problem. Let him drive you. I already asked him to and he said yes, so it’ll be awkward if I have to tell him you’ve changed your mind. He’ll be confused.”

I stifle a laugh.

I doubt he’ll be confused, but I don’t tell her that.

“And you should’ve seen him,” she goes on. “He’s really excited to see everyone again.”

I let out a little huff. *I bet he is.* “

Fine, Mom, I have to go. I have to—”

“So you’ll drive over with him?” she asks in a lilting, hope-filled tone. I picture her toying with the dainty gold hearts-shaped necklace she always wears. “I know it would mean—”

“—Mom, I’ve got to go,” I cut her off because I don’t want to argue with or explain any of this to her.” Someone’s at the door. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She’s still talking as I pull the phone away from my ear and end the call.

I stalk around the kitchen, imagining Alec sucking up to my mom, like he did in the old days. He probably helped her load her trunk at the supermarket, the perfect surrogate son. He always used to do stuff like that. It drove me nuts, the way he’d kiss up to them, only to turn his nasty side to me.

That sweet boy who used to text me might be in there, somewhere. But Alec’s kept him buried so long, I doubt I’ll ever see him again.

I don’t care what my mother says, I’m not going to ride over with him.

Who does he think he is, for even suggesting that? Did he really think I’d

believe he was doing me a favor? No—he doesn't do anything unless he has something to gain by it.

I'm not even going to answer the door if he knocks. And that's that. I'll sneak across the street to Ted's and catch an Uber from there.

As I'm hatching the plans for my getaway, I inhale sharply and realize something's burning.

I whirl toward the oven to see black smoke pouring out.

“No!” I scream, rushing to it, grabbing a potholder and pulling out the cakes, which are completely charred.

Tossing them in the sink, I turn toward Alec's place and clench my jaw.

“I hate you!” I scream, hoping that he can hear me.

Alec

“Hey, hey. Look who it is.” Aidan meets me at the door, giving me a hearty handshake and a hug.

He and Cooper are identical twins. Before, it used to be tough for teachers and coaches to tell them apart, so they used to have fun playing all sorts of tricks. But it was pretty obvious to anyone else who was who. Cooper’s the cheeky one who likes to get into trouble, and Aidan, who is two minutes older, is the more straight-laced one who’d give you the shirt off his back. Other than that, despite the surface similarities, the more you get to know them, the more different they look.

But I guess they got tired of getting mistaken for one another, because Aidan is clean-shaven, unlike his brother. He’s dressed in jeans, an LL Bean sweatshirt, and a Portland Pirates ballcap. “So, Dr. Mansfield, what’s new?”

Before I can answer, a little girl that can’t be more than two toddles up and grabs ahold of his leg. She has two blonde pigtails, sprouting from the top of her head, and a chocolate mustache.

He lifts her into a football hold and says, “This little peanut is Taffy. She’s my youngest.” He wipes at her mouth. “And she already got into Mimi’s fudge. Come on. I’ll introduce you around.”

Aidan closes the door to the Hutton's modest New England saltbox that still smells exactly how I remember: cinnamon potpourri, Downy fabric softener, and apple-scented dish soap. It's a cute house, nothing fancy, nothing like the monstrosity across the street—my old house, a modern cliffside extravaganza with million-dollar views. It hasn't changed; it's just as cold and foreboding as usual. I could hardly bring myself to look at it as I pulled into the cul-de-sac.

But here, it's all warmth and love, like a Norman Rockwell painting. One step into the kitchen, which is brimming with delicious smells and peopled, and I already feel more at home than I ever did at any of my stiff, sedate family get-togethers. A collective cheer rises up as I show my face, and everyone starts to hug me. Can't remember the last time I received such a warm welcome and it *almost* makes me emotional, but I tamp that shit down.

Aidan introduces a small, pretty girl with a nose ring and bright red hair in a pixie cut. "This is Leah, my wife."

I expect a handshake but I get a tight hug from her, too. "I've heard so much about you, and all of your childhood escapades," she says with a grin, and then they introduce Hudson and Hollis, their five-year-old twins. "These two are already taking after their dad and uncle."

"Spitting image," Aidan says with a chuckle. "They just need an Alec, and they'd be the fearsome three."

I laugh, remembering. That was what their parents used to call us.

"Looks like you guys have to have your hands full," I say, astounded, as a woman with long, dark hair shakes my hand. She's gorgeous, about a thousand steps up from Cooper, looks-wise, and so pregnant she looks like she's about to burst.

"This is Abby, my wife-to-be," Cooper says, trying to grab a little dark-haired boy who races after the other kids. The kid just shakes him off and careens out of the room. "And Flash Gordon over there was Silas. My oldest."

“Nice to meet you, Abby.” I’m shell-shocked by the greetings, knowing I won’t remember the names, but happy to be here all the same.

It’s so surreal, seeing the guys I grew up with now fathers themselves. Makes me wonder what the hell I’ve been up to. I feel like I’m still in the minor leagues, in comparison, waiting to get called up.

As Mrs. Hutton slips her arm around my lower back and gives me a side hug that tells me she’s glad I’m here, I look around.

“Now, where’s our girl?” she asks.

Oh, shit. “She’s not here already?”

Stassi’s mother shakes her head. “Oh, no. What happened? I thought she was riding with you?”

“I knocked on her door. She never answered. I assumed that wires got crossed and she didn’t get the message. I didn’t want to be late, so ...”

Mrs. Hutton clucks her tongue and pulls out her phone. “I’ll text her.”

“Maybe she’s in another one of her moods,” Cooper says. He and Aidan exchange worrisome looks. “When was the last time you talked to her?”

“We texted the other day,” Aidan says. “She seemed ... herself?”

Before Mrs. Hutton can finish dialing on her cell, I catch a brief glimpse of blonde hair through the shades of the front bay window. A moment later, the front door cracks open behind me, and there is Stassi, peering in cautiously, as if she’s about to navigate a minefield.

All attention shifts to her.

“Anastasia!” her mom cries. “Oh, thank goodness. Was just about to call you.”

“You made it, Stass.” Aidan, who is closest to her, says, leaning over to kiss her head the way he used to when she was a knobby-kneed kid and the perpetual baby of the family. Only he quickly pulls away, grimacing as if she smells bad. “Did you burn your clothes or something?”

We’re not all dressed in our Sunday best, but we made an effort. Naturally, the occasion called for it. Stassi, though? She looks as if she

intentionally dressed down, as if she's trying to look like shit, with smudged make-up, a messy ponytail, and stained sweats. She even has some unidentified black stuff smeared on the front of her t-shirt.

"Thought Mom said you were going to *make* dessert," Cooper says as she deposits a box from Shaw's bakery department on the nearest counter. "Not *buy* it."

If looks could kill, the eye daggers Stassi shoots her brother would've been a direct hit. His fiancée elbows him and attempts to smooth things over, "Well, I love whoopie pies no matter where they come from."

Mrs. Hutton pulls Stassi into her arms. "Oh, honey, you look tired. Did you have a late shift last night?"

She nods, but doesn't say anything. The more I stare at her, the more I'm certain she's intentionally avoiding my gaze.

"Why didn't you go with Alec, like I arranged?" Mrs. Hutton asks.

"My oven broke. I had to go to the supermarket," she says, barely audible.

Stassi doesn't get nearly the excited reception I got. In fact, everyone seems a little cautious and restrained around her, as if she's a time bomb that might go off at any second. Silence prevails, and people trade uncomfortable glances. Not sensing the tension in the air, the little girl, Taffy, toddles into Stassi's knees.

It's the first time Stassi smiles.

She reaches down, hoists the girl into her arms, and kisses her forehead.

"How's my little sweetheart?" Stassi coos.

"*Sassi*," the little girl says, gleefully accepting the love and burying her face into the bend of Stassi's neck.

Eventually, the attention swerves from Stassi. Without question, she's avoiding me, because she doesn't look my way. Not once. Not even by accident.

"Can I get you a beer, Alec?" Mr. Hutton says, shaking my hand. It's the

first time in my life he's ever offered me a beer. How can I say no to that? It's basically a rite of passage.

Mr. Hutton is impossibly tall, and a Mr. Rogers type, right down to the sweaters he wears. He likes to work with his hands, do projects around the house, fish, all kinds of normal dad stuff. When he used to run Hutton Hardware downtown, he'd always come home with a project for us to build. Once, we made a treehouse. He's never without a kind word or a smile or even one of his famous lectures when the situation calls for it. "Yeah. That sounds great."

The men wind up in front of the television, watching a hockey game. The Bruins are on a tear this year. I sit on the couch and listen to the boys talk about their lives in Lewiston. Apparently, they not only commute to work together, but they bought houses right next to each other and had kids three months apart.

As I take it all in, I keep glancing over into the kitchen, where Stassi's talking with the women. It wouldn't surprise me if her plan is to ignore me the rest of the night.

But then, as I'm taking my next swig of my beer, it happens.

We lock eyes.

I smile.

Her expression goes cold, and she abruptly looks away.

I know she doesn't want me here. She looks uncomfortable, like a stranger in the house she grew up in, and I can't help thinking it's because of me. But I couldn't have turned down Mrs. Hutton's invite, even if I wanted to.

When the game is over, Mrs. Hutton announces that dinner is ready. Since the house is old, the rooms are small, so they've had to turn their giant dining table at an angle to fit all the adults. All the kids are given juice boxes and meatball sandwiches and put at a folding table on the covered porch just outside, where they can watch Disney movies on an iPad one of the parents

supplied. It brings back memories of when the Huttons used to do the same with us—only we didn't have iPads back then. Usually Mr. Hutton would set out his old RCA AM radio from the garage and play sports highlights for us.

Mrs. Hutton loops her arm in mine.

“Oh, Alec,” she says, surveying the table. “Sit over there. By my husband. All the men on that end.”

I notice it also happens to be right next to where Stassi's headed. As I make my way to that side of the table, I swear Stassi recoils. I try to help pull out her chair, but she ignores me, flopping into her seat and turning her head in the other direction, toward Abby. She even puts her elbow on the table, effectively blocking me out as Mr. Hutton says grace.

“So Alec,” Leah says, sipping red wine as Mrs. Hutton fills plates with her famous spaghetti and meatballs. “I hear you're a doctor? What made you get into that?”

I nod. “Yeah ... emergency medicine. I had an incident with my appendix when I was a kid and—”

“Yeah, we all remember that,” Aidan says, shaking his head. “Scared us all to death. You cried so bad, we all thought you were going to die.”

I forgot about the crying part. First time in my life I wasn't able to hold it in. The pain was unbearable.

Mrs. Hutton looks up. “He would've died if we hadn't gotten there in time. Oh, I still have nightmares about it.”

“Anyway, the Huttons saved my life. I was staying with them while my parents were away,” I explain. “But I mean, I always knew I was going to be a doctor, even before that.”

“You mean your *dad* always knew,” Cooper says, twirling a fork of pasta. Then he starts to mimic my father's voice, pretty convincingly. “*Alec, you get right upstairs and don't come out until you've studied for at least five hours.*”

“Yeah.” I force a chuckle and nearly knock over my wine glass when I go to grab it. I'm never clumsy but today I'm feeling a bit out of my element.

There's too much to take in at once, and I can't help but feel like I've got one foot in the past and the other in the present and it's throwing me off.

Next to me, Stassi notices, because in a flash, she reaches a hand out to stop it. I've already got it. But our fingers graze in the process, sending an electric jolt through mine.

"How are those parents of yours, Alec?" Mr. Hutton asks.

"My father's in prison," I say, not expecting it to be such the bombshell it is. After all, it's not a secret, and I figure they'll find out eventually. It's been in the papers, but the enclave of Sapphire Shores has largely been protected from the outside world.

Clearly, they don't know, because the silence that follows is deadly.

"Prison?" Mrs. Hutton finally fills in. I guess she hasn't heard. Or if she has, she's being polite and pretending she knows nothing. "Oh, no."

"Yeah. I mean," I say casually. "That's what happens when you play games with your clients' funds and don't pay your taxes, apparently. Guess he took a page from Bernie Madoff's playbook."

More silence save for the clinking of silverware against plates.

Finally, Mrs. Hutton says, "Poor Peggy. I should call her. She's probably beside herself."

I shake my head. Mrs. Hutton's relationship with my mother was tenuous at best. Mrs. Hutton tried, because that's what nice people do, but my mom wasn't very receptive.

The Mansfield monarchs always saw the Huttons as disposable, babysitters essentially, but not much use, otherwise. They had so-called "better people" to spend their time with. My parents saw the Huttons as beneath them. Not to mention that they had absolutely nothing in common so any attempts at conversing and connecting were stilted and awkward.

"Honestly, I couldn't even tell you where she is. After my dad's sentencing, she high-tailed it to the islands. But I think she's doing well. Last I heard, her new boyfriend's quite a bit younger than I am."

I don't focus on any one face, but I don't have to. I can feel the horror radiating from every person around the table. This time, I've stunned them all into complete silence.

I take a sip of wine. "You get this from that vineyard in Yarmouth? It's good."

Magically, the smoke clears and Mrs. Hutton beams. "Yes, all the greats from Maine, just for you. We figured you might be missing it."

Cooper quips, "I doubt he misses anything about this place. The wine. The whoopie pies. The Huttons."

He's giving me shit, flashing a smirk, but there's a tiny seed of resentment in his tone.

Resentment I deserve.

"Nah, you're wrong," I say. "I miss it all. I'm really glad to be back, honestly."

Next to me, Stassi softens, though she still refuses to look my way.

"Stassi, do you want your father to come look at your oven?" Mrs. Hutton changes the subject. "Been having a lot of incidents with mine recently and it turned out it just needed a new heating element. Easy fix."

"I could take a look?" I offer. Once my funds were cut off and I was supporting myself in college, I learned to be quite resourceful when it came to repairs around my shit hole apartments. With my crazy school and residency schedule, sometimes it was easier for me to fix things myself rather than call the landlord and wait for some repairman to show up.

"Oh that would be so nice if you could do that, Alec," Mrs. Hutton says.

Stassi doesn't respond, just gulps her wine.

Across the table, Cooper and Aidan look at me like I'm an alien.

These guys know me almost too well. I'm trying too hard, making them suspicious. I need to play it cool and stop kissing her ass.

A minute later, one of the twins whose name I've forgotten, runs in. "Mom! Taffy's spilled apple juice all over the table."

Taffy's mother rolls her eyes, but Stassi pushes away from the table first.

"Don't worry. I've got it," Stassi says before heading out to tend to the kids table.

The meatballs and sauce are just like I remember them. And it's great, catching up with all of the Huttons, but I can't stop my eyes from wandering out to the back room. The kids are chortling and giggling, calling Stassi's name nonstop. Eventually, she comes out with Taffy on piggyback, giving her a ride through the house. The other kids follow, like a grand parade.

Cooper sniffs. "Stassi and her loyal subjects."

"Yeah. I don't know whether to be happy or offended that she prefers their company over ours." Aidan digs into his second helping of spaghetti.

Stassi returns, whirring past us with Taffy, pretending she's in an airplane and making the sounds like one.

"Hey, Stass," Cooper says, "remember the time you said you wanted to be just like Aunt Connie someday? You're almost there."

I remember them talking about Aunt Connie. She was their crazy aunt that visited once or twice a year, the chain-smoking, Buick-driving, casino-loving, polyamorous, vivacious older sister of Mrs. Hutton. They all loved her as kids, until they realized she was a few sandwiches short of a picnic.

Stassi gives him a look. "You guys always made fun of her, but she dated one of the Beach Boys and she was Pamela Anderson's personal assistant for an entire year in the nineties before hightailing it overseas and shacking up with some French chef until she moved to Amsterdam and traveled the countryside with an eight-piece folk band. She was amazing. She really *lived*."

We all stare at her for a beat, letting that sink in.

And then I realize they're speaking of her in past tense.

"I think she just liked her vodka tonics too much," Cooper says with a shrug.

Aidan laughs. Mrs. Hutton gives them severe looks.

“You can make fun of her all you want, but I always adored her,” Stassi says, setting Taffy down and smoothing her hair back into her ponytail. “I don’t think I’m worthy of the Crazy Aunt title yet, but maybe someday, and if I am, I’ll be honored because it’ll mean that I actually lived my life instead of letting my life happen to me.”

We fall into silence. She looks around at us, then kisses the top of Taffy’s head.

“Anyway, thanks for dinner. Good to see everyone,” Stassi announces.

Mrs. Hutton jumps up in alarm, as if her daughter just announced she was going to jump off a bridge. “Wait, what? You just got here. What about dessert?”

Stassi shakes her head and reaches for her phone, showing the display to her. “I have an Uber waiting outside and a bunch of things to get done at home.”

Hell, looks like she always planned to make this trip a pit stop. I bet she ordered that Uber the second she got out of the one that brought her here.

“Can’t they wait?” Mr. Hutton asks.

“Unfortunately no,” Stassi says, making her way around the table and giving everyone hugs and kisses.

Everyone except me.

She skips over me, as if I’m a rock in her path.

And then she breezes out.

I don’t want to make it seem like I’m thinking about her, but I figure now, while she’s on everyone’s mind, is the only time I’m going to have to bring it up. “

“So what *has* she been up to, lately?” I venture casually. “She was like, valedictorian, wasn’t she? Always figured she was going to get out of this place, move to a big city somewhere and get a high-powered job. Take over the world. That sort of thing.”

There’s a short pause. Then Aidan says, “You didn’t hear?”

“Jonathan happened,” Cooper mutters, fingering the rim of his wine glass. Mr. Hutton clears his throat. “That’s not fair. She got past that.”

“Then Mason happened,” Cooper adds, staring down at his empty beer bottle like he’s contemplating a refill—or worrying about Stassi. Maybe both. “She hasn’t had the best luck with love.”

“Who’s Mason?” I ask.

Her mother frowns, drawing in a long breath. “Mason was her college sweetheart. They dated all four years and he proposed shortly after graduation. They moved to New York, got jobs and a nice apartment. They were planning their weddings, their careers, their whole lives. They had it all. But unfortunately didn’t work out.”

Aidan rolls his eyes. Mr. Hutton clears his throat.

“Is that what you call it? *Not working out*?” He looks at me, snorting. “Two weeks before the wedding, she found out the asshole had a side piece, pretty much the entire time they were together. He only fessed up because he got the other girl pregnant. After that, Stassi quit her job, moved home, and basically checked out of life. Said she was trying to figure out her next move, but she’s been working at Ted’s for about a year now and it doesn’t look like it’s going to change any time soon.”

“What was she doing in New York?” I ask. “For work, I mean?”

“Public relations,” Mrs. Hutton says, a hint of melancholy in her voice. “Her firm represented some Fortune 500 tech companies and some smaller start-ups. She was so good at what she did. They were about to promote her, too, when everything ... happened.”

“How much longer are we going to let her mope around?” Aidan asks. “At some point, I feel like we need to stage an intervention.”

I blink, trying to pick a single follow-up question from the dozens that invade my head, when Mrs. Hutton shushes them.

“Don’t say that. She’s not moping. She’s resting. Yes, she was overwhelmed, heartbroken, devastated, and she was working a highly

stressful job. She decided to come home, unplug a little. She's getting things back together, taking care of herself."

"Is that what she's doing?" Cooper mutters, not attempting to hide his sarcasm. "Most of the people I know who are resting and taking care of themselves don't seem that miserable."

"Have a little heart, honey," Mrs. Hutton says. "And a little hope too. After she lost Jonathan, we thought she'd never be happy again. Then she met Mason. And even though that didn't work out, he was proof that she could move on. I have no doubt she'll move on when the time is right. Until then, she has us. And our only job is to love and support her, not rush her healing process because we hate seeing her like this."

Damn.

No wonder Stassi's been pushing me away so hard.

"So this Mason guy," I say to her brothers. "Did you kick his ass?"

They snicker.

"Assuredly," Aidan says.

Mr. Hutton hides a snicker and Mrs. Hutton rolls her eyes.

"Aidan broke his nose," Cooper adds, which makes Aidan beam like he just scored the winning point in a championship Panthers game. "Amongst other things."

"Wouldn't be surprised if the guy won't be able to have any more kids after what we did," Aidan says. "Hope he enjoys the one he has."

"Jesus," I cough. I remember the kind of damage they used to do back in the day, when they were half this size. I can only imagine what else they did to that douche.

Well, that's a relief. But not much of one. It means they're still protective of her—which means they'd probably take me into a dark alley if they knew even an ounce of what all has gone on between Stassi and me. Not just now, but in the past too.

The woman has been through the ringer. It wasn't enough that I tortured

her throughout high school, then she went on to lose her first love in a drowning accident and just when she thought she was getting another shot at happiness, that blew up in her face too.

I can't blame her for pushing me away.

But I can't blame myself for wanting to be the one to make it right for her.

It's the least I can do.

Stassi deserves all the happiness in the world, and I want to be the one to give that to her.

Stassi

A few days after the shit show Sunday dinner, I'm taking out the trash behind the apartment complex when I notice Alec sitting on his balcony.

What the hell is he doing? It's dark, zero degrees, and that balcony does nothing but provide a breathtaking view into the window of the condo across the way.

Dumbass, I think, trying to creep to the dumpster as quietly as possible.

I haven't seen him or talked to him since Sunday, but I don't quite hate him as much as I once did. Maybe because I understand him a little better. It was easy to think he's living this perfect life in an ivory tower, but now, I know that's not the case. I heard the way his voice broke when his father was mentioned. It couldn't have been easy living with a man who demanded perfection like that. I'm sure he lived his entire life trying to please Mr. Mansfield, to be as perfect as he thought his father was.

And then, it'd all come crumbling down ...

You think you know someone and then it turns out they were lying to you the whole time. It's been a theme in my life, but up until Sunday, I didn't realize it was a theme in Alec's life too.

Who'd have thought the two of us would ever have anything in common?

Still, just because I understand him better doesn't mean I want to hang with him. And I don't need to be the friendly neighbor he comes to for a cup of sugar when he's out. I'm perfectly content with a civil cease-fire, where we exist in the same area, but never interact.

Unfortunately, the damn plastic dumpster lid creaks loudly as I pull it open and throw the trash bag in.

The next thing I know, Alec's voice cuts through the darkness. "Stassi? That you?"

I sigh.

I can't ignore him. "Hey."

"Your whoopie pies were great, by the way."

I keep walking. "Don't thank me. Thank Shaw's."

"You left early. Before things got really wild."

I stop. "Did my mom break out the Michigan Rummy?"

"No. I was waiting. I had a whole can of pennies in the truck, just in case."

I have to smile at that. Much of my family time growing up was gathered around that same dining room table, playing Michigan Rummy for pennies. For a family-friendly game, it'd sometimes get a little cutthroat and raucous.

"We use quarters now," I tell him.

"Whoa. That's too rich for my blood," he says, and I laugh.

Moving closer to the balcony, I try to get a look at where he's sitting. "What are you doing up there? You actually have room?"

"Yeah. I don't have a grill or bicycle. Room for two. And I have beer. Come on up. Front door's open."

I hesitate. I shouldn't do it. But then again, Mad and Joe are inside, and they're engaging in yet another Olympic sex marathon. I don't know why it bothers me, but it does. It shouldn't, and it never used to, but lately it makes me feel more alone.

"Fine," I relent.

A moment later, I'm making my way through his front door then past his bedroom, trying to ignore the things we did on that mattress weeks ago.

He meets me at the sliding door and hands me a beer. There's only one chair, but he stands and motions for me to sit. Then he leans against the wobbly railing. As I sit, I realize the balcony's slanting precariously forward.

"Are you sure this thing can hold both of us?" I ask.

"No." He shrugs.

I place the beer between my legs and dig my hands into the pockets of my parka. "It's freezing. Why'd you even come out here?"

"Your roommate was going for round three and I wanted to give my ears a break."

"Ah. I know what you mean." I look out across the courtyard and, sure enough, I can see right into the bedroom there. A rather large, middle-aged woman is lying in bed, doing leg lifts while she watches TV. "Great view."

He nods. "That? That's nothing. You should see what happens next."

We watch in silence. Eventually, the woman gets on her hands and knees and starts doing donkey kicks.

"Impressive," I say. "What do you think she's watching?"

"Looks like ..." he squints. "A Denzel Washington movie? Equalizer maybe?"

"Good one," I say. "Love Denzel."

"You should ask if she wants company. That'd be the neighborly thing to do."

I snort and take a drink of my beer. "You should know by now that I'm not that kind of neighbor."

"Yeah, I know." He takes a drink. "So what do you do for fun around here? When you're not serving crappy pizza and reading old books?"

"Are you asking because you care or because you're being nosy?" I ask.

"Both."

"Appreciate the honesty." I take another drink. Mom called me Sunday

night to tell me they'd filled Alec in on the whole Mason situation, though while she was sharing that with me under the guise of giving me a heads' up, I got the feeling her true intentions was to let me know that Alec knows I'm single.

If she knew the kind of things he put me through in high school, she wouldn't have been so gung-ho about that.

"Nah. Actually," he says, "I was thinking about what we used to do around here, during the winters, when we were too old to play in the snow. And I couldn't think of anything."

"That's because you guys were never too old to play in the snow," I mutter. "Or fling it at me."

"Ah. Right."

"You used to do donuts in the snow in the cul-de-sac, in that old Mustang Aidan had. Remember? One time, you ended up on our front lawn and nearly knocked that big tree in front of our house over. My dad was so pissed."

"Yeah ... I remember that." He's grinning. "Good times."

"Not that good. It was all my dad could do to stop you three from getting arrested. After that thing you did at Sweets? You knocked over that whole display. Ruined a few hundred dollars' worth of local honey and jam."

His parents paid for it, of course.

But my father was still livid that they put themselves in that predicament in the first place.

"Oh, right." The moonlight cuts down on his spectacular features, making him look as if he's carved of marble. That smug smile on his face is pure male pride. He looks like a cat with a canary. "That was good stuff."

I snort. "Was the possibility of juvenile hall worth it?"

"I don't know," he says, contemplating. "Sometimes I think I did half that stuff to try and get my parents' attention. Never worked though."

"That seems to be a pattern with you."

His emerald greens rest on mine. "Yeah. You're right."

I suppose it's more complicated than that though. Everything always is.

With Alec's father, he could only act one way—like a machine. With my brothers, he was able to let loose. Have some of that teenage fun. No wonder he still remembers it fondly, wearing a smile that transforms his whole face.

“Sorry about your dad,” I say. “That must have been awful for you.”

Alec shrugs, swirling his beer bottle. “Don't feel bad for me. Feel bad for the thousands of innocent people who lost their life savings.”

Mr. Mansfield wasn't just incredibly militant in order to ensure Alec stayed in line so he could succeed. There was no love in that house, at all. That was why Alec preferred to be with us on holidays, why I never heard his parents say they loved him, why they never came to any of the hockey games. Alec wasn't their son, he was simply the heir to their legacy.

That thought had hit me, hard, during Sunday dinner. For the first time, I saw how even hundreds of miles away, Mr. Mansfield still affected Alec, making him tremble, even as a grown man. I'd seen little hints of it, heard voices raised in anger while pedaling my bike, saw him sitting out on the beach, alone, even when my brothers weren't around. But I'd never put the pieces together until that moment.

That's why I had to get out of there Sunday.

Understanding Alec, my childhood nemesis? The horror.

If I went soft on him, it could only mean one thing...

“I'm surprised you came back here,” I say.

He chuckles. “Why wouldn't I? Some of the best times I had were right here. I mean, you came back, too, so it's not that bad, right? Plus I missed the blueberry ice cream we used to get at the farm on 115. That alone is worth it.”

I nod. “At Toots? Oh, yeah, little more of a drive, but way better than Sweets. Sweets closed down last year.”

“Damn.”

“Pretty sure they still kept your guys' faces on their Wall of Shame until

the last day.”

He chuckles. “We were legendary.”

“Amongst other things.”

There’s a silence, and maybe it’s the few swigs of liquid courage in my veins, but I bring myself to ask a daring question.

“What else did you miss about this town?” I ask.

He doesn’t miss a beat. “There’s one thing I really *missed*. It’s something I’d think about randomly, while I was doing my rounds at the hospital, and it would always excite me.”

I lean in, interested. The way he’s saying it makes me think he’s about to make some emotional confession, probably about one of the girls he dated. He always went out with the prettiest, most-wanted girls in high school.

“Let me guess,” I say before he can answer. “Carlina Smith.”

He looks over at me. “Who?”

I frown. Did I have the name wrong? No, no one ever forgets her name. “You dated her almost your entire senior year. She was your prom queen.”

He nods slowly. “Oh, right. Big ...” He puts his hands out in front of him to signify breasts. “Yeah. No. I haven’t thought about her in years. You know where she is?”

“She’s married. I hear she has six kids and lives upstate,” I say dismissively. I shouldn’t have wagered any guesses, because I’m now on the edge of the seat to hear what he actually missed because the tension lingering between us makes me think he’s about to divulge some deep secret. “What were you saying? You missed ...?”

“Oh, yeah. I miss going 80 miles an hour down Brown’s Hill, down that steep drop, the way it made me come out of my seat and feel like I was flying even if it was only for five seconds.”

I stare at him, nose wrinkled. Okay, that was a thing the kids in high school did around there, but it never appealed to me. I can’t see why anyone would miss something so *silly*.

“Really?”

“Hey, don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it,” he says, cracking open another beer. “*Have you ever tried it?*”

“Out there? No. Why? All the bad kids used to go there to drink and make out and smoke weed.” I shudder at the thought. That stuff never appealed to me. It always seemed unsafe.

“Oh, so, *I’m* a bad kid? What happened to that shit you said at dinner, about living life?”

“You’re not bad, but ...” Jonathan always used to think I wasn’t worthy of a place like that. He always used to treat me like a princess, taking me out to nice dinners and solitary picnics on the beach. *You’re not like them. You’re better than them. You deserve more than a drunken, back-of-the-car make-out session.* “It’s just not my scene.”

“Okay, so what *is* your scene?”

I open my mouth to answer, but then I realize, I *have* no answer. Jonathan took my virginity on the beach, during one of those picnics, after plying me with some fancy wine he’d taken from his parents’ home bar. Back then, it had felt a lot classier than Brown’s Hill. But was it, really? Or was I blinded by the throes of a young, first love?

And he’s right. I’m nothing like my zany aunt. I’ve barely lived at all.

Alec seems to understand my silence. “I’ll take you sometime.”

“That’s okay.”

“You’re the one who said you wanted to live. Like Aunt Connie.”

“Yeah. But not with you.”

“What’s wrong with me? I think if I got you in the right mood ...”

“Don’t press your luck. You barely got me up on this sorry excuse for a balcony.”

“Yeah, but I got you up here.”

He’s right. I am. And again, it’s dangerous territory. If I want this civil détente to continue, I shouldn’t be wandering this far into enemy territory.

“Anyway, I’m freezing.” I rise quickly as a shiver runs through me. I’ve only had a few swigs of my beer, but I should go. I set it down and go to the sliding door. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Wait.” He follows me. “I’ll walk you out.”

That’s odd. I didn’t need his help getting here. What suddenly made him a good host? But the second it hits me, I realize we’re both standing outside his bedroom. Inches from his mattress. Where the magic happened.

As if on cue, the wall starts to pound, and Mad begins to moan as they start round four of the day. The weight of Alec’s stare rests on me, but I do everything not to return it.

“We’ve got to do something about this,” he says. “It’s a little much. Why don’t they go to his place?”

“Pretty sure he lives in his mother’s basement,” I say, cringing.

Without warning, Alec jumps over the mattress and starts banging on the shared wall between the apartments.

“Aw, yeah, you like it harder, Stassi? You want all of this?” he shouts in an overblown, overdramatic way, impressively in tempo with the banging coming from Mad’s room.

Heat climbs to my cheeks. “What the hell are you doing?”

He sets his beer bottle aside and starts banging even harder, with both hands this time.

“What does it look like?” He answers, then he turns to the wall. “You want this big, fat cock, Stassi?”

“Oh my God. I can’t with you. I’m leaving.” I head for the door. Sometimes it’s hard to believe he’s a big, mature doctor who saves lives for a living and not a perpetual frat boy.

Alec doesn’t stop. And the funny thing is, neither do Mad and Joe. They’re completely oblivious, which means they’ll keep going at it, even when I’m back in my apartment, and it’ll be even worse, because I’ll be alone.

I groan and slump against the wall. “Guess I won’t be getting any sleep tonight. Again.”

He stops banging on the wall and turns to me.

“Also, for the record, you do not have *a big, fat cock*,” I tell him. “And I would *never* beg for it.”

He looks down at himself. “No? You sure about that?”

I nod, straightening my shoulders. “I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

“In that case.” He motions to the television set. “You’re welcome to watch a movie here. I’ll turn it up loud so we’ll drown them out.”

Skeptical, I check out the arrangement. I’ll have to sit on his mattress, which can be all sorts of dangerous. But at least I won’t be alone. My lips twist. “You’ll keep your not-so-big, fat cock to yourself?”

Alec smirks. “It’s big and fat and you know it. But if you insist.”

I look at the television. “What movie?”

“Whatever you want. I’ll let you choose. We can even watch a Denzel movie if you want.”

Weighing my options, I decide staying here and watching a movie is the lesser of two evils, so I sink down onto the very edge of the mattress, sitting primly, like it’ll swallow me up if I get comfortable. “Fine. But only if we’re watching *The Princess Bride*.”

“A classic.” He sits down next to me. I used to watch this movie religiously as a kid and he’d always give me crap for it, but to this day, it’s my go-to comfort watch. And I could use a bit of comfort these days.

I find it on Netflix, and I turn up the volume almost to the max which mostly drowns out the sounds next door. We haven’t even gotten to the Farm Boy part when he says something.

“What?” I ask.

He takes the remote, lowers the volume, and motions to the wall. “They’ve stopped.”

“Oh.” I start to get up.

“Wait. Where you going?” He’s lying on his side on the mattress, pillow under his head. I can’t deny he looks good in his t-shirt and jeans, barefooted and casual. “Let’s finish it.”

I’ve never been able to tear myself away from this movie. I take off my shoes and slowly inch back on the mattress so my back is against the wall for support, and I keep my arms and hands close to my body, as if I’m about to board a dangerous rollercoaster.

“You don’t have to look like it’s a death sentence, you know,” he says as he observes me.

“What do you mean?” I glue my eyes to the television. “I’m fine.”

But every part of me is prickling with heat, thinking about what we did on this bed. Why couldn’t it have been anyone else but him? If it’d have been some random hot guy I met on the app, I’d have no problem casually hooking up. But casual isn’t a word that will ever belong in the same sentence as Alec Mansfield.

“Are you though?” He reverses direction, getting onto his knees to look into my eyes. “You look uncomfortable.”

“I said I’m fine,” I over enunciate my response. But as I attempt to focus on the movie, I can’t help but notice him watching me instead of the screen. “Hello? Eyes that way.”

“What if I just want to look at you?”

I give him a look. “Don’t make this weird.”

He grins. “I’m not making it weird. You’re overthinking it.”

“I’m overthinking the fact that you’re staring at me instead of the movie we’re supposed to be watching?”

“Basically.”

I roll my eyes. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you looking at me?”

“Because I can.” He rolls to his side and props his head on his hand. “And because every time I’m near you, I can’t take my eyes off of you.”

I roll my eyes again, this time so hard it hurts. “You really think that’s going to work on me?”

“I have no idea what works on you at this point. I’m just being honest.”

I want to believe him, but knowing the kind of person he used to be, the number of times he fooled me, I’m hesitant.

“I think I should go,” I say again, and this time, I really mean it.

“What if I asked you to stay.”

“What if I told you you’re trying too hard?” I shoot him a look. “And you’re wasting your time?”

“What if I told you you’re all I think about every fucking minute of every fucking day.” His words send a hard stop to my heart, and suck the air from my lungs at the same time. “What if I told you I’ve been crazy about almost my entire life?”

“I’d tell you you’re full of shit. That you’re horny and you probably just need to get laid.”

“Why is it so hard for you to believe I like you?”

“Uh, let’s see ...” I start rattling off all the horrible things he did to me growing up, counting off my fingers one by one.

But before I can finish, he pulls me close to him, and once again, all the air wooshes out of my lungs.

“I say this with the utmost respect.” He studies my lips. “Shut up, Stassi.”

With that, he kisses me, hard, pinning me back on the mattress. My body is lit, on fire, squirming beneath him as my head and my heart go to war.

I pull away, breathless, I say, “Now I really should go.”

He takes my wrists and fastens them over my head. “Are you sure?”

It’s a challenge. And he’s right. Arms and legs tangled, I don’t want to move from this spot at all. He feels too good pressed against me. Too right. I draw in a shaky breath as it hits home.

As much as I hate Alec, I'm still obsessed with him.

Every little part of him.

For almost as long as I can remember.

And now he's gazing at me in a way that could almost make me believe he's equally obsessed with me.

But his words have always been cheap and his actions have always been cruel. Falling for this again, believing he could be something he isn't, is a gamble I can't afford to take.

My breasts push against his chest, so close that his heartbeat is thudding against mine. He leans his head down and kisses me, soft and tender, his eyes begging me for permission. It's something I didn't expect from him.

"*Fuck*," I whisper, completely melted and gasping from the unexpected tenderness of this moment.

I want him.

Really want him.

I want his hands in my hair and his mouth on my body and his cock so deep inside me it fills me to the hilt.

"Hm." He ruins this moment with a grin of pure male pride, but it doesn't matter. I'm too invested now. "So you *do* want this big, fat--"

"It's your turn to shut up, Mansfield." I lift my head to kiss him, hard.

He makes quick work of freeing me from my shirt, my bra, and my sweatpants before all but ripping off my panties. I race my fingers down his strong back, under his jeans, to the globes of his ass, kneading them. He growls into his kisses, then his mouth drops down, lower, lower, finding purchase on my breast. And all at once he's licking and sucking my nipple, leaving me spasming and arching my back in pure delight. I scratch at his ass with my fingernails, pushing myself off the bed, meeting his open mouth. He stays like that for what seems like hours, just licking and kissing my breasts, cupping one and then the other, and the small fire in my belly starts to gather into a fiery inferno.

Then his mouth slowly trails downward, licking and nibbling to my navel. His rough cheeks are like sandpaper against my skin, but it's an amazing friction. He slides off the bed then suddenly grabs my leg, lifting it up, positioning himself so that I can feel his breath on my clit. I let out an animal groan as his nose grazes the length of my seam and the warmth of his tongue follows.

"I love the way you taste," he says, his breathy, hot whispers sending jolts of pleasure through me. "I can eat this all day."

He nudges my thighs wider on the edge of the bed, spreading me open.

I toss my head back but make sure I never stop watching him as he relentlessly devours me. His eyes are locked on mine as he licks and sucks and teases and nibbles, the bottom half of his face buried in me.

Then the feeling starts to overpower me, and my belly quivers, and I can't control myself. I writhe on the bed, arching and bucking in time to his tongue's lapping. I coil my fingers in his thick hair and push his face into my sex. And just when I think it can't get better, he slides a finger inside me.

And holy shit.

"Oh my god," I moan. "Yes ... right there ... keep doing that ..."

He slowly eases another finger into me, making me shudder uncontrollably. He slides them in and out in time to my thrusts against him, and all the while his mouth is nipping and nibbling on my clit.

I don't want him to stop. I want release. I'm coming to the edge again, and I can't back down now. I scream into the pillow, sobbing and arching and bucking against his face so violently I slide off the bed, and he catches me in his arms, holding me against it.

"Oh God, please..." I'm begging him. Please what? I don't even know what I want from him. Just more of this.

Suddenly I'm exploding. Screaming and sobbing and falling to pieces, with his tongue buried deep inside me. He carries me over to oblivion, staying there to make sure I'm okay. Then he climbs up my shuddering body,

the stubble around his mouth glistening with my juices. I'm blushing, hard and hot.

"Oh my God," I murmur, my body still convulsing.

His hand slides between my legs, fingering my clit, and then slowly, he delves a finger into me. I gasp as a fever shoots through every one of my nerves. His finger slides slowly and rhythmically, in and out of me, making me moan and wriggle under his touch. His touch on my clit is gentle and soft and slow, circling surely so that now the wetness is coursing out of me. I feel an ache in my belly, something inside me, yearning to be filled.

He's going to do it again. Make me beg for the main attraction. For his big, fat cock inside me. I can't take it.

"Alec. Please," I beg him.

This time, though, he has mercy. I rest my weight on my elbows, watching him take his cock in his hand, rip the condom packet, slide it on, and guide himself between my legs. He pauses at my entrance and looks into my eyes, again asking silent permission. I nod, biting my lip in anticipation.

He covers me with his body, and suddenly I feel him sliding slowly into me, inch by inch, filling me.

"God," he murmurs, voice strained and husky. His hands are gripping my hips. "You're so incredible."

And then he is flush against me, hips against hips. He's huge, but he completes me, stretching me, and I feel him inside me, throbbing with his heartbeat. I let out a shuddery breath and savor the feeling of his hot skin totally against mine, blanketing me. I kiss the side of his face, salty with his sweat.

Pressure is building, an explosion just waiting to happen. Before it can, he releases his grip on my hips and pulls himself out. I feel the tip of his shaft at my entrance for a mere breath, and then he plunges inside, slowly and steadily.

I can't help it. It rips a shriek from my mouth.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I cry out, not giving a damn if Mad or Joe or anyone else can hear me now. “Harder ... don’t stop ...”

“You like this,” he growls out, voice strained as I’m now lifting my hips off the bed, meeting his every thrust in a steadily hastening rhythm. We’re both covered in sweet sweat, and the friction is threatening to make us burst into flames. “Just admit you need this just as much as I do.”

I moan in pleasure as the feeling that started low in my belly is now radiating out, threatening to take over every inch of me. Now, I feel shameless. I want this to go on forever. The pressure between my thighs is now thundering through me, taking me to the very edge, and I know an explosion is coming.

He slows his thrusts, sliding in and out, testing the rhythm, getting even deeper. His chest slides against my hard nipples, and suddenly, I let out a cry. He’s found the right place, because the chaotic ecstasy is almost too much to take. I’m getting even hotter and closer with every plunge.

I hook my legs around his hips and he buries himself impossibly deep inside me. I’m frantic as I find myself building to the edge of that peak.

My entire body ripples with such intensity as I scream out his name and come with such force hard that I’m practically sobbing, even as I start to come down.

He must’ve been holding out on me because the second I find myself coming down, he plummets deep into me, holding me there, and I feel him pulsating inside me. He lets out a long, muffled groan into my hair, then whispers my name, his breath hot against my ear.

“Stassi,” he murmurs as the shuddering subsides, gazing dreamily into my eyes. He falls then, completely limp, into my arms. “You’re *everything*.”

I’ve been called a lot of things before, but never that.

Alec places a gentle kiss on my collarbone as I bask in his words. But as the heat of the moment slips away, it becomes more and more clear: I’ve done what I told myself I wouldn’t do again.

I've jumped without a net.

And I know better than anyone how hard the ground can be.

Alec

As cold as it is on this March day, it's colder still, knowing I have to spend it at the Maine Medical Center. It's already not my favorite place, because it's a hospital. My place of work. It's been even worse, though, because for another twenty-two hours, there's no chance I'll be seeing Stassi.

Three days.

That's how long it's been since we made love and she left my place like she couldn't get out of there fast enough.

I don't know how she does it. We live right next to each other, practically in each other's business. I've seen that sex-addict roommate of hers, plenty of times, usually when she gets in her car and heads to work. I feel like an idiot, or a Pomeranian, every time I run to the front window, hoping to catch Stassi, only to be disappointed.

It's like she's like a ghost. Either she's spending all of her time in her apartment, not making a sound, or she's doing an expert job of avoiding me.

I strongly suspect it's the last one.

Maybe I should be, too.

There's no way I can face the Huttons now. The first time, I might have been able to chalk it up to a drunken accident, a lonely mistake. But twice? I

all but pounced on the woman. Zero self-restraint. And it was incredible. But like everything else, actions have consequences.

Still, I can't bring myself to regret a moment of the nights we've spent together. Every time I think about her, I only want more. The sex was phenomenal. I didn't think it was possible to beat the first time, but somehow it was monumentally better the second time around.

And it wasn't just hate sex.

I think there was a little bit of "like" in there, too.

Or maybe it was all in my mind.

Maybe I'm going crazy.

I must be, because even now, as I finish my rounds this evening, Stassi is all I can think about. Even though, at this moment, I'm positive she's back to cursing my name.

I somehow make my way through the elderly woman with an acute respiratory infection and the man with chest pains. They're standard cases, nothing I haven't treated a hundred times before, so I order an echo for the man and instruct the nurses to pump the woman full of fluids. When I'm done, it's miraculously time to head home.

My twenty-four-thousand-hour shift is finally over.

Tucking my white coat in my locker, I pull my phone out with the hope that Stassi might've finally decided to use the number I gave her.

She hasn't. Of course she hasn't.

Instead, there's a message from Cooper.

I grit my teeth for a second, thinking, *She told him*. But then I open it.

It's just an invitation.

Cooper: *Hey, brother, we're going out for lobster tomorrow. You want in?*

Brother. It was great catching up with them during dinner, and I felt welcome, like part of the family. But now, I don't feel like their brother anymore.

I feel like a traitor.

How am I supposed to show up with a straight face and act like I didn't just screw their little sister ... twice?

Still, going out with old friends, cracking some beers, talking about the old times might be exactly what I need to take my mind off her. Otherwise, I'm probably going to do something stupid. Try too hard, again. Kiss her ass. Be that pathetic Pomeranian. And push her even farther away in the process.

Alec: *Sounds good.*

When I get home, her apartment is dark. It's after nine. I wonder if she's still at Ted's, getting ready to close up.

If she is, I'm not going to make the mistake of going in there so she can ignore me—or, even worse, sic Markie the Italian bulldog on me. There's no doubt that lady does not like me. She practically bit my ass, chasing me out the door, a couple weeks ago.

I stare at Stassi's place, and then at my own. I guess it's going to be the same way it's been, the past two nights without her—me, getting drunk on the balcony, waiting for her to come by and bless me the way she did the other night.

It's almost too much to take.

So I reach into the center console, grab a pad and pen, and scribble a note.

Maybe the only way we can communicate right now is through some hot, dirty sex. And if that's all she's willing to give me right now, that's fine by me.

Stassi

Cold eggplant pizza isn't doing it for me tonight.

The thing was, it *needed* to be. There's nothing in the fridge, and I don't have the money for takeout. My part of the rent is due next week and tips have been terrible this winter.

I don't even have enough money for myself.

I have the television on, but I'm not watching it. I keep looking at the walls, wondering how long I'll be able to call them mine.

I can't go back home.

My parents might be the most wonderful people on Earth, but I've made them worry enough.

I can't call Aidan or Cooper, because they'll start asking questions and answering them will only make this whole thing worse.

I'm alone.

Completely alone.

As I'm sitting on the sofa in the darkness, a key jingles in the lock. A second later, Mad walks in. Joe trails behind her like a tail, already on her ass, groping her boobs from behind. They're not expecting me, because I always have the dinner shift at Ted's. I guess they were looking forward to

another loud screw-fest, one that I've clearly disrupted, from the way they stop and stare at me in shock.

"Oh," Mad says, gauging the situation. "I didn't know you were home ... why are all the lights off?"

She trails off. She's no idiot. She can see something's up.

"Who's that," Joe mumbles, between attempts of trying to swallow Mad whole. He's all-right looking, a little too used-car salesman for me, and his face is always pinched. And yes, he has a bit of a large chin. Not that I can see it, because it's lost in her mussed up hair.

Mad swats him off. "Duh, it's Stassi. My roommate."

He gazes at me as if seeing me for the first time. Okay, so it's probably the *fourth* time he's actually seen me. Most of the time, I catch him half-asleep and naked in the dark upstairs hallway, heading to the bathroom to shed a condom. I think I know his skinny white ass better than his face.

"Oh, hey," he says.

Mad starts reversing direction and shoving him towards the door.

"Sorry. Change of plans. I need some roomie time," she says, reaching behind him and opening the door. She shoves him out. "Call me later, okay?"

"But—" I hear him say from the front stoop before she slams the door on him.

She approaches the couch and stoops in front of me to get a better look. "Aw, babe, is everything okay?"

I shake my head. I can't even find words.

There are no words.

No words that can ever explain what a deep pile of shit I'm in.

"Did Ted fire you?" she asks.

If only *that* was the problem.

I'd be ecstatic if that was all I had to worry about.

"If he did, good! I can get you an admin job at my place. They need someone to type in new listings. You'd like it. And you'd fit right in. And we

could carpool together and—”

She stops when she sees me shaking my head.

“Okay. Then what?” she asks.

I reach into my purse. It’s still on my shoulder. I look exactly the way I had, three hours ago, when I came in from my doctor’s appointment in downtown Portland, and collapsed in a heap of *What the hell am I going to do?*

Then I pull out the prescription and hand it to her.

She reads, and her eyes widen.

“Does this say prenatal vitamins?” She squints at it, as if she’s expecting the words to change. “Stassi, why ... are you—”

I can’t hear the word, so I blurt, “I went to the OB/GYN for my yearly and to refill my birth control. And she gave me those.”

She sits next to me. “Something happened though, at the appointment. They don’t just give you prenatal vitamins for the hell of it. Did they do a pregnancy test?”

I nod and my lips quiver. “It came back positive.”

She gasps, clapping a hand over her open mouth.

“Who ...” she begins, but she already knows the answer. It’s not like I have a line of potential suitors at the door every night. Her eyes go to the side, toward Alec’s apartment. “How?”

“The condom must have broken? I don’t know!”

“But you’re on the pill. Aren’t you?”

I nod vigorously, hoping that means it’s all just a crazy mistake.

“The odds of that happening must be extraordinarily minuscule. Maybe it was a false positive?” she suggests with enough confidence in her tone to make me believe her.

“That’s what I told her. So to humor me, she gave me two more, just to check. Each one came back positive. Then she did a blood test. I’m definitely ...”

I can't finish my sentence.

Mad say nothing. She simply clicks on a nearby lamp, gets me some water from the kitchen, fluffs my pillows, and covers me in my favorite throw blanket, like I'm a terminally ill hospital patient. When I have a few sips, I start to feel a little more human. A shell-shocked human, but a human nonetheless.

"Doing okay?" she asks.

I nod. "Thanks."

"Do you have any nausea? Any weird pains? Any ... anything?"

"No ..." I trail off. I don't, but as I look over at her, the realization hits me. I'll be feeling all that stuff, won't I? In the next nine months, my body will be going through a massive transformation. I won't be Stassi anymore. I'll be someone's mother. I can't even take care of myself, how am I going to take care of a *baby*?

My mother at least had the greatest man on Earth to help her.

I have ...

Alec.

Forget what I said. I *am* feeling nauseated.

Really. I can't do this.

As I'm having my hundredth mental breakdown of the day, Mad hands me a folded sheet of paper. At first, I think it's the prescription, which I don't want to see again, but just as I'm about to order her to put it out of my sight, I realize the paper is lined—like the last note from Alec.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask.

"It was under the door when I came in. I figured it's for you."

I unfold it, knowing that whatever words are written on it, he probably wouldn't be saying them to me if he knew my news.

Roses are red

not to mention they're thorny

do my poems make you cringe

or do they make you horny?

Yours Cruelly, Alex

I let out a laugh before I realize I'm crying.

I am absolutely the furthest thing from horny right now. Horny is what got me into this trouble in the first place.

"Are these happy tears or sad tears?" Mad asks, handing me a tissue from a nearby box.

"I don't even know," I say, laughing and crying even more.

This can't be happening to me. It just doesn't feel real. I mean, how can it be possible? It was supposed to be hate sex, sex to get him out of my system for good. Now I'm carrying his baby and tethered to him ... for eternity.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

I mean, I've always wanted to be a mom someday—but not now.

And never with Alec as the father.

Jonathan was a little immature, yes. But he was allowed to be—we were only eighteen. He was sweet, constantly told me how much he loved me, and always took care of me. Mason was perfect husband material—smart, successful, doting—until he cheated on me. That was the reason I came back here, to this no-frills, no-attachments life, because whenever I've put myself out there, worn my heart on my sleeve, people have left me and taken away parts of my heart in the process.

The ones I love *always* leave me.

So what does that mean for the people I *hate*?

It seems so unbelievable, the boy who used to torment me all my life, is now tied to me in this way. My mind cycles back to yet another summer, when Alec's parents were off on their vacation and they'd left him with us. We'd gone down to Old Orchard Beach to play in the sand and ride the amusements. I was probably seven or eight, and after spending all morning being told to stop following the boys, decided to sit down in the sand and build a castle of my own.

And it was a *castle*. It had turrets. It had a moat. It had elaborate tunnels. I'd even made a prince and princess out of sand, sitting in thrones. It had everything, and I was so proud of it as it had taken me hours to build. Once it was finished, I'd run to get my mom and dad, and when I came back, what did I see?

Alec, crouched over my castle, the thing in ruins. Smashed to bits.

That cruel boy grew up to be a man and now that man is the father of the baby growing inside of me. I don't know a fate that could be crueler than that.

"So what are you going to do now?" Mad asks, her lips bunched at the side as she studies me. I know she's worried. And she's my best friend. But everything is about to change, and I can't even wrap my head around it right now.

One thing at a time, one day at a time—that's all I can do.

"I guess I have to tell him." I grab my phone.

"You're going to text him?" The tone of her voice is incredulous.

Well, yes. I'd planned to. I know it's cold and distant, but that's preferable to telling him to his face. I don't want to give him the opportunity to say all the things he thinks I want to hear and hold me in his arms and act like this isn't the worst thing that possibly could've happened.

I open the phone and realize a slight problem. "Shit. I threw his number away."

"Then go over there and tell him."

"He's probably not there. He's never home with his work schedule." I'm making excuses, but I don't care. My life has been turned upside down in a single day. I'm allowed.

I grab his note and a pen from the drawer of the coffee table, then scribble something underneath it, fold it, cross out my name, and put his there instead.

Holding it out to her, I say, "Can you deliver this next door?"

Mad takes it. "Damn, babe. You're cold."

Maybe.

But I didn't stomp all over his childhood and leave scars that still haven't healed.

Alec

A twenty-four-hour shift in the ER is one thing, but there's nothing like a day at sea to really tire you out. Ironically, though, while the sea wears you down, it's also bringing you back to life.

As we ride back from the harbor in Aidan's old Ford pickup, it almost feels like we've traveled back in time fifteen years, back when we had the world at our feet and were just waiting for our lives to begin.

Things were simpler, then.

But today was good.

I was almost able to put her out of my mind, but she was still there in the background, like a song that gets stuck in your head.

The lobstering trip brought back so many memories though. Good ones ones I'd long since forgotten. Even the hum of the boat motor, the smell of salt water in the air, the frigid ocean breeze on our faces—were enough to transport me away from my problems, if only for a few hours.

Back in the day, we used to go out on the Hutton family dinghy and check the traps at least once a week, once a day in the summertime. We'd wear nothing but jeans, rolled to the knees, letting the sun bake our backs and the wind burn our cheeks. We felt like hunter-gatherers of old, providing for our families, a lobster dinner fresh from the ocean. Sometimes we'd go and pluck clams from the shoreline too and have ourselves an old-fashioned clambake with drawn butter, corn on the cob, and Mrs. Hutton's famous blueberry pie.

My parents came to it, once. Only once. I'd been so proud to show them what I could do, that I could bring home dinner. My father had taken one

look at the spread and said, “You know, lobsters were once called poor man’s chicken. They used to serve it in prisons as punishment.”

He didn’t eat a single thing except the blueberry pie. Mostly he helped himself to what little bit of hard alcohol the Huttons had in the liquor cabinet. It wasn’t top shelf, but that didn’t matter. Ironically, I’d later learn that my father wasn’t top shelf either—he was just doing his damndest to pretend to be.

I force that thought out of my head and concentrate on the moment. The radio’s blasting an old Third-Eye Blind tune. It’s still freezing, the ground covered with two feet of old snow that probably won’t melt for at least another month, but the days are longer and we can finally see the light at end of winter’s tunnel. Besides, we’re Maine boys, used to the cold, so we drive with the windows down, letting the glacial air blow through our hair.

The scent of fish and sea clings to our skin.

Some people might think it’s bad, but I love the smell—I’ve always associated it with freedom, youth, and the Huttons.

“We should go for a couple of beers?” I suggest, looking at the guys. “What do you say?”

Cooper shakes his head and speaks in a down east accent. “Got to get back to the fiancée, ayah. Abby’s expecting me to cook these bad boys up for dinner. She’s been riding my ass all month, wanting lobster, since I didn’t take her out for Valentine’s Day.”

Aidan nods. “That’s because you suck.”

Cooper doesn’t argue.

“But yeah, I’ve got to get home to the wife and kids, too” Aidan adds. “Sorry, man. We should do this again though. Soon.”

I don’t know why this disappoints the hell out of me. I guess because I used to be the one to bow out of our get-togethers early—usually for a girl. I just want this moment to go on as long as possible.

“Yeah. Raincheck,” I say.

Reality crashes in as they drop me at my Tacoma. The night seems to stretch endlessly in front of me. I have a twelve-hour shift early next morning, and that fearless, wild, risk-taking person I was at sea? The one who momentarily forgot about all the things weighing down his mind?

He's gone.

And Dr. Mansfield, the person my father wanted me to be, is left in his place.

Thanks, Dad.

We stand at the back of the truck, divvying up our spoils from the basket. I ask for two, just two. I have it in my head I might have someone to share them with. But that hope is tenuous at best. I'll probably just boil them up and throw them in the freezer, have a shower, and do what I usually do—drink a few beers until I pass out alone.

“We should do this again. Real soon,” I say, surprised at how desperate I sound. Never mind that we literally just said this a few minutes ago. But I don't want to be the kind of person who talks about plans and never follows through. “What are you guys doing next weekend?”

“Uh, I'll have to check,” Aidan says quietly as he closes the tailgate. I know that voice. It's his way of saying, *I don't know about that*. And I get it. They have wives and kids and jobs and obligations. They're not a couple of teenage wisecracks with all the freedom in the world. Those days are gone forever.

Cooper chuckles. “Yeah, same. I need to check my schedule. Might have some free time next fall.”

Aidan claps my back. “One of these days you'll get it. Until then, enjoy the freedom, man. 'Cause once it's gone ...”

I drive home. Thirty minutes later, the full weight of exhaustion drapes over me when I step out of my Tacoma and head for my door—until a thrill of excitement shoves my fatigue aside when I spot a note sticking out from under it.

At first, I recognize the paper as mine and think Stassi did a *Return to Sender*. I wouldn't blame her. My last message was pretty corny. But as I pick it up, I realize she's crossed out her name and put mine.

Opening it, I read:

Alec,

I regret to inform you that your latest poem made me cringe. That said, it was inventive. Let me know when you have a second to talk. My number is 555-282-1193.

Stassi

I grin. Finally. I've been doing all the chasing, so it's good to see her throwing me a bone.

While nothing about her note gives the impression she wants to hook up, it's a step in the right direction. Besides, she's never been overt about wanting me. I'm wise to it, though. I know she does. As much as she hates me, she wants me just as much as I want her.

I can feel it in a way I can't fully describe. It's just an inner knowing, a hope that won't die down, a nudge from the universe saying this is the way it was always meant to be. I know she feels it too. I can't be the only one. If she'd ever get around to accepting it, we could finally be together and she'd get to experience the happiness she's always deserved.

It's after ten, and all her lights are off, so probably too late to call her. I'll hold off until morning. But despite my exhaustion, I spend an entire sleepless night, composing a text to her in my head.

First thing in the morning, before I leave for my shift, I decide not to be too cute.

Me: *Hey, it's Alec. You wanted to talk?*

It's not even seven AM, but she texts back immediately—odd for a girl who works evenings most of the time. I'd like to think it's because she's been thinking about me as much as I've been thinking of her.

Stassi: *Yes, are you free tonight after I get off work? Like ten?*

Coy and professional. If I weren't savvy, I'd think this was a business text. But that's the way she usually is before she falls into bed with me. Me and my big, fat cock. If she wants to get together tonight, that's perfect. I can think of no better way to cap off a long shift. My stomach flips just thinking about it. And screw coffee—I'm going to be running on pure anticipation today.

Alec: *Sounds good. Should I come over there?*

Stassi: *Yes, please.*

I expect she will be saying that a lot more tonight.
And I can't fucking wait.

Stassi

I'm dead on my feet.

I barely made it through my shift. I kept leaning against everything—walls, counters, tables—because I felt as if I might collapse at any moment. On top of that, I kept zoning out at the worst times. I mixed up table orders twice, gave the wrong change, and nearly tripped over my own feet and face-planted with a full pepperoni pie on my shoulder. Ted wasn't happy with me, and it wasn't all that busy so he sent me home early, which was great, because I need time to think.

As if I can do that.

Is this what it's like, being pregnant? Baby brain? That's a thing, right? Funny, I never paid much attention when my brothers partners were having their kids.

Even though I was exhausted during my shift, when I step through the door into my empty apartment, I'm suddenly wired. My pulse is pounding a million miles an hour and I can barely breathe as a second wind takes a hold of me. Though I know why—it's not excitement, it's fear of the unknown. I have no idea how Alec's going to react when I give him the news.

It could go so many different ways it makes my head spin.

Pacing back and forth, I try to come up with a script. I want to be as unemotional and matter-of-fact as possible. I need to relay the details in a calm, professional fashion, and focus on solutions. I practice the words again and again in my head, until I have them committed to memory.

But every time I say the lines in my head, they feel false. Like they're from some made-up story or the plot of a movie. Every so often, I realize it's really happening to me.

And every time that realization hits me over the head, I become a little more certain.

My mind is made up.

The doorbell buzzes at five after ten. To me, "five after" is a dead giveaway that someone is trying to be "fashionably late" but in reality was probably was sitting around counting the moments. When I open the door and see Alec dressed in his best, hair wet from a shower, smelling delicious, I know what he's expecting.

But I have news for him.

Fortunately it doesn't take long for him to realize the error of his assumption.

He takes one look at me, still in my work uniform, my hair piled in a messy bun, smelling like garlic and grease, and his smile falls. "You *did* say *tonight*, yeah?"

"Yep." I open the door wider. "Come in. We have to talk."

He drags his hand through his damp hair, never taking his attention off me for a second, as if he's looking for a hint or a sign about what this is regarding.

"I don't know how to say this so I'm just going to say it." Folding my arms, I gather a long, deep breath and look him in the eyes. "I'm pregnant."

He lets out a laugh, but in the midst of it, his whole life must flash in front of his eyes, because he cuts it short. Next, he pulls at the collar of his shirt, as if it's too tight. And then his eyes fall to the ground. He hasn't said a word,

but I can tell he's got about a thousand questions swirling in that big old head of his.

"It's pretty early, obviously," I say. "But I'm sure. I've taken four tests. I'll make another doctor's appointment, soon, where I'll have an ultrasound."

He swallows hard, then opens his mouth. Only nothing comes out. Alec was always such a silver-tongued devil. He could always think of what to say. Speechless Alec is an Alec I've yet to meet.

"Anyway, I've made up my mind that I'm keeping it. I've always wanted to be a mom and I haven't met the right person yet, so I figure why not just do it on my own? My mom and brothers are close by if I need anything. And —"

"Wait, wait, wait. Slow down," he finally speaks. "Why are you assuming I'd want nothing to do with it?"

I blink. "Why would I think otherwise? When we were younger, you always said kids were annoying and you were never going to have them."

"So I'm beholden to the shit I used to say when I didn't know anything about anything?" he scratches his temple as he makes a fine point.

"I just want you to know I don't expect anything from you," I say. "Nor do I want anything from you."

"Don't." He angles his head, his brows meeting.

"Don't what?"

"Don't push me away," he says. "Just because I let you down in the past, doesn't mean I'm going to again."

"You say a lot of really nice things." I lick my lips. "But at the end of the day, they're just words. And words are cheap. And I've fallen for your lines before. I can't do it again. This is bigger than us, Alec."

"You're right," he says. "It is bigger than us, so let's put our differences and our past behind us and do what's best for the baby."

"See, you sound so convincing," I say. "And you're saying exactly what I want to hear. I want to believe you mean it, I just ..."

“You don’t have to believe anything I say. All I ask is you let me prove it. Give me a chance to be the person you need me to be.” His gaze falls to my lips, and I’m tempted to take a step back. Now is not the time for any of *that*, even if it would momentarily make me feel better. “Give me a chance to show you I’ve changed.”

Exhaling, I re-cross my arms and shrug. “You can be in the child’s life. But that’s all you’ll ever be. My baby’s father. Nothing more.”

His lips press flat as his eyes hold all the words he isn’t saying and probably wants to.

“That’s a start,” he finally speaks. His gaze drops to my belly, which is flat as a pancake given I’m barely into my second month—if I’m going off the date of my last period. I won’t have a due date until I can get an ultrasound. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“You always say you’re fine. How are you *really* feeling?”

I lift a shoulder. “Scared as hell. You?”

His lips lift at the corner, flashing a single dimple. “Same.”

“I have to admit, you’re taking this much better than I expected.” I’d almost garner to say he’s happy about it. There’s no shock, no *my life is officially over* look on his face.

“You forget I’m an ER doctor,” he says, “I’m trained to take action, not mull things over.”

“That’s why you’re so calm?”

“That and I’ve learned to contain my emotions in the face of life-changing news.”

“But this is *your* life-changing news. It affects *you*. You’re allowed to feel some sort of way about it.”

“Of course. And I feel fine. It’s not planned, but it’s not like it’s bad news. We can do this. Plenty of people do this. We’ll figure it out together. We’ll make it work.”

I don't remember him being this optimistic in the past.

"Okay, so what's next?" he asks before reaching for his phone. "Oh. I know a good OBGYN affiliated with the medical center. He's the best in the state. I'll give you his information."

"I already have a doctor—Hope Freeman."

"Ah, all right then." There's fight behind his eyes, but he doesn't argue. "You want me to come to that first appointment?"

"No, that's not necessary."

"I can drive you. You shouldn't take an Uber."

"You're starting to sound like my mother ..."

"What if I want to be there?" he asks.

I lift my brows, surprised. If he wants to be there, I can't rob him of that experience. I just don't want him to hold my hand and I don't want the nurses and technicians to talk to us like we're some happy, loving couple.

Once again, I catch Alec staring at my middle, as if he expects the baby to pop out at any moment. If he found me hot or sexy before, that ship's about to sailed. Now he's looking at me like I'm some unidentified, foil-wrapped package he found in the back of his freezer.

"You can go if you want. But you don't have to drive me. We can just meet there," I say.

"Wait." He sounds strangely even more excited than before, which doesn't make sense. Five minutes ago, he was free as a bird. Now, he's going to be a father. I don't think he's fully thinking through what this means. "Hold on. I think we need to establish ground rules here."

He nods and we head to the sofa, making ourselves comfortable for what feels like a conversation that's never going to end.

"I agree." I cross my legs. "If you want to be involved, fine. But it's my body and what I do before the baby is born is my choice. You understand that?"

He nods. "Naturally, I wouldn't tell you how to do anything. *But I am a*

doctor. It's in my nature to want to make sure the people I care about are healthy. You can't get mad if I make any suggestions."

"Understand. But I have Dr. Freeman who's been delivering babies longer than you've been practicing emergency medicine, so you can't get mad when her advice overrules yours." I lift a second finger. "Next, we co-parent as *friends*."

"Friends ..." He says the word slowly, as if trying to test out its taste.

"I don't want to try and forge some weird romantic relationship just because of this situation. It's sticky and complicated and the last thing I want is anyone involved getting the wrong idea. You are the father. I am the mother. We are in a cordial friendship. That is all."

"Okay. Got it." He leans forward, nodding in complete agreement.

I sigh, relieved. This is turning out way better than I thought it would. And now I feel that yes—we can do this. I might not be able to envision Alec as a boyfriend, but he's loyal, moral when he wants to be. Maybe I *could* see him as a father, especially knowing he always looked up to mine.

I yawn as the exhaustion of the past couple of days catches up to me.

He stands up, taking the hint for once.

"Okay. So this is a good start," he says, clapping his hands like a coach before a big game. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find it endearing. "We can do this."

I walk him to the door, quietly wondering if he'll still be this excited once he has time to process it all.

"You know," I say, "my brothers are going to kill you when they find out, right?"

He sniffs a laugh.

"I know." Then he turns away to open the door and the full weight of it must hit him at that moment, because he mutters under his breath, "Oh, *shit*."

Alec

I should be freaking out about this.

I *know* I should.

But everything is status quo the following morning. I do everything just as I did every morning before this—starting with pouring a strong commuter mug of coffee. Heading outside, I cast a glance at Stassi’s place and wonder what she’s up to, how she slept last night after our talk. I thought I’d be tossing and turning, but instead I slept like a baby—no pun intended.

I’m going to be a father.

And the girl I’ve been in love with most of my life—is going to be the mother of said child.

Despite the looming threat of Stassi’s brothers murdering me, I imagine this is what it feels like to win the lottery, to know that you’re going to be set for life, albeit in non-financial ways. From this moment on, Stassi and I are a team. Once she finally realizes I’m not going anywhere, I’m certain she’ll let her guard down again.

I arrive at the Maine Medical Center with five minutes to change into my white coat and grab my things.

Everything is perfectly normal—the nurses at the front still flirt with me,

the overnight doctors joke with me about needing caffeine, the break room donuts are still hard as rocks.

Despite knowing that everything has changed, everything else is remarkably the same.

The hard part hasn't happened yet. In fact, I've yet to be able to picture myself as a father. Maybe it's too abstract a concept to me, since I never had one of those fathers who called me "son" and shot hoops with me in the driveway. Not to mention, it's something way off in the future. I guess I always knew eventually, someday, I'd have kids. And nine months, right now, seems just as far away as *someday*.

And then there's Cooper and Aidan, who will, most definitely, murder me. Knowing them, it won't be quick and painless either. Best case scenario, they'll never talk to me again, which means kissing future lobstering jaunts goodbye.

Because I'm not Stassi's husband. I'm not even her boyfriend. Her significant other. I'm her co-parent, this likely won't go over well with the wholesome and traditional Hutton family. But Stassi doesn't seem to care about that part. She didn't care, either, when she showed up at their house looking like shit. I get the sense she's tired of pretending, tired of keeping up appearances for her family.

And I get it. I don't want to pretend, either. It's not right. After all, too many parents stay together for the sake of their kids. We were never even together in the first place. It's doomed from the start, so why even try?

Cherry comes out of triage while Dr. Burns is getting me up to speed on the overnight cases. She glances at me, but talks to the senior staff member. "Doctor, the dislocated shoulder in three is in a lot of pain."

Burns looks at me, his face grim. "Little boy. Five. He's been in before."

I nod, understanding there's possible abuse, neglect. I dealt with this a couple times in Winston-Salem. Doesn't matter how many times I see it, though; the little kids break your heart. I can't imagine it getting any easier.

“You’ll see to it?” he asks.

“Yes,” I tell him. I pull up the boy’s chart on the tablet as I head to his exam room. His file is plenty thick, full of reports and x-rays and photographs of contusions. I know boys are usually rough-and-tumble, but this is beyond usual roughhousing. He doesn’t have any other siblings at home, save for a two-month-old sister.

Before I pull back the curtain, I already suspect a call to Child Protective Services will be in order.

The little boy is a skinny thing. He’s wearing Spiderman pajama bottoms and slippers, and his hair is sticking up with static, long enough to suggest he hasn’t had a haircut in forever. He’s lying on his back, clutching his arm, which is hanging loose at his side.

“Hey, pal,” I say brightly, sitting on the stool beside his cot. “I’m Doc Mansfield. What’s your name?”

He looks at me with sad eyes. “R-R-Rufus.”

I glance past him, at the woman sitting in the chair across the way. She’s hunched over with her head resting on one hand, scrolling through her phone. Her hair is harried-mom-style, in a messy loop on her head, and she’s wearing buffalo-checked pajama pants and snow boots. “Cool, nice to meet you, Rufus. And your mom is ...”

She finally looks up, her eyes bloodshot. “Carrie. Rufus was jumping from his bed again.” She looks at him for confirmation. “Right, Rufus? Tell him what you were doing.”

The little boy nods dutifully, his gaze carefully passing from his mom’s to mine and back.

My chest constricts. The kid’s trying so hard to be good, to obey his mother and tell the story she gave him. And yet I’m a hundred percent sure that his mom is a lying piece of shit. I maintain civility. “Is that right? He’s hurt himself before. Three times last year.”

“Yeah. Because he thinks he’s a stuntman and is always jumping from

things.”

She goes right back to her phone as I perform the examination, gently feeling his little bones and tendons. “I’m just going to take a look. You like Spiderman?”

He nods, though he’s holding back tears from the pain. The kid is such a twig that a stiff breeze might blow him over. There’s nothing to him but skin and bones and big, sunken in eyes. It might be improper nutrition, but I can’t speculate on that. I used to eat nothing but hot dogs and chicken nuggets when I was a kid his age.

What I can speculate on, though, is the bruising on his neck. There are three circular black-and-blue marks there, roughly the size of finger marks, as if someone grabbed him hard.

“Yeah, me too. He’s the best.” I suck in a breath and get ready for my next task, which isn’t going to be pretty. “Okay, you definitely popped something out there. So I’m just going to quickly pop it right back in.”

His eyes go wide.

“It’s going to hurt for a second, but then you’ll be good. And when it’s done, I’ll buy you an ice cream downstairs. Deal?”

The kid nods excitedly, which makes me wonder if he’s ever been offered ice cream before.

I glance at the mom, who doesn’t look up from scrolling her phone, and then I take a hold of his shoulder and easily set the joint back in place. He doesn’t cry out. Considering the ease with which it happened, I feel like it’s likely not the first time and this kid has endured a lot of pain in his short life.

And damn if I’m going to let it continue.

“Feel better?” I ask my patient.

He nods.

“All right. We’re going to put you up in a sling because you should take it easy for the next few weeks. No furniture diving, you got that?” I ruffle his staticky hair as he nods. “And we’ll get you some medicine for the soreness.

But first? Ice cream. Chocolate or vanilla?”

The grin that breaks out on his face is one I’d be happy to see every day of my life. It instantly lifts my mood.

“Chocolate,” he says.

“Excellent choice, my dude.” I reach for the curtain. “Before I get it though, your mom and I are going to have a little chat in the next room. Be back in a sec, okay?”

He nods, and his mom looks up, uninterested, before climbing to her feet and following me out the door. I lead her into a private alcove and spin on her. When I look at her head-on, in this bright light, I can see the pitting in her skin and the glassy eyes. Telltale signs of addiction.

“You’re home with him and your daughter ... anyone else?” I ask.

“My boyfriend—my daughter’s father. He works nights though.”

“All right,” I say, typing that information one-handed into the file on my tablet. I look up. “So who’s beating your son?”

She blinks, taken aback. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You and I both know that what happened to Rufus didn’t happen while diving off furniture. And I’m going to have to call Child Protective Services.”

Carrie wipes at her nose. “It’s hard. Taking care of the baby, and him ... my boyfriend doesn’t help. It’s really *hard*.”

“I get it,” I say, though I can’t relate. Rufus has been in here even before the new baby came along. This mother needs a rude awakening, and I sure as hell hope it doesn’t come at her son’s expense. “I know sometimes it can be frustrating and your emotions get the better of you. I still have to call it in. I’m legally obligated to report these things. And even if I wasn’t, I’d do it, anyway. Your kid needs help. *You* need help. Where’s the baby right now?”

She looks down at her feet and nods. “She’s with my neighbor.”

“All right. Go in with your son and sit tight. Let your neighbor know it’s going to be a while.”

As I got to my office to make the call, the compassion I was trying to

muster for the woman who allowed her kid to be hurt like that drains away, and I'm left feeling pissed. There are shitty parents everywhere. Mine were two of them. No, they didn't hit me. They didn't lay a finger on me. They didn't come to my hockey games or give me any indication that they even liked me, other than throwing money my way on a regular basis so I could become the image of success they wanted me to be.

But some people should not be parents.

And I'm not going to be one of those.

On the way to the cafeteria to get that ice cream, I stop at the nursery. There are three little pinkish-red nuggets in tiny bassinets—a boy and two girls, judging from the color of their knit caps.

Growing up, I never thought I'd want kids someday and I used to say that all the time, but it was only because I was raised to see kids as a burden. I was also worried I wouldn't know how to be a dad to them. I figured my lack of real parents would put me at a disadvantage.

I can't imagine how it'll feel to be a father. When I see cases like little Rufus, I imagine it's harder than it looks—and it looks pretty damn hard, to me. I guess it'll be a lot of on-the-job learning, with trial and error.

But I'm sure as hell not going to ever lay a hand on my kid.

Or treat it like it doesn't exist.

And it may be a lot of work, but it'll never be a burden.

As I'm staring at the tightly-wrapped bundles, a red-headed nurse with a pretty smile waves to me through the window. I wave back. Lily isn't nearly as direct about her intentions as Cherry, but she did ask me out to dinner a few nights ago, an invitation I'd had to refuse.

I'm about to go into the cafeteria when I notice a little teddy bear in the window of the gift shop. I can't resist, so I go in and make the purchase. Assuming everything goes as planned, I'll give it to my kid when he or she is born.

But that's a long time from now.

As I buy the chocolate ice cream and hurry back to the ER, I think of Stassi. There's still something she doesn't know, something I've never told her. Something I planned to tell her—eventually. But now that she's carrying my baby, that complicates things. I don't want to stress her out, or risk having her hate me forever, not when we're finally getting to a place where she's open to letting me be a part of her life, even if it's only because of the circumstances.

I'll tell her someday, when the time is right.

But not yet.

Stassi

“Oh my God, I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”

That’s Tenley’s typical proclamation, every time our little group gets together for a meal in downtown Portland. As a textbook workaholic, it’s not unusual for her to forget to eat several meals in a row and then find herself completely famished. At least when she eats, she eats *well*. Last time we all sat here sipping our cocktails while she inhaled a double cheeseburger, large fries, and a Coke and then swiftly polished off a giant turtle sundae for dessert.

“Work must be crazy, huh?” Mad asks.

“Always,” Tenley says.

“Oh, I keep forgetting to stop by your place. You still have that dress you were selling? The Zimmermann one you posted on Insta?” Mad asks. “Can I just Venmo you now?”

“You should have reminded me. I’d have brought it today,” Tenley says. “Next time just email my assistant and she’ll put it on my calendar.”

“I keep forgetting you have an assistant,” I say. “So weird thinking of you as someone’s boss. I remember when you used to be this shy little wallflower who was afraid to raise your hand in class.”

“Look at her now,” Campbell says, lifting her glass. She’s back in town for some family reunion, but she managed to sneak away for a few hours with her best girls. “Kicking butt and taking names. Such a girl boss.”

Tenley shoots her a look. “You know I hate that phrase.”

“Which is exactly why I said it,” Cam teases. She’s always been the one in our group with the offbeat sense of humor. When conversations get heavy, Campbell brings the comedic relief. Ever since she got married, I swear she’s become even more of a smartass. I imagine she’s had to level it up a notch for Slade. The man is always so serious. “You know we’re proud of you though.”

We managed to snag the window booth at Topper’s and spend the next few minutes catching up on all the little things. Since it’s far too cold to eat on their rooftop outside, at least we have a view of busy Commercial Street. Right now, it’s mud season, meaning all the snow on the ground is in dirty, melting piles, and there are puddles everywhere. I keep staring out the window, wondering how long it’s going to be until I have to come clean about my news.

“Hey.” Campbell nudges me and leans in. “You okay? You seem a little out of it today.”

I glance up and find all the girls staring at me.

Painting a smile on my face, I say, “I’m fine. What are you talking about?”

A wave of nausea washes over my middle. Reaching for my ice water, I take a gulp in an attempt to stave it off.

“So what’s new with you?” Tenley asks me. “I feel like you’ve been MIA in the group chat the last few weeks. Ted’s keeping you that busy?”

“Oh, um ...” I’m about to say *nothing*. The N part of the word is still on my tongue when Mad kicks me under the table.

“Guys, she’s not going to tell you, but I will. Remember that hottie from the dating app who she used to know? The one she was texting with that

night we went out?”

“Alec Mansfield?” Campbell asks. “What about him?”

I give Mad a look. I was planning on telling them, I was just waiting to work up the courage.

“What?” Tenley leans in, her expression firm. She hates being out of the know, which makes sense given her profession. Information and evidence gathering is what she does. “What does Mad know that we don’t?”

Mad nudges me and offers a reassuring look.

I glare at her.

“Did you end up meeting up with him or something?” Campbell asks.

Hesitating, I swallow the lump in my throat. “I did.”

“And?” Tenley asks, ever the impatient one.

“We ... had a few too many drinks ... and one thing led to another ...” I choose my words carefully, watching as their expression disassemble in real time.

“So the two of you had sex.” Tenley sits straighter, looking like she’s interviewing a client.

“Oh my god. Did you really?” Campbell asks, though it’s not coming from a place of judgement so much as it’s coming from a place of amusement. “How was he? Was it good?”

“A little too good if you ask me ...” Mad says between pursed lips.

I give her an elbow to the rib cage and remind myself never to tell her a secret again.

“Tell us everything,” Cam says.

“Yeah, what’s the deal? Are you guys dating or what?” Tenley prods as the waiter comes, asking for our drink order.

“Margaritas all around,” Campbell says before I can ask for something non-alcoholic.

Mad kicks me again. This time, it hurts.

As the waiter turns to leave, I raise a finger.

“Actually, I’ll just take a Sprite,” I say. The girls all turn to stare at me, so I quickly add, “I have a little headache. Hung over.”

“Oh, really, what an interesting story.” Mad eyes me in a way that suggests she’s not going to let me live this down. “Because I swear you were passed out on the couch by eight o’clock last night. Did you go out later and not tell me?”

“Maybe I slept wrong. Anyway, it doesn’t matter, I have a head—”

“Bull. Shit,” Mad mutters under her breath. “Whenever I get a shitty night’s rest, I don’t wake up the next day *glowing*.”

Even though the world does not revolve around me, I could swear, at that moment, it does because it’s like the busy restaurant goes completely silent. My heartbeat putters in my ears. Every eye around the table takes me in like I’m some subhuman species and a flush creeps up my neck.

“No kidding. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were preggo,” Tenley says with a laugh, but by then, the others must’ve seen something in my face. There I go again, broadcasting my thoughts on my forehead. “Wait ...”

Campbell says, “Oh my God ... are you?”

Tenley claps. “That’s amazing!”

Our server delivers my Sprite along with a pitcher of margaritas and three glasses. Mad gets busy pouring before suggesting we make a toast.

“Guys, stop. I don’t want this to be a big thing,” I say. “It’s already a lot to take in.”

“Uh, too late. Having a baby is already a big thing,” Tenley says. “And we’re your best friends. We’re happy for you. Plus we get to be aunties now. It’s exciting!”

“What does Alec think about it?” Campbell asks.

“He’s surprisingly taking it in stride,” I say.

The girls lift their glasses and I meet them with my Sprite.

“To Stassi, who’s going to be the world’s best mother,” Mad says. “And also to me, because this never would’ve happened had I not messaged Alec

from your phone that night. You're welcome, by the way."

"Cheers!" Tenley and Campbell clink their cactus-shaped glasses against ours.

"Isn't it so crazy how things work out sometimes?" Campbell marvels. "Someone who spent their entire life hating you suddenly becomes the greatest thing that's ever happened to you."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I lift a palm. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Well, I think it's sweet regardless," Campbell says. "I know he was a jerk to you back in the day, but I bet there was admiration—even love—then, too. At that age, guys just suck at expressing it."

"I don't know about that," I mumble, thinking of how he used to be the loudest person humming the Wicked Witch of the West theme as I pedaled by on my bike. How he used to call me "squirt", or even better, "static cling". How he used to spit water on me when I'd walk past them while they were playing in the sprinkler outside. His antics knew no limits.

"You two are going to make some good-looking kids," Mad says, licking the salt from the rim of her glass. "Just so you know."

"How far along are you?" Campbell asks.

"Only six weeks. I think. I still have to go to the doctor to confirm it with an ultrasound this week."

"What did he say when you told him?" Tenley asks me.

"Not a whole lot. I mean, he was in shock, but he seemed okay with it. Said we were going to make it work and he wanted to be involved. He was surprisingly ... excited?"

"Aww..." Campbell beams.

"So, you going to have a shotgun wedding or what?" Mad asks, dipping her straw amidst the ice cubes, looking for pockets of alcohol in her near-empty drink.

"What? No. There's not going to be a wedding." Just the thought of walking down the aisle and promising my life to Alec sends a frigid reality

check to my veins.

“So what, exactly, are you then?” Campbell asks, her face scrunched as if trying to solve a particularly difficult math problem. “Friends with shared diaper duty?”

“Co-parents with ground rules,” I say. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“How romantic,” Tenley says, rolling her eyes.

“It’s not supposed to be romantic. I’m not living in that fantasy. It’s supposed to be practical.”

Tenley circles the rim of her glass thoughtfully, a confused expression on her face. “What are the ground rules?”

“My body, my choice,” I say. “His medical advice doesn’t overrule my OB’s. The baby comes first. We’re a team. That sort of thing.”

“Those are ridiculously simple ground rules,” Tenley says as if she’s mulling over a legal contract. “I strongly advise that you make a more extensive list—and get it in writing.”

“Like a prenup?” Mad asks.

“A baby-nup,” Campbell chimes in.

“One thing at a time, guys.” I sip my Sprite, the bubbles soothing the storm brewing in my stomach. I threw up this morning for the first time, gagged on my toothbrush. Even though I used mouthwash after, there’s still a burning sensation in the back of my throat.

“I’m so excited to see where this goes,” Cam sighs, resting her chin on her hand. Her giant diamond glimmers in the low overhead light, throwing reflections everywhere. Ever since she’s been married, she’s turned into this swoony romance-y person. While I’m glad she’s happy, it’s taking some time to get used to.

“It’s not going anywhere. We’re just two people who know each other and who happen to be having a baby together,” I say. But even as I state the words I’m so sure of, I can’t help thinking that the man I saw in my apartment was ... promising. He was attentive. Concerned for my welfare.

Wanted to do the right thing. I've spent a long time thinking he was the opposite of husband material, but the other night, he easily could have been.

I've spent too long second-guessing him, so I don't stop now.

What kind of game is he playing?

With him, it's always a game.

Life is one big game and Alec always wins.

While I can forgive the Yours Cruelly version of him that tormented my formative years, no amount of kind gestures will help me to forget. He hurt me once, twice, a thousand times.

I don't know if I can trust that he won't do it again.

Alec

Three days after I learn I'm going to be a father, I decide drastic action needs to be taken.

Stassi's been a ghost, avoiding me per usual. I've texted her a few times, confirming when her doctor's appointment is, asking if she needed anything at the store ... the responses were short—which makes me think this co-parent thing is all bullshit. She's clearly not expecting fifty-fifty. Not even ninety-ten. I think she might even be regretting letting me know about it at all.

I'm going to give her the benefit of the doubt though. A lot is happening to her, and she's probably freaking out, keeping it all inside like she always does.

Her apartment is dark when I get home from work that night, so I send her a text.

Alec: *Hey. What are you doing later? Thought we could catch up.*

A moment later, she responds:

Stassi: *After I get off from Ted's? Crashing and eating crappy pizza, not necessarily in that order.*

I smile. At least it's not a one-word answer. Maybe I was wrong, thinking

she's avoiding me. Her body's got to be tired, standing for an entire an eight-hour shift while cooking that little human. I write back.

Alec: *Crappy pizza isn't good. Come to my place. I'll make you dinner.*

I barely look away from my screen before her reply comes in.

Stassi: *No.*

Okay. Maybe she *is* pissed at me. I can't think of what I did this time, other than implant my seed in her and destine her for a lifetime of caring about something that's fifty-percent me.

I need to sweeten the deal.

Alec: *Come on, I'll make your favorite. And I have chocolate cake.*

There's a longer wait this time.

Stassi: *How do you know what my favorite is?*

I snort. She might think she's an enigma in a riddle in a mystery, but she's not that hard to figure out.

Alec: *I grew up across the street from you. I know.*

I expect her to tell me to go to hell, or that I can't possibly know, but instead, I get:

Stassi: *Fine. Be there at 9:30. I'm eating and then I'm going to bed. Nothing else.*

I get the stuff at Shaw's on the way home so I know it's still fresh. Stassi hates all seafood, except if it's fried shrimp, maybe a little calamari. She even hates lobster.

Some Maine girl she is.

As a kid, she used to eat a lot of peanut butter and jelly, French fries, and Caesar salad. But I'm not making any of that. My baby—and my girl—need proper nutrition. I get to work, chopping the vegetables, making the broth, and stirring, stirring, stirring the rice, so that by the time 9:30 rolls around, it's almost done.

My doorbell buzzes early, and when I open the door, I find her fresh off her shift, still sporting her Ted's pizza uniform, her blonde hair in a messy

loop on her head.

“Sorry if I smell like Italian dressing,” she starts out. “I spilled a whole bowl of salad on myself.”

Leaning in, I inhale. “You’d be really good with some croutons.”

“If I wasn’t so tired, I might actually laugh at that.” She looks around cautiously, taking a tentative step in. Her eyes narrow as the strains of classical music swell. “What’s that?”

“Mozart.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Mozart? Who the hell are you and what have you done with Alec?”

I shrug. “What do you mean?”

“You used to listen to Slipknot on repeat so loud that I couldn’t sleep.”

“My tastes have matured.”

“*Riiight.*” Her eyes are still doing a careful volley around the room. They do a double-take when they land on the candles on the dinner table I just set. Now, she doesn’t just seem confused, she seems disgusted. “What’s *that*?”

“Dinner?”

“By candlelight?”

“The lighting in Ted’s is jarring and bright. I just thought this would be relaxing,” I tell her.

She sniffs. “Wait ... is that ... ?”

I nod.

And just like that, I almost see a little crack in her hard façade. “You made me vegetable risotto? How did you know?”

I press my lips together, refusing to tell. But it’s not some conjurer’s trick. “Your mother says she brings it to you, sometimes, when you’re sick. Because it always makes you feel better. Mine probably isn’t as good. But ...”

“Wait, when did you talk to my mother?” Sheer panic floods her voice as she freezes in place.

“Don’t worry. She doesn’t know anything. I just asked what your favorite foods were and she told me.”

“She didn’t ask why you wanted to know?” Stassi squints, suspicious.

“I told her I was trying to be neighborly and that all you eat is crappy pizza. She didn’t question it.”

“It smells just like it,” she concedes. “I didn’t even know you knew how to cook.”

“I had to teach myself in med school after I started packing on pounds from eating on the go all the time. The truth is, if you’re trying to give nutrition advice to patients, it falls on deaf ears if you weigh more than a small moose.”

She laughs. “I honestly came here expecting a peanut butter and jelly. Maybe a glass of milk.”

I lead her to the table, pulling out a chair and placing a napkin in her lap.

“This is weird,” she says. “You don’t have to do all of this.”

“I want to.”

She picks up her fork and digs in, closing her eyes as she savors the first bite. “Oh my God, this is so good.”

I imagine anything tastes like heaven when you’re used to eating burnt, undercooked pizza every night of the week.

I take the spot beside her and dish myself a serving.

“Forgot to tell you,” she says. “Based on my last period, they think I’m due December third. Will know for sure at the ultrasound though.”

“December third,” I murmur, pouring her some sparkling water. “Wow.”

It hits me then how much a life can change in just one year. Last December, I was planning to move back up to Maine and looking for some last-minute hook-ups in Winston-Salem. Now, I’m here, and about to be a father before the year is out. Unreal.

She must be thinking the same thing, because she says, “I know, it’s crazy. Anyway, it’s all good. I’ve told a few of my friends, but I’m not telling

my family yet, not until I'm at least a few more weeks in. So I'd prefer if you keep it just between us."

I fill her plate with more risotto since she's already polished off the first helping.

"Does your roommate know?"

"She does. And Campbell. And Tenley. But no one else. If you see anyone you know around town, please keep the news to yourself." She lifts a forkful of her risotto to her mouth, pausing. "I'm sorry about your parents. When was the last time you talked to them?"

"I spoke to my dad when I first moved up here. My mom, I never know where she is. She called me a few months ago." But that's not something I want to talk about, so I motion to her fork. "How is it?"

"Divine," she says. "Was that not obvious by the fact that I inhaled the first serving?"

I chuckle. "Just thought you were hungry."

There's a moment of awkwardness, where we both end up concentrating on our food, until I think of something bright to say. "How was work?"

"How is work, *ever*? It was bad. But made even worse because I can't even think. I feel like such a space cadet. I keep forgetting orders and tripping over my own two feet."

I ask her more questions, trying to get her to open up to me as to why she's closed off, but she yawns throughout. I can tell she's beat, so I don't press her to stay for deep conversation, a movie, or whatever ideas I had funneling through my head. Tonight isn't about that, anyway. As much as I want it to be, I've decided that I'm going to be on my best behavior and just let her dictate how this goes.

My pace is obviously much faster than hers. If it were up to me, I'd have put a ring on her finger yesterday and figured the rest out later. But we'll go at her speed. The last thing I want to do is pressure her and back her into a corner. Nothing good can come from that, especially given our past.

When we're done eating, she looks like she's about to fall asleep at the table.

I say, "Well, you should get to bed."

She waves me off. "I'm fine. I'll help with the dishes."

"I got it." I grab her coat and hold it out for her to slip into. "Let's get you home."

"I'm not helpless."

"Never said you were."

She shuffles to the door, following me as I open it for her.

She pauses there. "Thanks for dinner."

"Yep. Come on." I walk her the twenty steps to her door.

She seems confused by this. "Do you think I'm so drunk off your risotto that I might get lost or something?"

"No. Just making sure you get there safe. There are some slick spots."

She looks around. "The ice has melted. There's no one around. Exactly what were you expecting? Rogue aliens coming down from the sky and attacking me?"

"Listen, you work in an ER and tell me stranger things haven't happened."

The truth is I want to be a gentleman. I want to be the guy she doesn't think I can be. The kind of guy who'd never think to send a Yours Cruelly message, even just as a joke. The kind of guy who'd never stand her up for homecoming, even if his intentions were secretly good.

We're in front of her door now. It's still dark inside—her roommate probably isn't home. Stassi steps onto the stoop and grabs her key from her pocket. "Okay ..."

"See you tomorrow?" I back away. Whatever the opposite of coming on strong is? I've got to do that.

She turns a little, surprise mingling with relief on her face. I think she was expecting me to go in for the kiss.

“Sounds good.” She makes for the door, but then stops. “Is this because I smell like Italian dressing?”

I turn and walk back to my place, tossing over my shoulder, “Yeah, I prefer French.”

Stassi

The morning after my weird meal with Alec, it starts.

One minute, I'm dead to the world, sleeping deeper than I ever have in my life—the kind of sleep where you wake up and wonder where you are and what day it is. The next minute I'm crouched on the bathroom floor, puking my guts out.

It's mostly bile, but a little bit of risotto. I'd lied to Alec—I hate to tell my mom, but his risotto was better than any dish I'd had in my life. Unfortunately, it doesn't taste nearly as good coming up.

I go to the sink and wipe my mouth, examining my face in the mirror. I look like I've been through a war. My eyes are sunken and dull and my face has a green tinge to it. Cupping my hand under the faucet, I suck down some water, rinsing my mouth and feeling a bit better.

Only a second later, I'm kneeling at the porcelain throne again.

This time, I think I might actually lose my entire stomach.

When it's over, I'm too exhausted to do much of anything else, so I lie on the bedroom floor. I must fall asleep for a few minutes, because the next thing I know Mad is standing over me like an angel bearing a sleeve of saltines.

She passes me one. "This is not really a good look for you."

"I can't eat that. I'll just throw it up," I moan.

"You're throwing up *because* you haven't eaten anything, dummy," she says, shoving the cracker closer. "That's why it's called morning sickness. You get it on an empty stomach."

"How do you know?"

"My sister. She had to take the medication they give chemo patients to stop hers, it was that bad."

I sit up and nibble one. "Okay then."

"Feel better?"

I nod. Weirdly, I do.

"Want to eat something real?" she asks.

She gives me a hand and helps peel my sorry ass off the floor. Strangely, I go from nauseated to ravenous beyond all reason in a matter of seconds. "A bacon cheeseburger sounds good actually."

"It's nine in the morning, babe."

I pout. I guess this is what pregnancy cravings look like. "Ugh."

We go downstairs and I begin pulling apart the fridge, looking for something that appeals. Nothing does, except weird things.

"Are you going to eat these olives?" I ask her.

She makes a face. I think she got them last Christmas in a charcuterie board gift set. We'd eaten most of the cheese and crackers, but the olives had quickly been relegated to the back of the fridge since neither of us liked them.

Until now.

I pop open the lid and toss back a couple, the oil dripping down my chin. "Mm. Sweet nectar of the gods."

"Gross," she observes me like a patron at a zoo.

Don't care. While she watches, I empty about half the bottle down my throat. "You're right though. I feel better. What day is today?"

She says, reluctantly, "April first."

“Really?” Immediately I feel worse. “Oh God.”

I know she understands exactly what that means, because she was going to be a bridesmaid.

Thinking fast, she changes the subject. “We need to find somewhere that serves bacon cheeseburgers in the morning.”

“I bet a place in Portland does.”

“Well, I’m not going all the way there. You should get that boyfriend of yours to grab one for you on his way back from the hospital.” She catches herself before I can correct her due to my mouthful of olives. “Sorry, *co-parent* of yours.”

I swallow my mouthful and look in the fridge for whatever else appeals. “He wouldn’t do that for me.”

“Are you sure?”

I’m not. In fact, I’m pretty sure he actually *would* do it for me based on the meal he made last night.

“Okay, yeah. He probably would. But I don’t want him to,” I say.

“Why not?”

“Because. He made me this amazing dinner last night. Veggie risotto. I don’t want to keep relying on him for everything. I don’t really want to rely on him for *anything*. I’m just trying to keep it to the bare minimum.”

She pats her heart. “He made you dinner?”

“Yeah ... but it was odd. He had Mozart and candlelight and romantic stuff like that.”

“Aw!” She’s all dreamy. Eyes lit like Christmas and everything. I never pegged Mad for a romantic. Before Joe, she was definitely a lot more cynical about relationships.

“It’s *not* ‘Aw.’ Don’t you get it? It’s for the baby. Aren’t there studies that say classical music makes babies smarter? And veggies are obviously nutritious for the baby. He just wants a healthy pregnancy, that’s all.”

She eyes me as I slam the fridge door. I’m still hungry, but there’s

nothing interesting in there.

“And just what makes you think that’s all he cares about?” she asks.

“Other than the fact that he’s teased me all my life?”

“Yeah. But just like Cam said, he probably did that because—”

“Oh no he didn’t. He didn’t pull my pigtails on the playground because he didn’t know how to express his love for me. That’s all a load of crap,” I mutter, thinking back to all the times my mother used to say the same thing—*oh, he’s only teasing you because he likes you!* “He didn’t just tease me. He ripped my heart to shreds.”

She leans against the sink. “What exactly did he do to you? A few mean emails? That doesn’t sound so—”

“—it was worse than that. You see, for a while he texted me— anonymously. I didn’t know it was him at first. I poured out my soul and he made me feel heard and validated. We had a connection. A *real* connection. He even asked me to a dance. But then he didn’t even show. I was fifteen. And it was like, my whole life ended that day. It was awful. And the worst part is, I didn’t know it was him until later. So while I was sitting there waiting for my mystery date to show up, he was taking pictures with my brothers and all of their dates. He was smiling and having the time of his life all the while knowing that I was being stood up.”

She lets out a little sigh, her expression laced with pity. “Damn. That’s pretty unforgiveable. Maybe he was too nervous to go through with it, because of what other people would think?”

“Or maybe he wanted to get me back for ignoring him?” I say. “Alec was the most popular guy in school. He didn’t need to care about what anyone thought of him because everyone loved him.”

“Kind of seems like he’s not that person anymore though. A true bully wouldn’t do half the things he’s done for you.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’m just trying not to give him the opportunity to disappoint me again. I might be having his baby, but I’m not going to fall

victim to his stupid mind games again. I think he's finally understanding that. He didn't even try to make a move last night. I thought for sure with the candles and the music and everything ..."

"Sounds like he's just trying to be respectful."

I snort. "You literally never know with him."

"I think you are entirely too suspicious," Mad says. "And I get it. You guys have a past. But I also think you're cutting your nose to spite your face here. You're holding onto the past and he's looking towards the future and you two are having a baby together. At some point, you have to meet in the middle. Or at least figure out how to move forward."

"I'm too tired to finish this conversation," I say as I trudge to the stairs. "I'm going to bed."

"Sweet dreams, mama."

It's not just that I'm beat. I wish it was.

Crawling under my covers, I think of Mason.

When we first started dating, I thought for sure he was my ticket to the life I'd never had in Maine. That living in our cute little Lower East Side apartment, I'd have a fresh start and finally shed the weight of my past. He was solid, dependable, easy, not one for surprises—or so I thought. I was certain I knew everything about him, that we shared our lives equally, sans secrets. In my mind, he was guy who was going to prove to me what forever looked like.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Odds are Alec isn't going to be that guy to prove it to me, either.

And yet, now, I've gone and tied myself to him—forever.

I wish things were simpler. That he was just a schoolyard bully crushing on a girl. But he always took it too far. And the more I ignored him, the worse he got. Now I'm supposed to sweep it all under the rug?

All I wanted was closure—and maybe a half-decent apology.

Now I'm having his baby.

But Mad's right ... at some point I have to stop living in the past.

As tired as I am, I grab my phone and type in a text.

Me: *Thanks for dinner last night. Your risotto might get me through today.*

I don't expect a response right away since he's probably at work, but a few moments later, my phone chimes.

Alec: *No problem. Is today a bad day?*

I think for a moment before responding.

Me: *I was engaged to a man a while ago, and today would've been our first wedding anniversary. But he cheated on me before the wedding, so I called it off.*

Alec: *That sucks. Wait ... your anniversary was going to be April Fool's Day?*

I sigh.

There are a thousand jokes one could tell about the date.

I decide on the most obvious.

Stassi: *Yep. It was the only date available at his church. Guess the joke was on me the whole time.*

Over a year after my break-up with Mason, I'm nowhere near where I thought I'd be. Back then, I expected our first anniversary would be spent in Maui, reliving our honeymoon. I'd expected to be the envy of my friends, a thriving power couple who lived a glamorous life of parties in NYC interspersed with exotic vacations in little-known locales around the world.

I never thought I'd be spending it like this—living in this slummy condo a stone's throw from where I grew up having all those big dreams. Pregnant with Alec Mansfield's baby. Working at Ted's. Alone.

Talk about one plot twist after another.

It seems like the more I wish for stability, the less stable my life becomes. Makes me wonder if I should start hoping for the worst? Whoever's running my life, pulling the gears and levers behind the curtain, could maybe use a

little reverse psychology? Sinking into my bed, I draw in a deep breath and exhale, telling myself nothing's going to work out and everything's going to go to hell in a handbasket.

As I'm dozing off again, my phone buzzes with a text.

Alec: *If you ask me, he's the fool.*

Warmth pumps in my chest, and a smile threatens to crack on my face.

But then I promptly remember what day it is and what a fool I've always been.

At some point, I've got to stop taking the bait.

Alec

As I pull down a narrow alley in downtown Portland, I'm suspicious.

This looks like a place where drug deals go down.

"Are you sure it's here?" I ask Stassi, peering at the backs of broken-down buildings and overflowing dumpsters.

"Of course. I've been coming here since I was seventeen." She checks her phone. "Can you drive faster? We're going to be late."

That's my fault. I got a late start—I'm not the most punctual of people. But the clock on the dash says we still have five minutes. "Relax. Appointments never start on time anyway. Doctors are used to it."

The alley ends at a small parking lot. I find the only empty space and look over at the one-story building. It was modern, back in the seventies, with a brown shingle roof, covered in rust-colored pine needles. There's a misshapen evergreen bush covering much of the door, but I can make out the words "FREEMAN" and "Obstetrics" on it. "

That's the place?" I point.

She's already halfway out the door. "Yep. Stay here if you want."

I've never known this city to be unsafe, but in this neighborhood, I'm starting to rethink that. "No, I'm coming in."

I stay close to her on the short walk to the door. Before I can reach for it, she stops. “Um—really, you don’t have to come in if you don’t want to.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I want to.”

“I’m just saying,” she speaks over me. “That Dr. Freeman has been my doctor for a long time. Her place might not be the nicest, she might not have the most up-to-date equipment, and she might be no-nonsense, but I like her. And if you have a problem with that ...”

She doesn’t finish, but from the way she’s looking at me, I imply the rest of the sentence: *I can go screw myself.*

More ground rules. Ever since I’ve learned I’m going to be a father, I’ve noticed most of what Stassi says to me takes that form. There hasn’t been any discussion where the kid is concerned. She’s already made up her mind and is just informing me what is going to be done. I haven’t pushed back because I know she’s going through a lot. But damn.

“She *does* know about epidurals?” I ask. “Right?”

I’m only kidding, but Stassi’s clearly not in the mood for my lame jokes today.

She glares at me and opens the door on her own. “I’ve already put together my birthing plan. I’m going to have this baby naturally.”

“You have? Would you mind sharing it with—”

I stop when I realize we’re in a waiting room full of women. Many are pregnant. A couple are nursing. They’re all quiet, looking at us. Somewhere, a television tuned to a morning talk show is droning on, canned laughter in the background. I stand there, feeling like the odd man out. Technically, I *am* the odd man since I’m the only guy in the room.

Stassi marches up to the glass separator. When the clerk behind it pulls it back, she says, “Stassi Hutton. I have a ten o’clock ultrasound appointment?”

There’s nowhere to sit, so I end up staring at a rack of brochures on Genital Herpes and Pain During Intercourse. When she wanders back to me, I whisper in her ear. “Are you going to share it with me?”

“Share what?” Her face is twisted in confusion.

“Your birthing plan.”

“Why? Are you planning to carry this baby?” she snaps.

I open my mouth to respond, but quickly clamp it shut when I realize I’ve got nothing.

Instead, I look over at an old lady who’s pretending to peruse the pages of an old *Reader’s Digest* but is obviously listening in on us.

These past weeks have been brutal. The sheer amount of discipline it takes to be cordial, keep my hands to myself, and not punish her lips with a kiss every time she says something smart? I deserve an award for the Olympic-level self-restraint I’ve exercised.

Still, I think she’s warming up to me. She actually told me about her first ultrasound appointment and asked if I wanted to take her instead of catching an Uber, so that’s progress.

But she’s out of her mind if she thinks she can keep the medical part of this a secret from me. I am a doctor, goddammit. I’ve delivered babies in medical school. I don’t know everything, but I know a thing or two.

Plus, not all doctors are created equally, and I’m not really sure I want my baby to be delivered by a half-assed practitioner who’s running an obstetrics practice out of what appears to be a former KFC. My kid deserves the best, not a waiting room with peeling wallpaper and mismatched chairs, and a doctor who graduated from some Caribbean med school.

Yeah, I looked her up.

Dr. Freeman is nothing like Dr. Patel, who is one of the best obstetricians in the country.

Stassi manages to snag a chair when another patient gets called back. Crossing her legs, her foot bounces and she stares blankly ahead at the wall.

She’s got to be nervous about giving birth; of course she wants to be in the best hands. My plan is to bring it up after the appointment. If I do it before, she won’t be receptive. I have a long, thoughtful list of reasons in my

head, and I am sure once I detail them Stassi will see my side.

That is, until the door opens and a very small woman with gray hair comes out.

“Anastasia,” she calls out. Stassi pops up from her seat and heads to the door. Almost immediately the gray-haired woman pulls Stassi into a warm, motherly hug. “It’s so wonderful to see you. Are you ready to see your baby, my darling?”

Does she greet every patient like that? No wonder Stassi likes her. She gives off a protective, grandmotherly vibe. But good bedside manner does not a good doctor make.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Stassi smiles for the first time all day and points to me. “This is Alec. The baby’s father.”

The woman is probably half my height and as wide as she is tall. She runs a critical eye over me and doesn’t offer me a hug, a hand, or anything. Just a *look*.

“Well, let’s get to it then,” Dr. Freeman says.

We follow her down a long, dark hall with paneled walls similar to the ones in my apartment. There are pictures on those walls, yellowing drawings of naked babies playing in tubs, walking in rainstorms with nothing but rubber boots, lying on the beach. Each one is creepier than the next. The place smells like pine cleaner mixed with urine.

Dr. Freeman settles her in a dark room with a cot and an ultrasound machine and kisses her cheek. “I’ll be right back, love. Sit tight.”

Dr. Freeman shoots me a glare as she leaves the room. I sit in the empty chair in the corner and look around. The linoleum on the floor is cracked, dirty. The ceiling has water stains all over it. Is this place even sanitary? If they can’t keep those things up to code, what about the medical devices? I can’t help my lips from curling in disgust. It makes me wonder just what else we’re not going to agree on.

“So ... what are you thinking for baby names?” I break the silence before

I have half a mind to lug her over my shoulder and carry her out of here.

“Florence for a girl. Oliver if it’s a boy,” she says without pause.

I squint at her. “You’re not serious.”

She blinks. “What do you mean? They’re adorable. And classic names are making a comeback.”

“You actually want a kid to go through life with the nickname Flo? And Oliver, as in *Please, sir, can I have some more?*”

“They’re family names,” she says, looking around for something to throw at me. When she finds nothing, she throws the next best thing. “And she won’t be Flo, she’ll be Flossie. Flossie or Ollie. Florence Marie Hutton, Oliver Michael Hutton.”

Hutton.

“What about Mansfield?”

She shrugs. “I like Hutton better.”

“Hutton-Mansfield?” I suggest.

She looks down at her lap. “Maybe.”

That’s probably the closest thing to an agreement I’m going to get from her. “What about living arrangements? You’re not planning on staying in that apartment with your roommate, right? A baby’s not going to be able to sleep with the kind of noise she makes.”

Stassi nods, looking at her fingernails. “I plan on looking for something else. There are places inland that are cheaper. I know that before they got married, Aidan and Cooper were renting a townhouse up in Lewiston that had two full bedrooms and was a fraction of the cost of my place. I could probably find a job up there.”

Lewiston would be a bit of a trek to the Maine Medical Center, but I could do it. I’d just have to take the turnpike.

“Okay. We could rent two of them, next to each other.”

She looks up at me. “What?”

“Yeah. I mean, if I stay down here and you’re all the way up there, I’ll

never see the kid.” And you’re going to need someone to be with the baby while you work, right? The hospital offers a paternity leave program and we can switch off shifts.”

Before she can answer, the door opens and Dr. Freeman appears.

“All right, darling,” she says, throwing a clipboard with her chart down on the counter beside me. Something tells me that this woman doesn’t know that most of the medical world has digitized records for the past several decades. She helps Stassi lie back and scoots a wheeled chair toward the ultrasound machine. “Let’s see what we have here.”

I’m instantly suspicious. “Don’t you have a tech to do this?”

Dr. Freeman glares at me. “I do, but my Stassi is special. I delivered her, you know.”

Ah. That’s the context that was missing.

Separating this bonded pair is going to be difficult—if not impossible. I glance at her chart. “You’ve taken blood at the last exam. What are the NIPT results?”

The doctor just stares at me over her wired bifocals.

“You did have the NIPT done, right?” I ask.

Stassi explains to her gently, “He’s a doctor. So—”

“Ah,” Dr. Freeman says, smiling at her as she squeezes the jelly onto her abdomen. Then she glares at me. “We did the testing. All was normal.”

“But what testing? Sequential? Because the other is far more accur—”

“*Alec*,” Stassi says, setting her head back. “Can you please stop asking questions up so we can see our baby?”

Our baby.

The words stop me in my tracks.

I don’t want our first meeting with our kid to be marred by us arguing. That’s probably what happened the first time my parents met me. I zip my lips and sit back in my chair.

Dr. Freeman switches on the machine and moves the paddle over Stassi’s

belly. At first, there's nothing, but then a fast, rhythmic, swishing sound fills the room—a sound I haven't heard since my OB rotation.

Our baby's heartbeat.

I watch as it creates waves on the screen. Strong, Steady. I close my eyes, listening, committing this sound to memory forever.

That's my kid. Our kid. *We* created that.

“And there it is,” Dr. Freeman announces.

I open my eyes. From my corner of the room, it's nothing. Just a little blip. A dot. A bulge on the side of an empty circle. Gray and black and white shadows and shapes.

Stassi lets out a little gasp.

Without realizing it, I'm up from my chair, holding my breath and thinking, *Damn. When I started this year, this was definitely not something I'd expected I'd be doing.*

Stassi looks nervous, flushed, and beautiful, with her hands fisted at her sides as she watches the screen. I so badly want to hold one of hers in mine, to share this moment with her, but I think better of it.

The doctor checks the screen as she moves the paddle around.

It seems like she goes on forever.

“Is there something wrong?” I ask.

“No, no,” the doctor says, checking the monitor. “All is good. See? There we go.”

I lean forward. Stassi squints. “What is that?”

“That's the head.”

I stare at an outline of a smooth, round shape.

Our son.

Or daughter.

“And over here,” she points closer. “The baby's abdomen. And there's a leg.”

I can't count how many times I've seen this before in a clinical setting,

but nothing can prepare you for seeing it when it's your own.

"Holy shit," I breathe, standing up and walking closer to it. I point out something. "What is that?"

"A little foot."

As I'm standing there, a hand reaches out, taking mine.

Shocked, I look down to find that it's Stassi's. Her eyes are filled with tears, focused on the screen.

"How big is it?" she asks.

"You're measuring a little over eleven weeks along. So ... about the size of a plum," Freeman says, making a shape with her thumb and forefinger.

I'm impressed. "That big already?"

Stassi sits up slightly, bringing her other hand to her mouth, her eyes still fastened to the screen. A single tear slips down her cheek and she makes a soundless "wow" with her mouth.

"That's our baby," she says.

Our baby. Stassi's, and mine. I've never loved the sound of anything more in my life. It's music to my ears. Food for my soul. All the cliches and then some.

"Well, everything looks great," the doctor says, snapping off her gloves and writing something in Stassi's file. Next, she grabs a warm towels and starts to wipe up the gel on Stassi's belly. "Congratulations." The doctor looks at me. "Well, you better get Mom taken care of. Go out and buy her some lunch. I'll want to see you next at twenty weeks. All right?"

We both nod.

"So ... there are no problems?" Stassi asks.

The doctor smiles.

"No, my love. Everything looks great. You have a very normal, strong baby in there," she says as Stassi sits up, looking a little stunned, her hands on her belly. "You'll want to invest in some maternity clothes if you haven't already. You'll probably begin to show soon."

“Yes, of course,” she finally says, her voice a little hollow. “Thank you.”

The doctor gives us a number of brochures on various baby and parenting classes held at the local community center and then she leaves us. For a silent moment, we don't look at each other. We just sit there, quiet, lost in our own worlds.

“I'm going to be a whale.” Stassi breaks the silence with a comment that makes me cackle. Maybe it's not funny, but after the gamut of emotions I've just sprinted through, I can't help but laugh. “What's so funny?”

“If you're going to be a whale, then you're going to be the most beautiful whale Sapphire Shores has ever seen.”

I've never known Stassi to give a flying fuck about her appearance. She's the farthest thing from vain. I imagine the real issue here is the fact that everything's happening so fast and she can't do a damn thing to control it.

I rub my hands over my face. We're going to have a baby. An actual life that we will be responsible for. We need to make decisions now that will be affecting its entire life. Of all the worries that should be going through her head ... it's that she's going to look like a whale? I just stare at her, incredulous.

“Let me treat you to lunch, and we can talk about it,” I say. “What do whales like to eat anyway?”

She smiles a little. A good sign.

“I don't know what whales eat, but I've been craving a bacon double cheeseburger,” she says.

“Lucky for you, I know a place.”

Twenty minutes later, we're in Portland, walking the Western Prom, overlooking the bluffs and the stately 19th century homes that overlook the harbor. It's easily the warmest day we've had all year. Neither of us have work until later today, the baby's looking good, and despite Stassi's anxiety earlier, she's radiant now. Practically glowing. The only thing that would make this day even better would be sweeping her into my arms and stealing a

kiss.

I have half a mind to ask her what she's thinking about, if she remembers this area and how her parents used to bring us here with our bicycles to let us ride around. I used to do wheelies and all kinds of stupid shit in order to impress her.

It never worked.

As we stroll closer to the burger joint, she says, suddenly, "Why didn't you take me to homecoming?"

My leisurely pace falters. That was unexpected. "What?"

"You know. You asked me. Via text. I know it was you."

I look out toward the Cape Elizabeth lighthouse in the distance, which happens to be away from her, so she won't see the lie on my face. "I don't know what you're—"

All these years, I was certain she never knew it was me.

And while I always wanted to come clean, I figured it was pointless to hurt her all over again, convincing myself that what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

"Don't lie to me, Alec. Please. We're going to have a baby together. And I know you. I knew that was you, just like I knew you were Yours Cruelly. Both messages stopped at the same time. I'm not an idiot."

I'm silent as I attempt to think of an explanation that makes me look less spineless. But this is Stassi. She'll see through it all. The only thing that makes sense is the truth and even then, what if she doesn't believe me? Because no one ever believed me.

"Rob Conrad," I say. "He asked you to the dance, yeah?"

She squints. "Yeah ..."

"And you told him no because you already agreed to go with someone else." I wince. "Me."

"Yeah ..." She frowns, like she's not sure where this is going.

"I overheard Rob talking to some of the guys on the football team about

you.”

She folds her arms, listening.

“He was saying his cousin in Portland was going to give him some ... some drug ... something to make you sleepy ...” I hate to elaborate because the sheer thought of what could’ve happened makes me sick to my stomach. “He was going to rape you, Stassi. And he was going to let his friends ...”

She clamps a hand over her mouth, her eyes watering.

“I never wanted to stand you up. Believe me.” I close the distance between us, though I don’t reach for her despite wanting to. “I had to make sure you were already committed to someone else so his little plan would fall through. I couldn’t let that happen to you.”

“Why couldn’t you have told me?”

“Would you have believed me?”

She’s silent, her ocean blues pointing at the concrete sidewalk for a moment. “No. Probably not.

“The week before homecoming, Rob got caught with drugs in his locker—do you remember that?” I ask.

She frowns. “Vaguely.”

“I planted them there. And I sent an anonymous tip to the school resource officer.”

Her expression softens, but only slightly. “He got expelled after that. They made him go to that other school across town, where they send all the kids with juvenile records.”

“Exactly. I didn’t want him doing to anyone else what he’d planned on doing to you.”

A few paces ahead is a park bench. Stassi takes a seat, exhaling through her fingers.

“I hated that you thought you got stood up,” I tell her, sitting beside her.

“I did get stood up.”

“You know what I mean,” I say.

“You stood there taking pictures in our front yard with Carlina. You stood there smiling while I was in my dress, waiting for someone who was never going to show up. You could’ve at least texted me and told me you weren’t coming.”

“I couldn’t risk you calling up Rob and going with him. Even if he was expelled, he still could’ve tried showing up anyway—or he’d have met up with you at a party afterwards. I didn’t want to chance any of that.”

“I cried over that whole thing for *months*.” Her eyes glisten and she turns her face away.

I reach for her hand, though surprisingly, she doesn’t yank it away.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “I wish it could’ve been different.” I wait another minute before adding, “If it’s any consolation, I meant everything I ever said to you. The messages we exchanged, that was me talking to you. That wasn’t Yours Cruelly. That was *us*. That was real.”

“If you actually cared about me, why didn’t you ever tell me?”

I blow a breath through pursed lips. “Have you met your brothers?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but they liked you.”

“They liked me because I wasn’t a threat. Trust me, I’d seen the way they dealt with anyone who so much as breathed in your direction.”

“Maybe you should’ve told them about Rob and his plans.”

“I did,” he says. “Who do you think helped me plant the drugs?”

Her brows narrow. “Then why didn’t you tell them you were the one texting me?”

“Because if they ever read those messages—and you know they would have—they’d have fucking killed me. If they had any idea the way I felt about you, they’d have ruined me any way they could’ve.”

Stassi sniffs. “They’ve always had boundary issues.”

“To put it lightly.”

“Do you remember what they did to Evan Blake? Warren Sheridan? Max Callow?” she asks.

“Remember?” I chuff. “Hell, I helped.”

I have to laugh at the memory. I was a part of their brute squad, happily carrying out the beatings with them. We didn’t want anyone touching Stassi. Of course, I did it for a different reason—because I was the one who wanted to be touching her, and couldn’t.

“I wish you would’ve told me all of this sooner,” she says.

“Had I known you knew it was me, I would have. I thought I was protecting you from being hurt again.” I hate that she went all these years believing I did that to intentionally hurt her. I only ever wanted to keep her safe.

“Well now you know,” she says. “Can we add another thing to our list of ground rules?”

“Of course.”

“No more secrets,” she says before pulling me to a standing. But before I have a chance to agree, she’s waxing on about cheeseburgers and leading me down the sidewalk. The previous conversation is over, taking with it my chance to come clean about something else that’s been weighing heavy on my mind.

She grinning now, strolling with a pep in her step, as if the heavy load she’d been carrying has just lightened.

I can’t bring myself to darken this day, so I keep it to myself.

Not forever. But for now.

We’re sucking down the greasiest bacon double cheeseburgers on this side of Portland a half hour later when she suddenly announces, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Okay ...”

“You’re really stepping up to the plate with all of this, but I worry it’s only because it’s new and exciting. I don’t want to get my hopes up,” she says. “So please just don’t make any promises you can’t keep, okay?”

“Listen.” I wipe the grease off my mouth and swallow my bite. “You’re right. This is exciting. But it’s not new. Not for me.”

She peers across the table, saying nothing.

“Stassi,” I say. “You can’t tell me you never saw it. You never felt it.”

She opens her mouth, blinking hard. “What? Saw what? Felt what?”

“I’ve been in love with you for almost my entire life.”

She just stares, as if I’ve just told her I’m an alien. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I know this probably feels like it’s coming out of left field. But it’s far from that. Not for me. You have no idea how much I’ve thought about this. About you. And this isn’t how I ever expected to tell you, but I don’t know how much clearer I can make myself.”

“Come on, Alec. Don’t be delusional. You *love* me? You *hated* me, from the second you—”

“—from the second I we moved into that house across the street.” I smile. “I remember it like it was yesterday. They were showing me room after room of that monstrosity, and all I was doing was looking across the street at that girl in the braids and pompom hat, wondering what she was doing.”

She blinks. “I don’t ... what was I doing?”

I chuckle. “You were making snow soup. You know—put the snow in the bucket and stir until it turns to water ... add some pinecones.”

“How do you ... ?” Her jaw drops. “Wait. I remember now. You dumped it on my head.”

I wince. “That was later. A different time. But yeah. I was in love with you the second I met you. And I was a little shit to you because of it. I kept wondering how I could actually finagle a way to be with you. But then I became friends with your brothers, thinking we’d naturally get pushed together ... and the opposite happened. The more I tried to get closer, the further we were pushed apart. And they made it crystal clear you were off limits. You know how maddening that was?”

I’m pouring out my heart and yet Stassi’s sitting there on the other side of

the table, looking at me like I'm speaking in tongues.

“Anyway, by some miracle, we're back in each other's lives again, and I'm not going anywhere. Even if I'm just a co-parent, even if that's all you ever want from me.” It's like an avalanche, and once I start, I can't stop pouring out every last thing that's been sitting in my head all these years. “I'll do whatever you want, Stass. I can't make you love me. But you should know that I don't want to be *just* a co-parent. I want you to be *mine*. Always have, always will.”

I lean across the small table for two we're sharing, asking permission with my eyes. The way she tilts her mouth toward me, tells me everything I need to know. I capture her lips with mine, my chest filling so full it could burst.

“I don't want to make this complicated,” she says, her breath mingling with my own.

“Too late.”

She smiles a surrendering smile that makes me think that maybe, just maybe, everything's going to work out for us—the way it always should have.

We finish lunch before heading back to the condo complex. I have her hand in mine the whole time. We both have to work—she's taking the evening shift at Ted's, I have another twelve-hour overnight at the ER. We should rest. But when we get out of the car and it's time to part, we linger there, equidistant between our places.

“I should go,” she says, but she doesn't make a move for her door. Instead, she massages the back of her neck, wincing slightly.

“What's wrong?”

“I must've pulled a muscle. The joys of pregnancy. Every day is a weird new symptom.”

I hold up a finger. “I have something for that. Come on.”

She follows me to my apartment, almost too willingly. I actually *don't*

have anything for that. Well, unless you count some pills that aren't good for a pregnant woman. But I do have two hands and I know how to use them.

I can't help it. The desire to devour her is just too much.

And luckily, she gets the hint.

We go upstairs without a word.

She pushes me back onto the bed, straddling me, and my hands delve around her, under her shirt, lacing my fingers together at the small of her back.

"I want you," she begs, giving me pleading eyes.

I let out a breath. "How about a full body massage?"

She grins and nods eagerly.

"Good." I motion to my back. "Because I've got some kinks here, that—"

She smacks me, hard, on the chest.

"Ow."

"I can hit a lot harder than that," she challenges.

"I know. That's why I'm going to stay on your good side." I push up onto my elbows, then reach for her t-shirt, lifting it up over her head. Gazing hungrily at her perfect breasts, I take one of them, dip the cup of her bra down, and tongue the nipple.

She throws her head back and lets out a little sigh of contentment, which only makes me hungrier.

Scooping her up, I lay her gently on the center of the bed. Then I strip off her jeans, unbutton my shirt and toss it aside.

"I want to make you feel good."

She licks her lips in anticipation. "Please."

I unbuckle my belt slowly, pulling on the button of my slacks and stepping out of them, all while watching her, imagining the way she'll look when she finally comes.

It's like Christmas morning—I want to unwrap the presents, but I want to savor this moment and let it last as long as possible. I shed my boxer briefs

and start to put a knee onto the bed to climb in next to her, but she holds up a hand.

“Wait,” she says.

I stop. “Something wrong?”

“I just want to look at you. I never really got the chance, before. It was too dark, and—”

“Well. Let me look at you, too.” I lean over, hook a finger under the band of her underwear, and drag it down, lifting each of her legs to pull it off. She sits up, unhooks her bra, and tosses it aside.

For the longest time, we just gaze at each other. She is beyond a work of art. Her breasts are not more than two handfuls, just the right size. Her nipples are two rosebuds, erect for me. The curls of her pubic hair is downy and blonde and something I want to get lost in. She’s all soft, pale curves, every blemish and freckle like a cherry on top of the most perfect dessert I’ve ever had placed in front of me.

But the sexiest thing of all?

The way she’s gazing at me.

I can’t explain how many nights I spent in bed, wishing she’d gaze at me like that.

When she finally reaches out to touch me, gently on my chest, a shiver runs through me.

I wrap a hand, still gently, around each ankle, and spread her legs, lifting her core up to me. I kneel between her legs, opening her up to me, and place a kiss gently on each inner ankle.

Then, without warning, I drag her to the edge of the bed, and she lets out a breath of anticipation as I crouch before her, running my tongue up the inside of her thigh.

This is not a massage. Not even close. But she’s powerless to stop me as my tongue goes higher, to that sweet, soft, downy hair. I bump it with my nose as she falls back against the mattress, letting out a mewl as I part her

pussy lips with my tongue and start to lick.

The taste is better than any dessert I've ever had.

"God, you're so sweet," I growl into her sex, lapping at her now like a wild animal. My hands wrap around her thighs, spreading them further, and she can do nothing but succumb to me, her abdomen, her whole gorgeous body quivering.

The licks turn to little nibbles, and then I bury my face at the apex of her thighs, taking her clit into my mouth and sucking hard.

That's all it takes for her to come apart. I'm rock hard from the sight of it, the feel of her, coming on my tongue. I shove my tongue deeper inside her, wanting every last bit of her nectar.

She pushes herself off the bed, arching up to meet my mouth.

"Oh God!" she cries, staring at me as she comes down. "What the hell did you do?"

I grin at her. "Thar she blows."

"Seriously? So you're going to go with whale jokes?" She smacks me.

"Time to meet Moby Dick?"

She smacks me again, though this time, she's smiling. "Seriously. You are so stupid. And that wasn't even a massage."

"No, it definitely wasn't," I say, sliding my hands up her sweat-slickened body and coming to rest next to her. She's a mass of quivering nerves, and it's more than I can stand, too delicious to resist. I want her to belong to me fully, just as I've always belonged to her.

She clings to me as I settle in next to her, running my warm hands down the length of her body, cupping her breasts and stopping at the barely-there roundness of her lower belly.

I kiss her, and kiss her more, until eventually, we fall asleep.

Stassi

Alec: *I want you to sit on my face again.*

I get this text right when the Uber pulls up at my parents' house. Vivid warmth floods my cheeks and I thank the heavens that it didn't happen while I was inside.

He's been texting me dirty things like that, non-stop. Which can't be good considering right now, he's at work. I imagine him dealing with life-and-death situations, then picking up his phone and typing in these things. The last one was about giving me a "pearl necklace." I can only imagine what he's going to say next. It's like he's been holding on to these for years, waiting for a chance to use them on me.

Me: *Stop. I'm at my parents' front door.*

I don't really want him to stop though. I love the way it makes me feel, like a part of me that hasn't been excited in years is finally waking up again. But I need to keep my game face on. I'm not ready to tell my parents anything just yet. I'm twelve weeks along, so I'm not quite showing, but I will be soon. My clothes are getting tighter by the day.

Yesterday, Alec and I went to a place downtown and picked out a bunch of maternity clothes, which made this feel realer than ever.

I still have time before I have to let my family know—but I don't have forever.

Alec: *I want you in my bed when I get home.*

Gladly. I can't wait.

Me: *Don't forget we're going crib shopping tomorrow.*

I pocket my phone, thinking about our little shopping trip. It's just window-shopping and lunch downtown. We're not buying anything—at least, not yet. I want to be at least halfway along before we make any choices. Not just because I want to know the baby's sex, but because we still haven't figured out the living arrangements yet.

Part of me thinks it could be so easy. I'll just move next door, and we can use the spare bedroom in his place as the nursery. What could be simpler than that? Then I could keep my job at Ted's—despite Alec saying I wouldn't have to work at all if I didn't want to. Despite the recent turn of events, the idea of relying completely on him for everything makes me nervous.

I don't want to jinx anything.

The past few days have been amazing. I'm happier than I've ever been. But there's always this little fear, niggling in the back of my mind. I've known Alec all my life, and yet, it's still so tenuous. One little argument, one little off-handed Yours Cruelly remark, could make *everything* come crashing down.

I try to keep those negative thoughts out of my mind as I go inside my parents' house. The television's going in the living room—my dad has some true crime or war show playing, as usual—and my mother is in the kitchen making lunch.

“Hi, guys,” I say, placing my purse on the table in the entryway. My mom lights up but puts her finger to her lips. I realize why when I hear the snore. My dad's passed out in his recliner, another usual thing for him. “Ooh, sorry.”

“You're just in time,” she says. “I'm making egg salad sandwiches.”

“Yum,” I say, glad it’s not cold cuts. I’d hate to have to explain why I’m not eating my normal turkey-apple sandwich because of possible listeria contamination.

“Guess what? I’m going to be a grandmother again soon,” she says, not looking up from assembling the sandwiches.

My heart free falls. “What?”

“I just got the call. Abby’s in labor. I’m going to go up there, to Lewiston, later today.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “That’s exciting. I have a gift for them. I’ll come up, too.”

She dries her hands on a dishrag and envelops my face in them. They smell like her favorite Dawn dish soap.

“Let me get a look at you,” she says. “Something’s different.”

I shrink back slightly as she looks me over, wondering if she can tell. Can she?

“Hmm. Have you gained weight?” she asks.

I pull back. “Maybe a few pounds? It’s all those leftovers from Ted’s.”

She holds my hand, still inspecting me. “I’m not saying it’s bad. In fact, it looks good on you. There’s something different about you.”

I haven’t been in the house for more than a minute. I haven’t even taken off my jacket yet. Am I really this transparent or is my mom just that good at seeing through me?

“I was probably too skinny before,” I say, going to the other side of the center island to block her view of me. After moving back from New York, the stress of everything made my appetite almost non-existent. “The weight probably makes me look healthier.”

“Anastasia ...” Her tone is a warning, and I can’t meet her eyes, which only makes me look even more like I’m hiding something.

“What?”

“There’s not something you want to tell me?” she says, glancing over at

my snoring father and then going over and shutting off the war movie with the remote. She spins to me. “Is there?”

I play dumb despite the fact that she’s already piecing it together in real time.

Her expression narrows, and she leans in to whisper. “Are you pregnant?”

All the air leaves my lungs, and I hear my heart beating over the sound of my father’s snores.

“Oh my God. You are.” Her mouth opens, and for a moment, nothing comes out. “Oh, my. Oh, my, my, my.”

“Don’t tell Cooper and Aidan. Promise me you won’t.”

“Of course I won’t, it’s your business to tell them when you feel right, but ... why would you not want me to ... oh.” Her eyes light up. “Wait. Is Alec the father?”

I nod.

The smile that breaks out on her face is almost enough to convince me that everything is perfect, that we can all go forward as one big happy family. She actually claps her hands excitedly. She’s always had an unnatural love for my tormentor.

“I knew it.” She does a mini jump. “When I learned you were neighbors and he called the other day asking for my risotto recipe, I started piecing it together. That and I always knew he had a thing for you. My goodness, you’d have to be blind as a bat back in the day not to notice the way he looked at you.”

“Really?”

She laughs. “You didn’t see it?”

I shake my head. She doesn’t know anything about Yours Cruelly or the homecoming debacle. I always kept it inside, not wanting to re-live it or risk her getting my brothers involved because they tended to make things worse instead of better sometimes.

“They’re going to kill us, aren’t they?” I ask. “Cooper and Aidan.”

“Oh.” She waves me off. “Heavens, no. They love Alec like a brother, and now he really will be a part of the family.”

I’m not so sure I can agree with her rosy assessment of the situation. “Remember all those boys they beat up? The ones who had the gall to look at me?”

“They were kids. They wanted to protect you. They’re all adults now. You, too. You can make your own choices, and they don’t have a vote.”

“They might have families of their own, but that didn’t stop them from doing a number on Mason last year,” I point out.

“I think we can all agree Mason deserved what he got,” she says under her breath.

“Did you know Cooper got a tattoo of the Death Star on his bicep last week? He still thinks he’s part of the Rebel Alliance or something,” I add.

She chuckles, shaking her head as she finishes putting together the sandwiches and preparing a pitcher of lemonade.

“Cooper’s an adult. I can’t stop him from getting tattoos just like I can’t stop you from being with Alec—not that I would. You know how much I adore him. Your brothers are going to be thrilled about this.”

I worry my lip. “I’m not so sure. They don’t really like anyone. They didn’t even like Mason, they just kept it to themselves until the end.”

My mother holds up a finger. “They liked Jonathan.”

“Yeah. *One* guy. Out of a hundred.”

“Everyone loved Jonathan,” she says, smiling sadly.

“Except Alec,” I say as a memory pops into my mind. It was a house party for the hockey team, shortly before Jonathan died. Or ... wait ... was that the night he died? I was sitting on a couch with my legs in Jonathan’s lap, and we were both kind of tipsy. I wasn’t much of a drinker, but I used to try to show up at them, for a few hours at least. Anyway, he was reading my palm, pretending to tell my future, talking about how many kids we were going to have, the house with the white picket fence and the pool ... and then

he went to spit in my hand. I giggled and nudged him away and looked up to find Alec staring at me with so much hatred in his eyes they were practically black.

That look Alec gave me is still ingrained in my mind, even now. I hadn't even known he'd been back from college, but his face was twisted in sheer disgust. It made me feel like I'd done something wrong, but then, later on, right before I left, I saw them out on the back porch by the keg having heated words. They shoved each other before some of their teammates broke them apart.

Funny, I hadn't thought about that for years, almost like I'd blocked it from my memory. But Alec's hatred for Jonathan made the hate he showed me look like child's play. Knowing what I now know, I can see his beef with Jonathan was simple jealousy. But back then, Jonathan was my everything. Nothing anyone could possibly say or do would've made me think otherwise.

My mother asks, "So when is my next grandchild due?" Mom asks as I sit down and dive into my sandwich.

"Early December."

"You're going to have to tell your brothers sooner than later because you're going to be showing soon."

I look down at my belly, pressing my t-shirt down. It's not quite as flat as it used to be, but not bulging, either. It just feels full, bloated.

"You're petite, like me," she says, "and the women in our family show early."

That doesn't stop me from reaching for another sandwich. "I guess there's no bikini season this summer for me."

"What about supper this Sunday? You could tell them then? No sense in dragging this out."

I shake my head. "Not this Sunday. Not until I'm a little further along."

"Okay. In a few Sundays. Invite Alec over, and you can tell them together. It'll be better to do it among family. They won't overreact in front

of the kids.”

I nod. “That makes sense.”

My father lets out a loud snore and cracks an eyelid.

“Oh. Stassi. Hi,” he says, kicking out of his recliner. “What did I miss?”

I glance at my mother, and we share a secret smile.

Alec

I wake up in the early morning with muscles stiff as hell and an ear-to-ear grin on my face.

I crane my neck to the side and see the reason. Stassi's curled under my arm looking like every man's fantasy, clinging to my side, her silky hair splayed out over my chest.

I reach out and tuck a white-blond lock back, away from her face, so I can get a better look at her. Not that I haven't seen her a million times before, in life and in my dreams. But this is still relatively new. She's been coming over to my place every night this week, and yet I still can't get used to the sight of her curled around me. Her smell on my sheets. Her clothes strewn around my room. The smile on her face, knowing I put it there.

If we have a girl, I hope she looks like her mother.

It's not possible to get enough of her. Looking at her now, I only want more. I shift in bed, adjusting my morning wood, and then I grab my phone, scrolling through it one-handed as Stassi sleeps soundly in my arm.

A minute later, her eyes flutter open.

"Hi," she says sleepily.

"Hey. Didn't mean to wake you."

She yawns and stretches before sitting up and blinking at the morning sunlight coming through the window. The sight of her perfect, pert tits makes me want her again. But we went so many rounds last night, I don't know if I have anything left to give. I'm spent. Drained. I need to charge.

Still, I reach for her, copping a feel. She giggles and checks the clock.

"Ugh. I have to go to Ted's soon." She rolls onto her stomach and checks her phone. "And I'm officially an aunt again. Cooper and Abby just had their baby. Another boy."

"You going to go up and see him?"

"Eventually." She sets the phone down and reaches for the nearest shirt. It's my old Panthers hockey jersey, number nine, and it looks way better on her than it does on me. Especially when she has nothing else on at all.

"We have time," I say as she shakes out her hair from the collar of the shirt. Holding her there, I reach my hand under the sheet and find my way between her taut thighs. She squirms but parts her legs, giving me access.

Her brow furrows. "Not all that much."

"We have enough though. I can be fast. I know what you like ..."

She studies me, a smile breaking out on her face that turns into a little giggle.

I roll over and set my phone down. "What?"

She gives me a playful smile and grabs for my phone. "What are you looking at? Are you sending Yours Cruelly messages to another girl?"

I chuckle as she stares at the phone, trying to figure out how to unlock it. "Yours Cruelly died a tragic and horrible death a lifetime ago."

"Good riddance. He was an asshole."

I'm glad we can laugh about this now.

I pull her onto me. She throws a leg over my hip and straddles me, kissing me, her hair falling in a veil around my face. I touch her little belly gently, which is somehow now sexier as it gets rounder by the day. If she didn't already drive me wild, her pregnancy curves are going to be the death of me.

When she pulls back, I saw the crease of worry in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I’m just thinking of next Sunday and my brothers beating you into a bloody pulp on the sidewalk outside my house.”

“You think I can’t handle your brothers?” I puff my chest out in an attempt to be funny. I’ve always had broad shoulders and an athletic build, but Cooper and Aidan are built like two brick shithouses.

She inhales sharply. “I love your confidence but ...”

Honestly, I probably couldn’t, if we came to blows. But I’ve been working out what I want to say to them, and it’s sound.

I run my fingers down the lines of her shoulder blades. “I *know*.”

She straightens her spine, her nipples pointing up, making me want to suck on them again. I rub the pad of my thumb over a nipple and it pebbles at once.

“You know they’re going to wonder why you did a one-eighty, acting like I was the most annoying thing in the world to, uh, knocking me up.”

“You really think they remember that? It was a long time ago.”

She gives me a look. Then she rolls over in bed, onto her stomach, reaching for her own phone on the ground. She lifts it up, scrolls, and then recites, in very flowery language, as if it’s a Shakespeare soliloquy: *Hey blondie, Roses are red, some diamonds are black, I think Laura Ingalls Wilder wants her clothes back. Yours Cruelly, X.*

The words come back to me as she says them. I remember the outfit. A shirt with a high, ruffled collar, that I don’t even think my grandmother would wear. She made it look sexy. Now that I think about it, that might’ve been the first time I beat off, thinking about her.

“Okay, what about this one: *Hey, blondie. Roses are red, sushi is vile, you look like you came from a donation pile. Yours Cruelly, X.*”

Again, that look. This is where I’m supposed to explain.

“For the record, I like sushi,” I tell her, reaching for her phone. She holds

it away from me, but I have longer arms and grab it, paging through one insult after the next. “What the hell? Did you keep all of these?”

She nods.

“Why?” I ask.

She looks down at her chest, flushing. “Because, well ... everyone ignored me. Yours Cruelly was mean. But at least he knew I existed. Him and ... well, the other you.”

It’s a dagger in my heart, right there. I didn’t know. How did I not know? She acted like she was above everyone. Like she didn’t want to be down on Earth with us losers. I was trying to bring her down a peg. How could I not realize she just wanted someone to be nice to her?

In a cruel twist of fate, that someone ended up being Jonathan.

He might have been a prick, but he at least he paid attention to her—that was all she wanted.

I touch her thigh. “Jesus. Stassi. I’m sorry.”

She gives me a small smile. “It’s all right. It helps to laugh about it now.”

“What about the other messages? The texts we exchanged? Do you have those?”

She shakes her head, paging through the phone and sighs. “I don’t have that phone anymore and I deleted that number a long time ago. I wanted to forget about that whole homecoming thing. Honestly, that wrecked me more than all of the Yours Cruelly emails combined.”

“Fucking Rob Conrad,” I say.

“You wouldn’t have gone with me anyway.”

“Your psychopath brothers never would’ve allowed me to. You know that.”

She lifts a shoulder. “I guess we’ll never know, will we?”

She’s so damn cute. I want her. Again and again. For as long as I live, I want to be the one she comes home to, the one she worries to when things don’t go her way, the one who fathers her children.

And if that's going to piss her brothers off, then so be it.

I can be everything she wants me to be and then some.

She'll never shed another tear if I have anything to do with it.

I roll her back onto the bed, caging her under me. Her breathing comes hard and fast with anticipation as I pin her wrists to the mattress. It's like she was challenging me to make the next move.

She doesn't have to. With her, I can't control myself enough not to. I need her.

"What book are you on now?" I ask.

She gazes up at me with a question. "*The Hobbit.*"

"H, huh? Getting your Tolkien on? That's my favorite book."

"Is it? I'm having trouble getting into it. Baby brain, I guess."

"Maybe I should read it to you." I spread her legs with my thighs, settling myself between them, and ease my hardening cock into her. She spreads her legs wider, welcoming it, and hooks her legs tightly around my hips, urging me toward her with her calves, gently pushing on my ass. Since you can't get someone pregnant twice, we've not had to use rubbers and I have to say, she feels tighter, wetter, and softer than anything I ever could've imagined. "Oh God."

I think of baseball.

Medical charts.

Taxes.

Anything to keep me from exploding right here, right now.

I want to take my time here. Feel everything. Every last inch.

She grips me harder, which only sends me closer to the edge.

"Oh God, Alec," she moans, raking her fingernails down my back. "You feel so good inside me."

When I'm buried to the hilt inside her, I breathe out, "You don't know what you do to me, do you?"

"Why don't you tell me then?" she whispers back.

She thinks the worst thing I ever did was hide that I sent her sweet messages and blew her off because I was protecting her from Rob Conrad. But that's far from the worst thing I've ever done to her.

Eventually, I'm going to have to tell her. And when I do, she's going to hate me more than she ever has before.

So much, she may not ever want to see me again.

So instead, I repeat the words in my head, again and again, as I plunge in.

Roses are red, violets are blue ...

Forgive me for what I did to you.

Stassi

“Hey. Thought you wanted me to read that to you.” Alec’s just taken a shower, a towel slung low over his hips, his chest and shoulders dotted with drops of water. “Looks like you’re almost done now. What’s next?”

I’m in a little cocoon in his bed, finishing *The Hobbit*. It’s been a long slog trying to get through it. Alec keeps asking me how I’m liking it, and I have to confess: I’m not. I guess I’m not much of a fantasy fan.

But at least I’m almost finished. “Yeah. I’m having trouble thinking of an I, though. I think I’m going to read *I Am Legend and Other Stories* by Richard Matheson. After all these dwarves, I think I need zombies.”

He goes to the dresser and finds a pair of boxer briefs. “So you want to do that for my day off? Go to the bookstore?”

Truthfully, I’d been thinking of something else I have to do today. But I nod, liking that he’s making plans for *us*. It feels nice to be included in his life, to know that he wants to spend time with me when he could essentially do anything. He really does care about me and the baby. He’s putting his money where his mouth is. “Sure. I think I should probably get a copy of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. I hear it’s a must. But can we stop someplace else first?”

He sits on the edge of the bed to put on his jeans and gives me a curious look. “You’ve got me intrigued. Where?”

I know he won’t be intrigued any longer when he hears my answer. So I say it quick, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

“It’s Jonathan’s birthday. I always visit his grave today.”

His bare shoulders stiffen, and his jaw sets. He looks away. “Yeah. I guess if you want, we can stop.”

Alec never liked Jonathan. Part of me always thought it was because when Jonathan joined up with my brothers, Alec got muscled out of their friendship. Not completely. But enough to make him feel displaced. But now that I know how he felt about me, all those years ago ... I guess it makes sense that he was jealous that Jonathan and I were happy together.

Whatever it is, it’s water under the bridge. Jonathan’s gone. Alec doesn’t have him to worry about.

“Thank you,” I say.

I pull myself up and get ready, making sure I have enough saltines in my purse, though my morning sickness isn’t as bad as it once was. I direct Alec to make a stop at Shaw’s so I can get some flowers, and then we head to Sapphire Shores’ only cemetery. It’s a small place on a bluff overlooking the ocean, down a long, narrow dirt road. The place lot is empty when we pull in.

Removing my seatbelt, I look over at him. He’s wearing his sunglasses, leaning his head back, as if trying to catch some sleep.

“I’ll be back in a little bit,” I tell him.

“Take your time.”

Pushing open the door of his truck, I step out onto the gravel road, then make my way up the path I’ve come to know by heart. Luckily, a few days of warm weather have sucked up the melted snow and hardened the ground, so my feet don’t sink into the soft earth. New grass, electric green, is starting to poke up everywhere, and the air smells like pine needles and the Atlantic.

Jonathan’s grave is at the very end of the last path, against a moss-

covered picket fence. Beyond that and a line of scraggly evergreens is the drop-off to the ocean. His grave is one of the newer ones; still glossy and legible, standing upright rather than tilted like the ones around it. There's a small mound of melted snow at its base, where the sun never hits.

I move it aside and lay the flowers down, wondering if I'm the first to be here this year. Jonathan's parents moved south after his death. Too many bad memories, I guess.

Looking back at the truck, I can barely see it among all the new foliage. The birds are singing up in the trees, signaling spring is coming, so I sit back on the grass and kick off my ballet flats, running my toes through the new grass.

"Hi, Jon." I say, as if we were together again, locked in an embrace. He and I used to sit at the beach together, holding each other for hours as we watched the tide roll in and out. When I used to picture our future together, I never thought of it this way—me above ground, him below. I pick up a blade of grass and start to play with it. "So, crazy story. Remember Alec? Long story short, I'm having his baby. Yeah, I know, you didn't really like him, and the feeling was mutual. But he's changed, I think. And I think I might be falling in love with him."

I pluck a strand of new grass, tickling the soft blade against my palm.

"I know, I know, it's crazy," I continue. "But it feels good. Right, you know? I don't know. It might be in my head. I don't even really know, Alec might just be caught up in the excitement, but so far, he's been amazing and for the first time in forever, I'm actually hopeful for the future. And it's different than the way I felt with Mason. With him I always felt like I was living some fairy-tale that couldn't possibly feel real, it didn't feel like my life. *This* feels like it's my life, though. Despite it not being planned, I'm at peace with it. Like it's ... I don't know. Meant to be?"

I realize my voice is rising, so I turn around to see if Alec has decided to join me. But no, I'm alone here. I can barely see into the window of the truck,

but he's not looking my way. In fact, I think he's asleep.

“Anyway, I think if you knew Alec now, you'd like him. I think you two would be friends. And I guess I came here because ... it really would mean a lot to me to know that you're looking down, and that you approve. That you're happy I'm happy. That you think I'm making the right choice for me, to keep Alec in my life. I know, it's not the way I planned it, but since when does anything ever go according to plan for me?”

I pause. I'm not waiting for a response. Or maybe I am. Just a little sign that he's happy with me and that he's listening.

At that, a pinecone falls from the tree. I look up and notice a squirrel, chittering in a branch overhead.

Funny. I never thought of Jonathan as squirrel-like. If he was any animal, it would've been a golden retriever—happy all the time, always goofy and hilarious. But it's enough of a sign for me.

I spend a few more moments there, clearing away anything that might look like a weed. Then, standing up, I return to the truck.

Alec springs to attention the moment I open the door and starts the engine.

“All okay?” he asks, practically backing out, almost before I've shut the door.

It strikes me as childish. He can't still be jealous of Jonathan. How can he seriously hold a grudge against someone who's six feet under?

“You could've come. You could've paid your respects.”

He's quiet for a moment. “Respects?”

He says it like it's a foreign concept.

The guy is six feet under. It's time he lets let bygones be bygones.

“I figured you wanted a moment alone,” he says, instantly putting my mind at ease and reminding me he's not the same Alec he once was. “I'd have come with if you wanted.”

He reaches the main road and pulls out, not looking at me. He's tense and

lets out a long breath. “You mind if we go home instead of the bookstore?”

I shake my head. “It’s fine. I still have a few chapters left. Maybe you can read it to me?”

“Sure.” He smiles. “I’ll do the voices. I have a pretty sick Hobbit accent.”

I laugh. As he turns the car toward home, it hits me. Alec used to be kind of a scaredy-cat when it came to certain things. My brothers used to be into horror movies, but Alec didn’t like them. When we went to the amusements at Old Orchard Beach, he passed on the haunted house. And during Halloweens, he always dressed as a hockey player. Every. Single. Year. He never wore anything remotely frightening with fake blood and fangs and stuff like that.

The cemetery probably just gave him the creeps. I’m sure that’s it.

A song I love comes on the radio, so I turn it up loud and reach over and grab his hand.

And for the first time, I think maybe everything’s going to turn out just fine.

Alec

What the hell is it to you, dickhead?

I'm finishing up a twelve-hour shift at the medical center, making my way through the last of the paperwork, when Jonathan's voice hits me, clear as day.

That was the last thing he ever said to me.

I remember being drunk. Everyone was, but he and I had gotten sloppy drunk because the liquor was flowing like the Mississippi river that night. But I wasn't so hammered that I forgot who my girlfriend was—which seemed to be a pattern with Jonathan.

A pattern he hid well from Stassi, who thought he was the most wonderful thing she'd ever seen. Playing the part of the easygoing, happy-go-lucky guy who just wanted to be friends with everyone made it impossible not to like the guy. He had everyone fooled though.

Everyone but me.

His bullshit is so thick that it survives, even a decade later. Stassi still loves and idolizes him, clearly, or she wouldn't be visiting his grave and talking to him like he's still there to hear her. She wouldn't be asking for his stamp of approval.

Who the fuck cares what he thinks?

She does, apparently.

Though she wouldn't if she knew the truth about what kind of person he was. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her. But would she ever believe me? She's had a shitty go of it, with untrustworthy guys who ripped her heart out, so if letting her believe that some man out there was the real deal brings her some sliver of joy, I don't want to take that from her.

Then again, it kills me to know she still idolizes him, even if he is six feet underground.

"Hey, you," a voice behind me says.

I spin in my chair, expecting to see one of the many nurses who have been trying to catch my eye since I started here. And yes, it's a woman in a nurse's uniform—white slacks, comfortable shoes, a pastel cardigan. But as my eyes go from the familiar face, to the in-your-face cleavage, to the nametag on her chest, memory sparks.

A memory of darkness, drunkenness, being wedged awkwardly in the cramped back seat of my high school vehicle, legs folded under me as I balanced her weight over me, reaching for the glory that was second base.

"Carlina?" I ask.

She saunters in and leans on the desk next to me as I recall what Stassi said to me about her. *She's married. I hear she has six kids and lives upstate.*

"That's right. Great to see you. I can't believe you're a doctor. Well, we always did call you *Smart Alec.*"

"Yeah ... wow." Years ago, I'd have reminisced in all those foggy-window nights at Brown's Hill, but those memories don't hold a flame to what I have with Stassi now. "You're a nurse here, huh?"

She points to the nametag, with the Maine Medical Center logo on it. "Smart. See? Getting that big degree paid off."

"Why have I not seen you here before?"

"I just started this week," she says, putting a flirtatious hand on my arm.

“I moved down here from Presque Isle.”

She lives upstate. “What brings you back?”

She tucks a lock of dark hair behind an ear with a row of diamond studs on it. “Oh, so the rumor mill around here still churns, huh? I remember you and I were the subject of their talk quite a few times,” she says with a little smile. “Hudson and I—you remember Hudson, don’t you? Two years ahead of us in high school?”

I shake my head, though I think I do. Big player—football, girls, the works. Typical guy I’d pair Carlina with.

“Well, we separated. I decided to come back here.” She shrugs nonchalantly, in a *What are you going to do about it?* way. “My parents are still around. And my sister. It takes a village, right? Thank God I only have one kid to raise. It’s the hardest job I’ve ever had. Harder than nursing, that’s for sure.”

I’m completely taken aback since I really hadn’t thought about her until Stassi mentioned her. When I heard she was married and had six kids, it had no effect on my life. But now that I’m staring at her, thinking that if she’s as much of a flirt as she used to be, I’m going to have to fend her off like Cherry, which already feels like a part-time job.

“Just the one?” I ask.

“Yep.” Her lips curl into a slow smile. “Just the one.”

So much for the rumor mill being accurate. I can only imagine the things people have dreamed up about me, but I don’t care enough to give it a second thought.

I check the time, counting down the hours until I can see my girl again. I can clock out in a minute, but I still have at least twenty minutes of paperwork left.

“Well, it’s been—”

“—what have you been up to? I heard you were in North Carolina after MIT, weren’t you?” She’s clearly not ready for this conversation to be over.

Making herself comfortable at my desk she turns my coffee mug and reads the funny saying on it before looking over the photographs posted there, though none of these things are mine, either—this isn't my station.

“Yeah, sure was,” I say, trying to determine the response that will send her on her way the fastest when I notice Cherry peering into the bank of desks, a wounded look on her face. The vultures are circling like disco lights tonight. “But this opportunity opened up and I grabbed it.”

“You were always an opportunist,” she says with a wink, leaning in closer and lowering her voice. “I know I dated a lot of guys in school, but I just remember ... you were the nicest. The most respectful of me. Most of the guys I dated wanted to go all the way, the first date.”

“High school was kind of a blur for me,” I lie so I can avoid having to pay her a compliment that she might take as a sign that I'm interested in rekindling an old flame. Then again, it occurs to me that Carlina was there the night Jonathan drowned. If I ever need someone to go to bat for me, it'd be her.

I need to stay in her good graces—without leading her on.

“Hey. You know what we should do?” she asks. “We should go out sometime. Get a drink. Relive old times. We had so much fun.”

Remembering that I might need her in my back pocket with the whole Jonathan thing, I don't say yes, but I don't say no either.

“I've got to clock out. Was good seeing you. Sure I'll see you around.”

Stassi

A couple weeks after the incident at the cemetery, while I'm reading *Little Women* and going about my business, something amazing happens.

It's a beautiful day in early June, the windows all open and the crisp breezes fluttering the curtains. Most of my days, when I'm not working, are spent right on this couch in Alec's apartment, trying to accomplish my New

Year's resolution. I don't know why, but it feels extra important that I finish reading all of the books I need to—if only to prove to my baby that I can do what I set out to do. I'm almost halfway there, but because I know that the end of the year is going to be busy with other things, I've made my new goal the baby's due date—December 3rd.

As I'm trying to burn through Jo March's adventures, I feel a little strange. At first, I think maybe I ate something that disagreed with me, because it's a little tight in my middle. My belly has been bulging more and more, and now I have to wear maternity pants with elastic waistbands. I press on the side of my stomach, and there's a slight, bubbling feeling, a flickering that disappears as quickly as it came. I stop, waiting to feel it again, just to be sure.

I know what that is. *I've been waiting for you.*

I still, closing my eyes, flattening my hand, trying to feel it again. This time, when it comes, it feels even more sure, stronger.

“Oh,” I whisper.

Alec is sitting on the other end of the couch, watching a hockey game with my feet in his lap.

He looks over at me. “You going to throw up again?”

I shake my head. I haven't thrown up in over a month, but I guess it emotionally scarred him because it was in his bathroom and he had to clean it up.

“No,” I say, forcefully grabbing his hand and resting it on my belly.

He waits for a beat, two. Then he says. “What? Are you getting bigger?”

I grab the pillow from behind my back and wallop him over the head with it.

“Just feel it. Can you feel it? It's moving,” I say, trying to track the movement with his fingertips.

His eyes go wider, and I think he gets the picture because when he touches my stomach again, he really concentrates. Then he shakes his head.

“Did you feel something?”

“Yeah, it was like little bubbles ... or butterflies ...” I say with excitement, grabbing my phone and opening it to the app I have. “Oooh. Listen to this. You may be able to feel quickening, that is, the baby’s movement. Soon, other people will be able to feel the movement if they touch your belly. The baby is the size of an avocado! Her eyes can work! And oh ... soon, she’ll be able to hear your voice!”

He peers over at the app. “She?”

“I think it’s a girl. That’s my gut feeling.”

With his hand still on my belly, he leans in. “Yo, Flossie. You hearing this?”

I grin. “So you’re warming to the name?”

“No. I still think it’s terrible. I keep imagining dental floss. But I thought Stassi was a terrible name, too.”

“Seriously?” I smack him with the pillow again.

“Remember how we called you Spastic? Static Cling?”

“I wish I could forget.”

“But I can’t see you being named anything else. And now ... it’s not just a name. It’s you. I think Shakespeare said something about it. What’s in a name? Right? By any other name, you’d be just as sweet.”

“So you don’t mind Florence?”

“I’m undecided. But I don’t mind Ollie. I actually kind of like that one. It’s growing on me.” He tickles my stomach, and I start to giggle as I read more about our sixteen-week old baby. “Oh. Hey. Remember Carlina?”

My good mood suddenly disintegrates. A few weeks ago, *he* hadn’t even remembered her. Or so it seemed.

“What about her?” I ask.

He’s leaning back, pretending it’s no big deal, but he’s also sucking on the inside of his cheek. I know him. It means something. There’s something behind this. And all I can do is think back to Carlina Smith, the gorgeous,

raven-haired stick with boobs, who had every boy wagging his tongue after her. And yet she was dating Alec. Of course she was—he was the most popular guy in her graduating class, and she was the female equivalent. She was on the swim team and used to bounce around in her bathing suit, her double Ds on display for everyone. As a flat-as-a-board freshman, I used to eye her from my bench in the locker room and *wish* ...

And then, I remember looking out that June evening, watching him with my brothers and their dates. He put a corsage on the strap of Carlina's tiny slip dress and kissed her, wrapping an arm around her like she belonged to him. I was so jealous, I wanted to die.

That entire night, while Alec and my brothers were enjoying their senior prom, I was at home, burying my face in a pillow and wishing that could've been me on his arm. It didn't help that I knew, because I snooped on my brothers, that they were all planning on renting hotel rooms and bringing their dates there after the prom. I *knew* Alec would do that with Carlina. He'd take her there, tell her how beautiful she was as he slowly undressed her, stare deep into her eyes, make love to her ...

I wanted so badly for it to be me.

And I hated that I felt that way about him.

But I couldn't fight the feelings, no matter how hard I tried.

"What about her?" I ask, my heart beating a mile a minute.

"She's back in town," he says. "She just started at the hospital this week. She's a nurse I guess."

"Really?" The word comes out a squeak. That's ... *convenient*.

"Yeah, and get this. She doesn't have six kids. She and Hudson what's-his-face separated. Remember him?"

Barely. Like I noticed any other hot guys in school. I was too busy drooling over Alec. And of course Carlina doesn't have six kids. I just made that up. I didn't think he'd actually believe me. In fact, I figured he knew more about her than I did.

“Fascinating,” I say. “Sounds like you two have been catching up.”

“Yeah. A little. That’s why I wanted to bring it up ... she wants to meet up after work sometime and catch up.”

Heat rages through me. I’m going to be sick and this time it’s not from the life I’m growing inside me. Exes don’t just meet up with their former flames to “catch up” unless there’s an ulterior motive.

“Why?” I ask. “What’s the point?”

He tilts his head.

“What do you mean, why? I told you why. To catch up.” He lets out a stilted laugh. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

Yes, dummy. This is like the beginning verse of every country song where the woman gets wronged.

“Of course not.” I don’t meet his eyes because I’m sure he’ll see the lie in mine.

Obviously he doesn’t believe it, because he studies me carefully. “Stassi. If I wanted to do something behind your back, I wouldn’t have told you.”

“I *know*,” I snap, immediately feeling childish for copping an attitude. “It’s fine. Have fun catching up with your ex-girlfriend while your pregnant girlfriend sits at home eating eggplant pizza.”

He leans in and kisses me. “I won’t go.”

“Why not?”

“You’re obviously bothered and I don’t want you to worry.” He shrugs like it’s not big deal.

I think for a moment. There really is no reason to worry, is there? He did tell me about it. And so what if she’s probably more gorgeous and alluring than ever, and I’m becoming a blueberry-shaped bloated creature whose body’s being slowly inhabited by a tiny alien? So what if they were once the hottest couple in Sapphire Shores and they were in love?

He loves me now, doesn’t he?

He even told me that he loved me, *then*.

That he's *always* loved me. Not her.

There's nothing sexy about being insecure, and Alec has done nothing but demonstrate how crazy he is about me in the time he's been back.

So I say, "Fine. Go. But bring me back some olives. Pimento please. And a brownie sundae. Thank you."

He grins. "Deal."

"Shouldn't you start getting ready?" I ask after he doesn't budge.

"I'm not going tonight," he chuffs. "I just mean, sometime."

Great—I was hoping to get all my worrying over and done in one night, now we get to stretch it out until whenever their schedules align.

Alec pulls me closer, his breath warm on the top of my head.

"I love you," he tells me, as if I've forgotten since he last reminded me an hour ago.

"I love you too," I tell him. "Don't make me regret it though."

"Regret what? Loving me?"

"Yeah."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Alec

Rossi's Diner used to be the big hangout after hockey practice. It's loud, smells like bacon grease, and it isn't romantic in the least. It's a good place to meet. A safe place.

At least, I thought it was, until Carlina walked in.

She's wearing a barely-there red dress that hugs her curves and shows too much skin, her hair piled up loose on her head. Her lips are red, her eyes smoky. I remember those lips, wrapped around my cock, that night. She never was sedate or mild-mannered, as that unassuming nurse's uniform would suggest. Now, she looks every bit like the woman I knew her to be—a regular femme fatale.

She ignores every male eye on her as she scans the place, looking for me. I have the momentary urge to sink down in the booth and slink out the back door, but then she locks eyes with me and smiles.

Shit.

She can cause a five-alarm blaze with the friction of those hips, swinging the way they are. She's wearing high heels and has a sexy little pout on her face, ensuring she makes her way into the fantasies of every man in the room.

Not me. I refuse.

Stassi's my Kryptonite, not Carlina.

I made a point to dress down tonight, faded jeans and an old t-shirt, not wanting her to assume this was anything remotely like a date. She runs a disapproving eye over me as I slip out of the booth to give her a hug, but she says nothing, squeezing me so tight her perfume rubs off on me.

Stassi's going to love that ...

She throws her clutch down on the table and slips in. "Interesting choice for a dinner date."

Date. There it is. I sip my water. "I didn't think this was a date, Car. We're just catching up."

Her face clouds over. But then she leans in and reaches for my hand. "Oh, I guess I just assumed ... are you seeing someone?"

I nod.

"And who is the lucky lady? Do I know her?" she asks.

"Stassi Hutton."

"*Stassi?*" Her eyes narrow, and for the tiniest moment I get the feeling she isn't quite as fine with it as she says. "The nerdy blonde from our high school?"

"She's not really nerdy anymore," I say. "She's actually gorgeous. And she's pregnant with our first child."

I make a point of saying first because I'm bound and determined to have more with her.

Carlina's still holds my hand. "Wow. I just thought someone like you ... I guess I just don't see you with someone like her. You're so out there, your personality so big. And she's ... not. But you used to be friends with Aidan and Cooper, right? Still, it doesn't make sense."

I shrug. "What in this world does?"

"Honestly?" She leans in, and once again I can see those breasts of hers obnoxiously on display. "You and I were the envy of the school. We made sense. I always thought we would've ended up together."

She lets out a little sigh and straightens.

“But whatever floats your boat.” A wicked smile curls her lips as her leg brushes mine under the table. “Just so you know ... I’m good at keeping secrets.”

I move my leg away. This was a mistake.

Still, I try to keep my tone light, charming. “I bet you are. We all were, weren’t we?”

Her eyes widen. “Wait. Are you talking about ... Jonathan Cole?”

I nod.

“Whatever. If you didn’t buy the alcohol for that party, someone else would have.”

“Maybe. But he drank a lot that night,” I say. “Too much.”

My mind goes back to that night, right before Thanksgiving. The haze of smoke in the abandoned house in the country we always used to party at. The beer and alcohol bottles all around. Most of us—the graduates—back in town for the holiday weekend. Cooper, Aidan, and I were hoping for a chill night. Music. Drinks. Reminiscing about our old glory days. This party, however, was bigger than usual. Even Stassi was there—with Jonathan.

She didn’t stay long that night though. She didn’t like those kinds of parties, and she had studying to catch up on. So after midnight, she jumped up off Jonathan’s lap, gave him a kiss, and hitched a ride home with someone’s DD.

Jonathan stayed though.

And the second she left, I could tell by the look in his eyes that he’d already forgotten about Stassi. I knew that look. I’d seen it a hundred times before. He zeroed in on things, and whatever he wanted, he usually got. That night, he was zeroed in on Hannah Honeycutt—some hot little freshman all the guys couldn’t shut up about.

I did my best to distract him, challenging him to do shots (I filled mine with water when he wasn’t looking), and always making sure he had a fresh

beer in his hand. Jonathan, always the good time guy, went along with it. And the drunker he got, the more he drank. It wasn't long before he was incapacitated, passed out on a sunken in sofa in the corner of the dusty living room.

I stepped outside to take a leak, thinking about heading home since my mission was over.

When I headed back inside, Aidan stopped me to ask if I'd get him home that night and we got to talking about something else. By the time I returned to the living room, though, Jonathan was gone.

Hannah Honeycutt, however, was sucking face with some guy I'd never seen before.

I let it go because at least I didn't have to watch him cheat on Stassi this time, and then I waited until I was good enough to drive home before rounding up as many passengers as I could fit in my BMW and heading out.

When I woke up the next morning and heard the news ... that was when the full force of what I'd done hit me.

"You can't blame yourself," Carlina says, placing her hand on mine.

But I do.

I bought and supplied the alcohol that night.

I made sure Jonathan was liquored up so bad he couldn't walk straight.

I just didn't know he was going to wander outside, stumble into a pond and die.

"Stassi was dating Jonathan when he died, right?" she asks.

I nod.

"Poor thing. Oh, I get it." She links her fingers together in front of her. "She doesn't know?"

"Nope."

I throw up my hands. "That's, uh, kind of why I wanted to talk to you tonight. I want to come clean to Stassi. Can you vouch for me?"

She frowns. "What?"

“Vouch for me. You knew what kind of person Jonathan was, how much he cheated on her. You know I never would’ve given him all that alcohol if I knew what he was going to do.”

“Yes,” she says slowly. “But ... why do you need someone to vouch for you? I don’t understand?”

I draw in a breath, let it out slowly. “It’s not just the Jonathan thing. I haven’t been very good to her, period. And I don’t think she trusts me. We’ve been through a lot, and I worry this might be the one thing ...”

“What do you want me to do? Sign an affidavit—Alec Mansfield is an okay guy? Give you a letter of recommendation? Put my stamp of approval on your forehead—Grade A?”

I just stare. I don’t know what I wanted. Just someone to tell Stassi, when she finds out the truth, that I’m not that terrible person who wanted to hurt her. Now that Carlina puts it that way, though, it sounds like a stupid idea.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know, Alec. I’ll think about it. But I live in the present. I don’t like to wallow in the past, and I don’t think you or that girl of yours should, either. A word of advice. You guys are together? Live for now. Enjoy each other. Don’t worry about ghosts. They can’t hurt you.”

She’s about to get up when I look up and see a familiar face. It’s Cooper’s fiancée, with Cooper, trailing behind.

He catches sight of me and waves, then sees Carlina. “Hey, hey. The gang’s all here. Reunion, huh?”

Carlina gives him her famous, flirty smile. “Look at you.”

“Long time no see.” He’s learned a thing or two about being in a relationship, because he *doesn’t* look, especially with his fiancée right beside him. “What are you doing with this old shithead?”

Carlina giggles in that sexy way that made my high school self salivate. She squeezes my arm and presses herself into me.

“Oh, you know,” she says, “reminiscing about the good old days.”

Cooper nudges me and speaks into my ear. “Hell man, you nailing

Carlina again? I always said you were the luckiest son of a bitch.”

“Nah. We were just leaving actually.”

He chuckles and winks at me, mistaking my sentiment for something else entirely.

“I bet you were,” he says.

“No, really,” I say but it’s too late. He’s turned his attention to his fiancée and the menu.

I wave him off, heading for the exit, behind Carlina, who is again capturing every male eye in the place.

When I get to the door, Cooper calls, “Stassi said you’re coming this weekend?”

I’m knocked so off-balance that it takes me a second to remember what this weekend is.

Sunday supper ... the big announcement.

Fuck.

How is that going to look to her brothers when I’ve just been seen hanging out with my ex-girlfriend?

Stassi

I pop a pimento olive into my mouth and smile.

Okay, so Alec forgot to bring me my goodies after his “catch up” with Carlina last night. But I can’t bring myself to care. One, because when he realized he’d forgotten, he went out special, this morning, to the store, and I found them waiting in the fridge when I woke up.

And two, last night, he came home only an hour after his shift ended. *Apparently*, they didn’t have that much to catch up on.

So now, I’m eating my pimento olives and brownie sundae for breakfast and feeling pretty happy about myself. Funny, I never actually liked pimento olives when I didn’t have a bun in the oven. Or, really, brownie sundaes, either.

But put them together ... it’s the most delicious thing on Earth.

I know, *weird*.

As I’m using an olive to scoop up some hot fudge, my phone rings. It’s my mom. Since I’m in such a good mood today, excited about our grand reveal to our family this weekend, I answer. “Hi!”

“Oh, you’re so chipper,” she says, but she sounds worried.

There’s only one reason for her to be upset when I’m happy. And that’s

when she knows she's about to ruin my mood. "What's up?"

Her voice is low. "I just talked to your brother, and he mentioned he ran into Alec last night at a restaurant ... and Alec was on a date."

"Oh, that wasn't a date," I say, still chipper because it's just a misunderstanding. "It was just a catch-up. She's an old friend from high school."

"Friend? Oh."

My stomach falls. There's more to this, something she's not telling me. "What do you mean, *oh*?"

"Well. Apparently, they were quite cozy. I believe the words used to describe them was, *Couldn't leave there fast enough and all over each other.*"

My gut sinks even lower. "They're comfortable with one another because they used to date. That's all. And you know how Cooper always blows things out of proportion and constantly has his mind in the gutter. I'm sure—"

"I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding, but those weren't Cooper's words, honey," she says, pain in her voice for having to break this to me. "Those were Abby's."

I swallow. "Oh ..."

"I'm sure it's fine. I just... I wanted to make sure you two weren't having any problems?" she ventures quietly.

"No," I say. "Everything's great. He told me all about it. I knew. He wasn't trying to sneak around or do anything behind my back. I'm fine with it. He even asked for permission."

"All right. I figured that. I just wanted to ..." She laughs. "Forget I said anything."

When I end the call, there's a text waiting for me, from Alec. He's been at work since this morning.

Alec: *Good breakfast?*

I smile. I'm never off his mind.

But then again, we haven't defined anything. We never talked about it. The last time we had that conversation and labeled ourselves, we decided on co-parents. Or at least, I did.

No ... the last time he talked about it, he said he wanted me to be *his*.

And I want that, too. I want to belong to him.

But then it's things like this ... little things ... that put doubt in my mind. If I hadn't been so oblivious with Mason, maybe I'd have seen the warning signs sooner.

No. There are no warning signs. I know Alec. I know what he did when we were younger was because of his parents and his inability to process how he felt about me. Whatever happened with Carlina was innocent. I'm sure of it. I'll tell Cooper that on Sunday and make sure he understands that there's no way Alec is going to hurt me. We're solid.

And maybe while I'm convincing my brothers, I'll be able to convince myself, too.

Alec

Sunday at 1 pm, we pull into the cul-de-sac and our childhood homes come into view.

Stassi shifts uncomfortably in the passenger seat. She's nervous; she hasn't said a word all morning and is clutching her homemade whoopie pies for dear life on her lap.

"Hey. It's going to be okay," I tell her.

She looks over at me.

"If your whoopie pies suck, we can just buy them from Shaw's from now on."

She scowls at me. "You're hilarious. Come on."

I step out of the car, looking over at my old house. Whoever lives there built an addition over the garage, and so now it blocks out even more of the

Huttons' view than it did before. It's square and imposing and looks even more like an impenetrable fortress than when I lived there, something I didn't think possible. The solid, high fence with a gate screams STAY AWAY.

Guess the Huttons never had much luck with neighbors.

When I step inside the Huttons' saltbox, I want it to feel like I'm home. Like I'm part of this family. That was how I felt, overwhelmingly, a couple months ago, when I was here last. But it must be the nerves, that feeling of betraying my two best friends, because I don't. Back then, everyone hadn't seen me in a while, and so they crowded around me. Now, they wave, and the boys joke with me, friendly as ever, but I can't fight the feeling that something is wrong. That *I* did something wrong.

That I *don't* belong here. And if I don't belong in this place, this place that was a refuge all my life ... where do I belong?

Stassi's nervous as hell, too, because she barely says a word before supper, and when we sit down to eat, she picks through the antipasto for all the olives, but only eats a couple before pushing her plate away.

Luckily, most of the attention is on Bodie, Cooper and Abby's new baby. It seems to have taken the pressure off us.

Not that it helps much. When the spaghetti comes, though I usually inhale it, I can barely look at it. I don't have any desire to drink wine, though I know it'll help me with my nerves.

It's all fun, meaningless banter until Cooper says, "So, dude, you and Carlina are back together now?"

My insides clench. Why the hell did I decide to go out with Carlina? What was I thinking? I had no interest in catching up with her or reliving the old times. It was warped to expect she'd want to help me quiet Stassi's worries about me. She only wanted one thing—me.

"No." I wipe my mouth with my napkin, exchange a look with Stassi, and begin to speak.

But Aidan gets there before I can. "Are you out of your mind? I heard she

was single. And it's like you two belong together. You dated all through high school."

"Yeah ... and back then, I realized she's not my type."

Aidan says, "Since when?"

"Since always."

Cooper laughs. "Dude. She's *every* guy's type."

Next to me, Stassi stiffens. I expect she will kick me, but instead, she says, "He's not dating her. Actually ... Alec and I ... *we* ..."

She casts a look around the table and words fail her.

I need to get this out. I don't have much time, knowing their knee-jerk reactions to things. I probably won't get a chance to explain. I need to do this fast.

"What Stassi's trying to say is that *we're* dating," I finish.

It comes out so fast, like a flyby, totally the wrong way I wanted it to. We're not even just dating. We're far more than that. I don't think it sinks in. Cooper gives us a blank look. "What? You're dating *who*?"

I point at Stassi, then at me. "We. Us. Each other. We're not just dating. We're together."

Aidan squints. Cooper looks between us and then lets out a laugh. "Get the hell out of here." He's waiting for the punchline. When it doesn't come, his voice is a warning. "You'd better be joking."

"No. And it's good. It's fine." With every shake of my head, I realize what a mistake this is. Because that isn't even the bombshell. There's a warning light flickering inside me.

Abort. Abort!

Aidan looks at Stassi.

"You—and *him*—" Aidan jabs a finger in my direction. "No. No. Our sister has more sense than that."

Stassi says, "I have plenty of sense. And I'm an adult. I really don't need your stamp of approval. But we wanted you to know."

“Stassi,” Aidan says, his face going red with anger. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

My face falls. For some reason, dickhead Jonathan got their seal of approval. And yet I’m, from the eye daggers they’re giving me, lower than a piece of shit. The sting is immediate, breathtaking. My best friends think I’m good enough to lobster with, but not good enough to date their sister. “What’s wrong with me?”

“We ask that every day,” Aidan mutters.

“For one. Did you forget? You were practically boning Carlina, two days ago, in public,” Cooper says with a snort.

“Like hell I was.” It takes everything I have to keep my voice a low volume.

Mrs. Hutton clears her throat. “*Cooper.*”

The room goes silent.

Leah smiles at us, smoothing things over. “Well, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Stassi so happy.”

“That’s because she’s obviously gone *insane*,” Cooper growls.

Aidan nods in agreement. “Whatever. Fine, have your fun, Stass. But don’t think it’s going to last. I’ve had waits for food at Rossi’s Diner that have lasted longer than most of his relationships.

“Right. How many times did you break up and get back together with Carlina? A thousand? And that was because you missed her tits,” Cooper says smugly, pushing his plate away. “Geez, Static ... I thought you had more sense than that.”

“Cooper,” my father bangs his fist on the table. “*Enough.*”

My first instinct is to tell Cooper to go to hell. I’m just about done with this. Stassi is insane for wanting to date me, because they think they know me. But they don’t, not anymore. Granted, it’s all my fault for being so damn convincing, putting up that front, making them think I was the last person on Earth who’d be good for their sister. I don’t know how I can undo it. Maybe I

can't.

Choosing my words carefully, I open my mouth to explain that to them.

But Stassi beats me to the punch. "I'm pregnant."

When it's out, I swear the air gets sucked out of the room.

Absolute silence. It seems to stretch on forever.

Then Aidan throws down his fork and leans back in his chair. "Well, that's just fucking great."

Cooper does nothing but glare, his eyes cold, murderous almost.

Mr. Hutton clears his throat.

"Well," he says, tears in his eyes, reaching over to give me a handshake.

"I think it's great. Mrs. Hutton and I couldn't be happier."

"Exactly," Mrs. Hutton says, clasping her hands together. "Grandparents, again! What a blessing."

I do my best to ignore the brothers.

"No one's more shocked by any of this than we are," I say. "This wasn't planned. But it happened, and we're really happy. We're looking into moving in together."

"How exciting," Abby says, rocking Bodie in her lap. "Closer to work?"

I look over at Stassi, who nods as I say, "Probably around Sapphire Shores. We're exploring options."

"Not that shithole you both live in," Cooper mutters. "That's no place to bring up a kid."

"We're looking into options," I repeat, since Stassi seems to have lost her voice. She's just staring at the pasta on her plate. "Something close to work, but it doesn't have to be in the city. And we won't have to worry about daycare, because once the baby is born, I get parental leave and so I can help with the night shifts, trading on and off so she can get some rest, and later go back to work, if she wants."

I venture a quick look at the brothers, who still look like they want to tear me limb from limb on top of this very table. Cooper's ripping apart his

napkin and Aidan is gnashing his teeth so hard I can hear the grinding from across the table.

“Well,” Mr. Hutton says, pushing away from the table. “Now that the meal’s over, boys, I think this calls for a celebration. Let’s go to the basement, why don’t we? Have a cigar to mark this occasion?”

Mr. Hutton has always been king when it comes to smoothing things over. He has an impressive cigar humidor in his office downstairs, but I know what this is all about. He wants us to talk.

Like men.

But the tension in the room is so thick as I push away from the table, I wouldn’t be surprised if we come to blows despite Mr. Hutton’s best efforts. From the worried look in Stassi’s eyes, she must feel the same way.

When I follow them down the stairs, it’s like a funeral procession. Mr. Hutton does his best to keep it light, doling out the cigars in his mancave, asking me questions about when she’s due and whether we think it’s a girl or a boy, but the guys are one united front of hate directed at me. They take their cigars but don’t light them.

“I always thought our Stassi would make a great mom, don’t you guys? She loves children, as you probably noticed. She always plays with her nieces and nephews,” Mr. Hutton points out, to which the boys don’t respond. “And I think—”

“What I don’t get is why you suddenly set your eyes on our sister. After all these years. Man, you *tormented* her. And now ...” Aidan shakes his head. “You’re going to look us in the eye and tell her you’re going to take care of her? You really think we’re supposed to believe that? Especially when two days ago you were out with your ex?”

So they’re going to tag-team me. This is going to be great.

All right. Time to lay it all out on the table. If that’s what they want, I’ll play.

We all look at Mr. Hutton, who clears his throat and stubs out his cigar.

“You know what? I think I’ll go upstairs and see what the girls are up to.”

He makes himself scarce as we all stare each other down. I don’t think we’re all going to escape here with our lives. And I’m already outnumbered, so the odds are stacked against me.

I hold my lighted cigar but don’t bring it to my lips. “We tormented her.”

“Right. Aidan and I are supposed to. We’re her brothers,” Cooper says. “You went along with it, because that’s what you always did. You have no excuse.”

I don’t follow. “What I always did?”

Aidan nods. “Yeah, see which way the wind blows, and follow that. Don’t ruffle feathers. Do what will get the negative attention off you.”

“What the ...” Is that what they always thought about me? “Name one time.”

“One time? Seriously? You always hid behind us. You never got in trouble. Not once. You pulled shit, as long as you knew you could go and leave people with their asses blowing in the breeze. Couldn’t risk your chances of getting into MIT, could you?”

“*What?* I never—”

“After everything she’s been through, she doesn’t need anyone pulling her chain anymore. Leaving her to shoulder the hard part. She doesn’t need this. We know her. She can’t handle another letdown.”

“I’m not going to let her down.” My voice is low.

“You aren’t?” Cooper snorts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“I have to remind you what happened with Jonathan?” he growls. “Unbelievable.”

“I didn’t ... what the *fuck?* He left that party. I didn’t know he was going to leave.”

“You got him drunk off his ass on purpose. You wanted something bad to happen to him.”

“I didn’t want him to die,” I say between gritted teeth. “He was passed out when I went outside. He was gone when I came back. I wasn’t his babysitter.”

A flash of something hits me, then, a memory I haven’t thought of ... probably since the day it happened. Me and Jonathan, having drunken words, outside on the back deck. Him shoving me so hard, I nearly went over the rail. Me shoving back. Faces twisted in anger.

How could I forget?

What the hell is it to you, dickhead? The last thing Jonathan ever said to me.

I remember seeing Stassi for the first time in years. On the way over, I’d heard she was going to be there, and I was like a kid during Christmas. And then I’d seen her ... and Jonathan, together. She was more beautiful than ever. Happier than ever, too.

After that, when I heard him talking about hooking up with Hannah Honeycutt later, I had to do something. With nothing but liquor at my disposal, I did what I had to do to make him unable to cheat because I sure as hell wasn’t going to let it happen on my watch.

And somewhere along the line, Jonathan left, and on the walk back to town, took a wrong turn in the dark, fell in that pond, and drowned.

“I didn’t force him to leave that night,” I say.

“Whatever makes you sleep easier at night,” Cooper spits.

“Have you always felt this way about that night?” I ask.

Aidan and Cooper exchange looks, confirming what I’d begun to suspect years ago—that they preferred Jonathan over me.

I hold my hands up. “Jonathan was never good enough for Stassi. You guys were too stupid to see it.”

Cooper snorts. “And you are?”

“Yeah, actually. I was in love with her,” I say.

“Then why didn’t you do something about it instead of running off to

MIT?” Aidan asks. “You left us without so much as a goodbye. Never called, never said a word. Then you showed up, that night, that party, all flash. *Look at me, I’m the fancy MIT boy.* None of us were impressed.”

All the pieces came together so perfectly. The way my insides had somersaulted when I saw her, more in love with dickhead Jonathan than ever after two years. The way he was scanning the room, just like he always did, looking for his next piece of ass. The misery and jealousy surging through my veins, which I tried to replace with alcohol.

I’d fucked with him, after Stassi left.

And now, he’s dead.

As much as I’d faked out the Huttons, pretending I didn’t love Stassi ... Cooper and Aidan had been faking me out, pretending I was still one of *them*.

I swallow. “Say it, then. You don’t like me.”

They look at each other, but they don’t deny it.

Aidan says, “All I know is that with your track record, it’s really hard to believe you’re going to be some stand-up guy now.”

“Look,” I say, taking a breath. “I know I’m not perfect. I’ve always cared about Stassi. But I didn’t want to step on your toes. I wanted to honor you guys, as my friends, first. That doesn’t matter though. I’m going to be the father I never had, with or without your approval. I’m going to protect and provide for Stassi and our child. I’m here. And I’m not going anywhere.”

The room falls into silence. I know these guys, at least, I thought I knew them, and apparently, they knew everything I tried to keep from them, too. They don’t believe me. And why should they? No wonder they trusted Jonathan above me. I was a cool guy to hang out with, joke around with ... but I’m not good enough for their sister. In twenty years, I never did a single thing to prove that.

Finally, Cooper fishes around in his jeans for his car keys. “I think it’s safe to say supper’s over. I’ve got to get Bodie home.”

He climbs the steps, and Aidan follows, leaving me staring at the ashes of

my “congratulatory” cigar. Some congratulations.

A minute later, Stassi dips her head down. “Oh,” she says with relief. “I thought I was going to come down here to find you beaten to a pulp.”

I shake my head and manage a stiff smile. “No.”

Not on the outside, at least.

Stassi

Oh, that's cute.

I've been sitting in bed at Alec's place, for two hours, adding baby clothes to an ever-growing online shopping cart. All gender-neutral, since we don't know the sex yet. It's probably premature, but shopping therapy is needed.

And when you're given a \$500 gift card to a cute baby boutique, you don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

I add a couple more onesies and look up. Alec left for work earlier than usual, before I woke up. And he hardly spoke to me about his conversation with Aidan and Cooper. I know it didn't go well, not just from the way they gathered their families and stormed out after supper. *He* hasn't been himself lately. He's been quieter, withdrawn.

I don't know whether to worry. At least, this morning, he had a bit of a sense of humor. He left me this note with the gift card:

*Roses are red, violets are blue,
You've got some shopping to do.
-A*

I had to do a double take when I read it. Because there was no *Yours*

Cruelly.

I think whatever my brothers said might have done a number on him.

But he didn't tell me a word about what my brothers said. At first, I told myself I didn't care, because it's my life. What I do and who I choose to be with is not something for them to decide. But gradually, I've been wondering more and more, and getting angrier and angrier at my brothers.

It has to be bad, for it to have changed Alec so much.

Why? Why can't they accept him?

Deciding I need to know, I reach over and grab my phone, dialing my mom.

She answers on the first ring. "Oh, Stassi, I was just thinking about you. How are you?"

Of course. My mom's always thinking about us, first. "I'm fine ... actually, not so good."

"Is it the baby?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. I've just been thinking about supper and what happened. Have you talked to the boys since then?"

"I haven't. I don't think they want to talk about it. I know it didn't go as well as we'd hoped, but—"

"Mom. It went terrible. And whatever they said to Alec really affected him. I keep expecting him to go running for the hills, screaming."

"Aw, poor boy," my mom says with a sigh. "But your brothers are just being protective. They just care about you—and after what Mason put you through, promising and yet never delivering, I guess they want to see more action and less talk. They'll get over it."

"But when?" I mutter, looking at the computer screen and my shopping cart full of stuff. "He is full of action. He takes me everywhere I need to go. He comes to all my doctor's appointments. He pays for everything—I mean, listen to this. He just surprised me with a \$500 gift card to buy necessities for the baby. He's stepping up."

“I’m sure. You know I love Alec. But I’m not the one you need to convince,” she says. “Maybe you should meet up with them and discuss it? Just you three?”

“I guess.” She’s right. That’s absolutely what I need to do.

But then again, there’s a little gnawing inside me, and I don’t realize what it is until after I hang up.

I’d like to think I know Alec really well.

But I thought I knew Mason well, too.

My brothers were Alec’s best friends for the longest time.

Maybe I’m just afraid of them telling me something about him that I don’t know.

If my past is any indication of my future, it’s only a matter of time before the other shoe drops.

Because it always does.

Alec

When I find the right book, I pump my fist. I'd do a happy dance in the aisle, but I'd probably cause a book avalanche.

I'm a regular at *A Likely Story* now, spending an hour or so there every few weeks to pick up a new book for Stassi. This time, for her O, she told me to surprise her.

Didn't take long for me to locate the perfect book, in the Charles Dickens section.

Oliver Twist.

Old Ollie.

We won't find out the sex of the baby until the twenty-week ultrasound, which is in another week. Things have been going all right. The more positive steps I take, the more distance I feel between myself and that shitty picture Aidan and Cooper painted of me a few weeks back. There's a little voice inside me that keeps saying, *I'm not that guy, I'm not that guy, I'm not that guy*, and the more good things I do for the baby, the more I believe it.

Right now, I'm feeling pretty good about myself.

Fuck them. Fuck them for having a bone to pick with me, all these years, and never coming right out and saying it.

The old man at the checkout counter, who I've learned is named Steve, actually seems cordial as he checks out the pile of books I've selected. He holds up the secondhand *Goodnight Moon* and *Guess How Much I Love You* board books. "You got little ones?"

I nod. "Will. In December."

"Nice." And he actually smiles.

After that, on my walk through the public market, I pick up some fresh pasta, Italian bread, and rosemary-infused olive oil, plus a jar of gourmet olives, so I can make Stassi dinner. As I'm checking out, my phone rings. It's the contractor I hired to make sure the apartment is up to code. I didn't care much about the place before, when it was just me, but now it's different. "Hey, Mike," I say, grabbing the bag and heading up to the parking garage.

"Hey, Al. Just wanted to let you know, I'm planning on being there tomorrow at 9?"

"Sounds good." I smile. Tomorrow's my day off, and I'm planning to get a lot accomplished. "How long do you think the inspection will take?"

"Couple of hours," he says. "Depending on how much you want to have done."

"I guess I'll see what the damage is."

I figure we should have it get us through the first year or so, and then we can look into buying a house, maybe somewhere inland. But I don't want to do too much, too soon. "See you then."

I have a spring in my step as I make my way to my Tacoma, throw my purchases in the passenger seat, and head for home. As I drive, I put in a call to Stassi to tell her I'll be making dinner, but she doesn't answer. Knowing her, she's probably working on the plans for the nursery, and that baby brain of hers has her forgetting her phone everywhere. Last night, I'd found it in the fridge, right next to an empty jar of olives.

When I get to the complex, it's dark. Next to it, Stassi's apartment is lit up, and Madison is outside, grabbing her mail. "Hey, stranger," she says as I

step out.

“Hey. You see Stassi around?” It’s odd. She doesn’t have a car, so she’s usually home when I get home.

She looks at my dark apartment. “No. Ever since you kidnapped her ...” She winks.

It’s true, Stassi gradually moved all of her stuff over to my place, and now, her old apartment isn’t even hers. Madison’s boyfriend moved in a few weeks ago and assumed Stassi’s share of the rent. It was a perfect arrangement, especially since their wild, wall-shaking sex doesn’t seem to happen nearly as much anymore.

“See you,” I say, wondering if Stassi went out somewhere with her family. Did she say she had plans? I can’t remember her saying anything about that.

But when I turn the key in the lock, I immediately focus on Stassi, sitting on the couch in the dark. The television is on, tuned to a random news show, its blue glow illuminating the tracks of tears on her face. She’s clutching a pillow against her chest.

I freeze as her eyes wander to meet mine, the pain in them heartbreaking. “What’s going on?”

Her voice is distant. “When were you going to tell me the truth about the night Jonathan died?”

Stassi

I look up at Alec through tears. He looks like he wants to bolt, just like my brothers were afraid of. And one thing becomes crystal clear in my mind:

If I hadn't asked him, he never would have told me.

I'd gone into that lunch with my brothers, full of spit and vinegar. Yes, they were just trying to protect me, blah blah blah, I'd heard it all before. I would explain I was thankful for them, but I needed to make my own mistakes, and politely ask them to butt the hell out.

But then they proceeded to tell me something so much worse than I imagined. By the time they'd finished, I wanted to throw up. I left the restaurant in a hurry and spent most of the day walking the path overlooking the ocean, trying to make sense of it.

Even now, I can't make sense of it.

My voice is hollow. "I see. You weren't planning on telling me, ever."

After what they told me, I expect him to bolt. That's what he did, after graduation. After Jonathan. That was why we never saw him again. He didn't even stay for the funeral. He was too much of a coward to face what he'd done.

But instead, he comes around to the couch and sits beside me. I move

away and glare at him.

“What did they tell you?” he says quietly.

“The truth about that night.”

I remember very little about it, though I hadn't had all that much to drink. I remember that glare of hatred Alec had given me and Jonathan when we were together. I remember seeing them having hateful words, out on the deck. But after that, I went home ... and I knew nothing but that after drinking too much, Jonathan had strayed from the path around Moss Pond, tripped, hit his head on the stone wall, and drowned.

I hadn't known that someone had *killed* him.

Alec. No, he hadn't pushed him. But from everything Cooper and Aidan said, he might as well have.

And all this time, he stayed away. He didn't offer me condolences. He didn't go to the funeral. He just left. He skulked away, rather than face the hard truth, rather than accept the consequences, like he always did.

He's not speaking. He's not defending himself. Because he knows he has no defense. And I want him, I *desperately* want him to defend himself.

“Is it true you played that game with him? You got him drunk?”

Again, he doesn't speak. He's staring at me, as if he wants to hear me say everything he did.

“You were egging him on, calling him a pussy when he didn't drink. They said it was like you *wanted* him to pass out.”

He nods. “I did.”

“Why?”

He sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly. “It's complicated.”

“Then uncomplicate it for me.” I wait a beat, two, but it's like pulling teeth. “You never liked him, right?”

He nods. “I never liked the way he treated you.”

I snort. “Really? You didn't like him treating me like a princess? Which is what he did. And all the while, you were the one sending me those nasty

messages.”

“Yes, that’s right. You *knew* not to trust me. But what’s worse?” he asks, his eyes meeting mine. “Someone who’s an asshole, or someone who pretends to be a stand-up guy and fools everyone into not seeing what an asshole he is?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that he was cheating on you every chance he got,” he says flatly.

I nearly laugh. Jonathan was a goofball. No one ever took him seriously. He didn’t have a deceptive bone in his body. “How can you say that?”

“Because I saw it. He was good at hiding it from you, from your brothers. He worked at it. But Carlina ... she knew. He was always trying to get with her, with any other piece of ass he could nail, when you and your brothers had your backs turned.”

“I don’t believe it,” I say, shaking my head. There is no way the boy I cried a thousand oceans for would do that to me.

Then again ... Mason ...

“I knew you wouldn’t,” he says gently, before I can complete the thought in my head.

Those words jar me. I suppose if I knew no one would believe me, I would keep quiet, too. I blink, my mind cycling back to that fight that they’d had, that last night. “Why did you almost fight, that night?”

His lips twist. He’s debating telling me.

“Alec, why?” I demand.

From the expression on his face, I might as well be extracting the words with a set of pliers. “He’d been out there, in the yard behind the bushes, with Tori Meltz. Getting a blow job. I saw them. And when he came back, I told him that he needed to keep his dick in his pants if you weren’t there.” He looks down at his lap. “*What’s it to you, dickhead?* That was the last thing he said to me, until, well ... yeah, I guess I challenged him to that drink-off, thinking he’d pass out and forget his promise to get with that other girl.”

I stare at him. “You... were protecting me?”

“I know. I did a shitty job of it.”

“And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why?” He lets out a sardonic laugh. “A thousand reasons. I felt guilty. I didn’t want you to hate me again. I didn’t want to lose you after I’d finally gotten you. I didn’t want to put a damper on the joy and excitement of having a baby. But most of all ... I didn’t want to hurt you. I knew you loved Jonathan. And he loved you, too. He just ... had a shitty way of showing it.”

I almost laugh, even as the tears start to fall. “He begged me, over and over again, to sleep with him. He was relentless. It was only after we were dating for two years that I finally gave in, and that’s because I thought we would be together forever. I felt bad making him wait ... when all along he was getting it from other girls?”

He nods. “I’m so sorry.”

My heart lurches at the sincerity in his eyes. “Alec. I don’t know what’s worse. That Jonathan did those things, or that you thought all this time that I was better off not knowing? Did you think I was too weak to accept the truth then? How am I supposed to know, going forward, if you’re ever keeping something from me? We can’t build a relationship without honesty and communication. And you can’t assume you know what’s best for someone else.”

He nods. “I know. I know. I’m sorry, Stassi.”

“You can tell me these things. I’m not a porcelain doll. I’m not going to break.”

“I was going to. I promise you, I was.”

I give him a doubtful look. “When?”

“You know Carlina, when we met up at the diner? It wasn’t a date. I told you we were catching up, but it wasn’t that, either. I was just asking her, because she was there that night, if she’d vouch for me. Because she knew what kind of guy Jonathan was, too.”

Apparently, other people knew Jonathan was a complete asshole. And I was the fool. Again. Just like with Mason.

I can't have this happen again. Three strikes, and I am out.

Really out, because now I have a baby to think about.

The thought grips me like a vise, and suddenly I feel like I'm flying without a net. I lean over, burying my face in my hands, and let out a sob.

The next thing I know, Alec is kneeling in front of me with a glass of water. "Drink this."

I take it and sip the water, feeling numb.

"Stassi ... I'm so sorry," he says again. "I love you."

The words don't hit in the way they should. In my life on this Earth, I probably spent more time wanting Alec to say those words to me than crying over Jonathan. But they don't penetrate. They don't do a damn thing to me.

He tries to put his hand on my knee, but I stiffen and stand. My voice is wooden. "I should sleep in my own apartment tonight."

I trip over bags he's left in the doorway. I notice some new books. *Oliver Twist* is on top.

Oliver. Instinctively, I grab my belly.

He doesn't try to stop me as I go to gather my things, but he does say, "Okay. But I thought ... Madison and Joe ..."

I climb the stairs listlessly, not bothering to correct him. I kept my key, and Madison kept my room open for me, telling me I'm welcome back, anytime I want.

Because I guess I always knew, deep in my heart, that nothing ever works out for me.

Alec

After the contractor leaves, I go next door and knock, having no clue about what kind of reception I'll get.

But no one answers.

She was clearly upset with me last night, and she has the right to be. I didn't argue with her, because I know how she is when her mind is made up. So I just let her go. I was hoping that if she had enough time to process, she'd understand.

I wonder where she went. Some day off. I was planning on getting stuff done, with *her*. And now all I'm doing is thinking about her and what I could've done differently.

On the way back to my place, I think about giving her flowers. But Stassi isn't the type to be won over by gestures like that. Flowers are milestones or apologizing when one's in the doghouse ... and I don't know what we are, now. I had her best interests at heart. I hope she'll see that, eventually.

Stassi left the nursery half-painted, a sunny pale creamsicle orange. I spend the rest of the day finishing up. As I'm washing the brushes, my phone buzzes with a text.

I practically run to pick it up, hoping it's Stassi. But it's not:

Dr. Burns: *Think you can cover tonight for an overnight?*

I sigh. Why the hell not? At the very least, it'll take my mind off Stassi for a bit. I text a yes and hit the shower.

As I'm shaving, the steam from my shower still settling around me, I get another text. This one has to be Stassi. She's had enough time, and now she wants to talk.

But as I wipe off the steam from the display, I see Aidan's name.

Aidan: *Can you and I meet?*

Though it's not Stassi, this is something I've been waiting for. I knew that once the boys had time to let the idea simmer, they'd want to talk to me. As much as I know it's going to hurt, I have to do it. I've been brooding over our last conversation, thinking of what I should've said, ever since it ended.

Alec: *Sure. Houlihan's. 7 pm?*

I figure it's neutral ground. He probably won't murder me there. And if

he does beat me within an inch of my life for touching Stassi, I'll be on my way to the hospital, anyway.

I get to the bar at a little before 7 and order a soda since my shift is coming up.

As soon as the waitress leaves my booth, the door opens, and my two former best friends walk in.

I should've known it would've been a package deal. Aidan never goes anywhere without Cooper and vice versa.

They walk toward me, mouths in rigid lines, hands tucked in the pockets of their jeans. The two of them, together, are intimidating, to say the least. No wonder our opponents on the ice used to cower in fear. As their closest friend, I'd never had that problem ... until now.

They don't bother to sit across from me. Instead, they stand, towering over me.

"We've talked," Aidan says gruffly, punching his fist into his other hand. "And now we want to get something straight with you."

I get it. They want to scare the shit out of me, and it's working. I know they're coming from a good place. I just have to keep reminding myself of that. "Okay." My voice only wavers a little.

"She told us what Jonathan did," Aidan says quietly. "And that he was an asshole to her. That he had us all fooled."

I nod.

"But him being an asshole doesn't make you any less of one," Cooper says.

I nod. That's true, too.

"So you know ... she's been through hell and back. She doesn't need any more of that shit," Aidan says. "I swear, I don't even want another hair on her head harmed. You understand?"

"If you ever leave her. If you ever hurt her ... even the littlest bit ... you're dead meat. Lobster bait. Got it?" Cooper says. He's usually the one

making stupid jokes, but this time, he doesn't even smile.

I nod resolutely and hold up my hand in oath. "I swear. I will never hurt her."

They don't break their gaze from me. Aidan says, "I guess only time will tell."

"I guess it will," I tell them.

But I'm not worried in the least. Because now I know one thing for sure.

I'd rather die than see Stassi hurt again.

Stassi

“Yes, just keep going. Right down there.”

The Uber driver gives me a confused look in the rearview mirror as he cautiously navigates the overgrown weeds and brush surrounding the gravel road. “Are you sure?”

The cemetery’s sign, about a quarter-mile back, had been so swallowed by the branches of a hydrangea bush that I’m sure he thinks I’m leading him straight off a cliff to the ocean. “Yep, a little farther.”

Finally, the first headstones come into view. Most are covered in wildflowers and moss, and the air above them is full of bees and butterflies and other insects having a field day. “Okay, this is great,” I tell him, scooting to the end of the seat and reaching for the door. “Can you just hang for five minutes? I promise I won’t take long.”

He nods. He’s not the friendliest of guys, but I think he might have noticed my stomach pooch and the loose blouse I have over it, and few men are so low as to bail on a pregnant woman. Score one for playing the pregnancy card.

The second I reach the edge of the cemetery, where Jonathan’s grave is, I kick my old flowers out of the way. I’ve never come empty-handed to this

place before, but I want him to understand.

“Liar,” I hiss.

The grave is silent, but around me, the wind picks up. It’s not a confirmation that he’s listening, but I don’t need that.

I know Alec was telling the truth. After I went back to my old apartment, I called around, to different people I knew from high school, and heard the worst things. Apparently, he got around. I called Carlina Smith, who told me that yes, he’d dated a few of her friends on the cheerleading squad while he was going out with me. I called Tori Meltz, who I wasn’t even friends with, and she confirmed that yes, she and Jonathan had been seeing each other behind my back. *For months*. Then I called Martina Abbot, who was the closest thing I’d had to a female friend in school—she and I were in stiff competition for valedictorian—and she said to me, “Sure, everyone knew. But none of us wanted to tell you, because you looked so *happy*.”

Every piece of information I added to the pile only made it more and more obvious what a sham our three-year relationship was ... and what an idiot I was. And no one in my orbit cared enough about me to tell me the truth.

I was oblivious then. I wanted so badly to believe that someone could love me, I missed all the red flags. I also missed the signs that were right there in front of my face.

The signs that yes ... all this time, Alec loved me. He has always loved me, and that’s not going away.

“Here’s the thing, Jonathan,” I say, crouching down so he can hear me. “I will always care about you and be sorry for what happened to you. But I’m pissed at what you did, and what everyone did to try to protect me. I wish someone had told me instead of running away from the truth. Because if they had ... maybe I would have realized who *really* loved me. You said you were that person. You said you loved me ... but the way you acted shows you didn’t. Not really.”

The wind picks up even more, and I feel like that's enough of an answer.

“Alec ... all that time, he said he hated me. But the way he acted to me, when it was just the two of us, alone ...” I smile. “I know he loves me. And I love him. More than anything. I have *always* loved him, and now I don't need to deny it anymore.”

As I turn back to the car that's waiting for me, I wonder if this will be my last visit to this cemetery. I won't forget Jonathan. That's not possible. But sometimes, you have to let go.

And I feel like I have.

I climb into the back of the car and fold my hands over my belly. “Thank you for waiting. You can take me back home.”

We bounce over the rutted road for a bit, and I have to clutch the door handle to keep from jostling about too much. It's when the driver reaches the main road that I feel a sharp cramp in my lower belly.

I take a deep breath, telling myself it was nothing.

But then it comes again. I grab my phone and text Alec.

Stassi: *I'm sure it's nothing, but I felt some weird cramps.*

He responds almost instantly.

Alec: *Come to the hospital ASAP. I'm in the ER. I'll meet you.*

I frown. The ER? That's a bit overreactive. But then the cramp comes again, harder and more insistent.

Stassi: *Are you sure? I should probably call my doc.*

Alec: *I'll call her. You get over here, now. Please.*

Sucking in a breath, I look up at the driver. “Change of plans. Could I ask you to take me to the hospital?”

Alec

I'm waiting by the sliding doors at the front of the hospital when she comes in, a wheelchair at the ready.

She looks all right, just hunched a bit, a hand over her stomach. But I'm taking no chances. "Here. Sit down," I tell her, helping her into the chair. "What's the pain like?"

"I told you, it's just a little cramp, I think. Is this really necessary?"

I nod. "Dr. Freeman is on her way. In the meantime, Dr. Patel and Lily, the best nurse in the state, are ready to help you."

"Oh my gosh. You're overreacting," she says, but I can tell she's nervous by the way she grips the arms of the chair.

We meet Lily in the hallway of the maternity ward and she gets right to work, helping Stassi into her room and onto a bed. The nurse does a blood and ketone test, then attaches sensors to her growing belly, as Stassi continues to chatter on about how it's probably nothing. "Well, that's true," Lily says with a smile as she turns on the machine for the non-stress test. "But let's just make sure."

I check the readout on the monitor as Lily takes her other vitals. The line is slowly moving on an upward trend, and I notice Stassi flinching as the line

reaches a climax. “There,” she says. “That was it.”

“It’s a contraction,” Lily says.

Stassi blinks. “That was a contraction?”

“Yes. Nothing to worry about at this time. Some mothers usually start with them around now. It wasn’t too painful?”

She shakes her head. “No, just tighter, I guess. I thought something was wrong. It was a little sharper before.”

Dr. Patel steps in the room, followed by Dr. Freeman. “Hello, folks,” Dr. Patel says, shaking my hand, and Dr. Freeman, ignoring me, makes a beeline over to Stassi.

“Oh, honey,” she says, sitting down at the monitor. “Not feeling so good?”

“I’m feeling fine. I guess I just had my first contraction, and I freaked.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Freeman says, checking the monitor, along with the other vitals. Then she takes her hand gently, checking for swelling. “Blood pressure is a little high and there’s protein in your urine. Any other symptoms? Blurred vision? Headache?”

She shakes her head and looks over at me.

Normally, I’d say it’s too early to worry about anything. But yeah, these are the early signs of preeclampsia, which start around mid-pregnancy, and that is a worry. I don’t want to give anything away, but it’s different when it’s my own kid. When it’s Stassi.

I go over and take her other hand, happy when she lets me. “Is everything okay?”

I let the other doctors answer. Freeman says, “Sure, doll, it’s looking good. Baby’s moving well, healthy as can be. You probably just gave yourself too much excitement. I want you to take a few days off and rest, no strenuous activity, no sex. Got it?”

At the sex part, Dr. Freeman finally looks at me. As if I’m the one who caused this. I don’t feel like arguing. “Got it.”

“So I can leave?”

“Yep. Just take it easy.” Dr. Freeman doesn’t bother looking to Dr. Patel for confirmation. I’m sure Dr. Patel would say if he thought otherwise, but he simply nods and shrugs at me, then heads off. So I guess Stassi is right. Dr. Freeman does have this under control.

But if this is preeclampsia, I’m worried.

After we get the discharge papers, I check in with Dr. Burns and get the okay to leave early to tend to her. As we’re leaving through the doors to the ER, I see the other nurses I work with, including Cherry and Carlina in the hallway, watching me with wide eyes. Neither one speaks. It must be a shock because I’ve never explicitly mentioned being a father to anyone at work, except Dr. Burns, when I asked about paternity leave.

“I’m sorry if I interfered with your work,” she says as I help her into my truck.

“Are you kidding me? I get to leave early. You should do that more often.”

She gives me a look as I help put her seatbelt on. “Ha, ha. You know, I’m not an invalid.”

“I know. But you’re only pregnant for nine months. Shut up and enjoy the royal treatment.” I slam the door.

When I come around to the driver’s side, she’s looking at me curiously. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

I nod.

I drive us home, asking every time she touches her stomach if she’s okay. Then I help her out of the car. There’s no question as to which apartment she’s staying at. When I lead her to mine, she doesn’t argue.

When I get her set up on the couch with some terrible reality dating show, I say, “Dinner?”

She nods. “What are we having?”

“Don’t worry. It has olives. I bought the stuff to make it last night.”

She gives me a guilty look. “Oh. Yes. I’m starving.”

An hour later, I bring over a tray with two bowls of veggie pasta and glasses of iced tea.

“This looks amazing,” she says, digging in almost before I finish handing her the bowl.

“Thanks, I gave you all the olives,” I say, sitting down beside her and putting my feet up on the table. “So what’s this one about?”

“It’s called Date Hate. They all took surveys beforehand, and unbeknownst to them, now they’re forced to live with the person they’re least compatible with for a full two weeks.”

“Huh.” That probably explains why the girl on the screen is throwing anything she can get her hands on at the guy. I twirl some spaghetti around my fork, and just as I’m about to lift it up to my lips, I realize Stassi isn’t looking at the screen. She’s looking at me.

“Thank you,” she says quietly.

I shrug. “I told you. I meant what I said. I’m always going to be here. For both of you.”

She smiles. “I was scared. More scared than I admitted.”

“I know.”

“But you were more scared than the both of us. Which made me worse. I mean, you’re a big doctor. You’re used to dealing with bad diagnoses. You don’t wear your heart on your sleeve. You didn’t even show a ripple when you found out I was pregnant, remember?”

I let out a long breath. “You’re right. Guess you could say I couldn’t help it.”

Her face clouds over. “There isn’t anything wrong, is there? You’d tell me, right?”

She wants honesty. I’m going to give it to her.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know. They were looking into whether you’re developing preeclampsia. It’s too early to tell right now. But

you're fine. They'll keep a close eye on it. Everything's all right. I just ...” A laugh escapes my lips because I don't know if I've ever felt this way before. “I don't know what's wrong with me. Even a point-zero-zero-zero-one chance of something happening to you is too much for me.”

An uneasy smile breaks out on her lips. “So I don't have to be worried?”

I put an arm around her and drag her toward my side. “No. I'm taking care of you. You know that now, right?”

She nods. “I love you.”

I smile and kiss her forehead. “I love you, too.”

“No ... I mean, I always have.” She gnaws on her lip. “Just like you said. From the minute I saw you, touring that house. You were wearing a blue coat and I looked at you and thought, *There's the boy I'm going to be with forever.*”

“Forever?” Funny, that word used to scare me. But when she says it, it doesn't. It feels right.

She looks back at the trainwreck unfolding on the screen and then her eyes meet mine again. “We're all right, aren't we? With everything?”

“Yeah. We're perfect.” I hold her closer, and that's when I feel it.

A little bubble, right by her stomach.

“Holy sh—” *The baby can hear.* I put my hand on it, and it comes again. Just a little tap-tap-tap.

Her eyes light up. “You can feel it?”

I nod. Yeah. Here we are. Stassi, me, and the baby. Our family. This is perfect.

Stassi

“Knock knock!”

I hear Mad’s voice as I’m sitting in the nursery, trying to assemble one of those cushioned rocking chairs from IKEA that came in about a thousand pieces. “Up here!”

Her feet echo on the steps, and a second later, she pokes her head in, holding two bags of what smells like fried chicken. “Oooh. I love the color. This is nice!” she says, looking around. “I never knew a room in this disaster could actually look this good.”

Holy God am I hungry. I jump to my feet and wipe my hands on my jeans. “Did you bring lunch?”

She laughs. “Down, girl. I did. It’s my day off, and I saw Alec leave for work earlier. I thought you might be hungry, so I stopped for chicken.”

I lick my lips. “Let’s go downstairs.”

We go to the kitchen, and I bring down plates from the cupboard and pour us drinks as Mad looks around. She picks up one of the baby books I have, spread over the kitchen counter, and starts to read as she nibbles on a drumstick.

“Who circled these?”

I turn back from pouring her an iced tea and realize she's looking at a baby-name book I got. I don't know. I'm confused because I never circled anything. "What do you mean?" I ask, coming closer.

She shows me the page. Sure enough, some names are circled. I glance through them all. The only person who has looked at this book is Alec, so it must be him. He circled my choices, Florence and Oliver, but he also circled others.

"*Ever Hutton*," Mad muses as she chews. "Name meaning *Always*. It's for a boy or a girl. I like that."

"*Hutton-Mansfield*," I correct, sitting beside her. When she gives me a look, I shrug. "It only seems fair. He's been doing a lot of the heavy lifting. He deserves some credit for that."

"I guess," she says with a little smile. "So how is my godchild coming along?"

Luckily there have been no more contractions, no more pain, and I've been resting and feeling pretty strong. "Good. Tomorrow is the twenty-week ultrasound."

Mad's mouth makes an O. "Isn't that when you'll find out whether it's a boy or a girl?"

I nod as I'm practically inhaling the chicken on my plate. When I swallow, I say, "But I'm not sure. Before, I felt like I had to know. Now, I don't really care."

"You don't?"

"Well ... yeah. Before, I wasn't sure I could handle any more surprises. Now, I don't mind it. Not every surprise in life is bad. Some are really good."

She leans in, a little dreamy look in her eye. "And to think, if I hadn't put that message in the app, you never would've gotten together with that particular surprise. I'm the one responsible for bringing you two together!"

"We lived next door to one another," I remind her. "Not just now, but almost all our li—"

“Hey,” she says, silencing me by slicing her hand through the air. “Be a good girl and let me call this a win.”

She’s right. Because if it weren’t for her, I might have gone right on hating him. And now, I don’t think it’s possible to love anyone more.

Alec

“I think this one might be my favorite book of all.”

Stassi is sitting in her rocking chair, hugging *Wuthering Heights* to her chest and watching as I put the finishing touches on the *Goodnight Moon*-themed mural in the nursery. Standing, barefoot in nothing but jeans, I grasp the brush between my teeth and check out my handiwork.

Finally, it’s fall. I was never an artist, but this wall was bare, and I thought, why the hell not?

“I hated that book in high school,” I mutter. “That Mrs. Havisham? With the wedding cake?”

“Heathcliff and Catherine. It’s really romantic,” she sighs. “Admit it. Besides, you’ve been known to hate on things you really love.”

I grin over at her. “Right. Let me check.” I pretend to think. “Nope. That one, I really hate.”

She grabs a stuffed animal and tosses it at me. “Don’t forget to add the bowlful of mush.”

“On it.” I stand back from my artistic endeavor and take a better look. It’s not bad. And it should be dry by the time the crib and changing table get here. Once they’re done and we add a few more touches, we’ll be ready to

rock.

And have this baby.

“Holy shit, in a couple of months, I’m going to be a dad,” I mumble.

“Language,” she warns gently.

“Sorry. But ... aren’t you ... just awed by that? That in a few days’ time, our lives are going to change completely?”

She nods as I go over to her. “I’ve had a long time to think about that, since every day, my *body* seems to change completely.”

“Yeah. I guess. I mean ... you already seem like a mother. But me? A father?”

I have a momentary flash of my dad, locking me up in my bedroom until I finished studying for my AP Bio test. Hooking me up with various SAT tutors that promised perfect scores, which I finally wound up achieving after taking it six times. That heart-stopping fear I’d have every time I brought home a test that wasn’t a perfect 100.

She stands and trails a finger down my bare chest, then puts her arms around me. “You’re not him.”

Funny how she can know exactly what I’m thinking without having to say a word. My parents scarred me, I know. But she has her own scars, and I’m partially responsible for putting them there. “I don’t deserve you,” I say to her, kissing her lips.

She smiles. “You deserve to be happy. You weren’t, when you were younger.”

“Neither were you,” I remind her. It’s maddening to think that while we were living across the street from one another, secretly pining for each other, happiness was right within our grasp. We were just too scared to take ahold of it.

“But I am now,” she says, a small smile touching her lips.

“So am I.”

I’m not afraid anymore. I’m so lucky. Because for the first time, I am

happy. I have everything I want right here.

I look over at the mural. “I want to do so much with this kid. Read them stories every night. Take them to Old Orchard Beach. Go get blueberry ice cream at Toots. Teach them to go lobstering. Everything. I want to be just like your dad.”

Stassi kisses my temple. “You will be. In fact, I think you’ll be even better.”

It’s a lot to live up to, but I’m up for the challenge. And if I succeed, it’ll only be because I have her.

Three Months Later

Stassi

Shortly after the first snowfall, our baby girl arrives.

I'd just finished reading the final pages of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* when the contractions got too close together and too painful for me to bear. I'd had a suitcase packed and in the back of Alec's truck for a month, so when I called Dr. Freeman and told her I felt it might be time, she told me to meet her at the hospital.

After that, well ... it wasn't fun. Nobody ever has a party during labor, do they? But I got the job done. Alec was there the whole time. And now, twenty hours after I arrived in the hospital, the nurse sets our new baby girl in my arms.

"She looks a little like you," I say to him as he leans over, touching her tiny hand.

He laughs. "Bald, red, and shriveled?"

Ignoring him, I gaze at her in wonder. "Hi. Hi, little Ever. It's Mommy."

Alec doesn't say anything for a moment. "Ever?"

"Ever Florence Hutton-Mansfield," I say with a smile. "Do you like it?"

He nods, and at that moment, a corner of our little girl's mouth goes up into a wry smile. I know, I know, babies that young don't smile, and it's probably just gas bubbles. But I don't care. It's a sign.

“Do you want to hold her?”

He cautiously takes her in his arms, swaddling the pink blanket even tighter around her, and says in such a soft, sweet voice, “Hi, Ever. I'm your dad. We're going to get to know each other pretty well.”

I smile as I watch him, rocking her, admiring his daughter. I know he's worried about being a good dad, but he doesn't have to be. There is no way on Earth this man will be like Mr. Mansfield. He's already proven his heart to be so much bigger. That promise he made, to always be there? He has never let me down yet.

A little while later, after I get cleaned up, the first visitors start to arrive. First it's my parents, then my brothers and their families. It's all congratulations and joy ... no bitterness to be seen. My father doles out some of the best cigars from his humidor, which he announces he's been saving for this occasion. My brothers hug Alec and tell him to say goodbye forever to good nights of sleep. Smiling, Alec proudly and patiently shows little Ever off to everyone, and when she starts to become fussy, he does a great job at calming her down.

He's a natural. I can tell, she's already daddy's little girl.

Eventually, though, even he can't calm her, and he seems a little confused until the nurse gently reminds him that she needs to nurse. When he has to give her back to me, he seems a little sad ... but it's a good reminder that neither of us can be everything to Ever. She needs us both.

When I finish nursing and Ever drifts off to sleep, Campbell and Tenley arrive with armfuls of gifts since I never had a baby shower. Later on, Dr. Burns and some of the hospital staff come by to give their best wishes, filling the room with stuffed animals, balloons, flowers, and other presents. Everyone admires little Ever. By evening, the place looks like the site of a

pretty fun party. The welcome for Ever goes late into the afternoon, but eventually, the reception line goes away, and it is just the two of us.

Eventually, we will go back to our home, back to reality, and we will be in our apartment ... with a baby. Everyone has told us to enjoy this time in the hospital, because when we go home, we won't have nurses to care for the baby. We'll be on our own.

I'm a little nervous about the prospect because everything is so new. "You should go home," I tell him as I nurse Ever again. "Get some rest. We'll still be here in the morning."

He chuckles and starts to pull out the folded cot. "I think I'll stay right here."

"Ugh." That cot looks like it has the most uncomfortable, lumpy mattress on Earth. "Are you sure?"

He sits down on it. "Yep. I'm right where I need to be. With my family."

Then, he reaches into his bag and pulls out another gift, wrapped in pink paper, and sets it next to her.

I have to laugh. "I think it'll be a few years before she can open it."

"You open it." He's eager.

I take the little envelope and open the card. At the top is Ever's birthday, and it says:

For Ever,

Roses are red, violets are blue,

Always remember that I love you.

Yours, Daddy.

Tear spring to my eyes as I open the paper and find a soft little teddy bear. "Aw. For Ever. I like that."

He smiles as he stretches out on the mattress. "Yeah," he says. "You two are stuck with me for life. I love you. Both of you."

I look down at our baby, and I think I might burst from happiness. I can't wait to leave this hospital and begin our life as a family of three. "We love

you, too, Daddy. Forever.”

Epilogue

Five Years Later

Alec

“Be careful!” I call to Ever as she and her older cousins run down the ocean path together.

All six of them, different in every way, and yet the same. The next generation of the magnificent Hutton clan. I always wanted to be a part of it. Now I’m lucky enough to be living that dream.

I’m holding my wife’s hand, something I always do when I’m near her. I can’t help seeking it out everywhere we go. Especially now, since she’s a little off-balance. Almost nine months along, baby number two should be making his debut any moment.

Who’d have thought I’d one day marry my dream girl? That we’d have a little girl and a little boy and a cozy little life? Most days I pinch myself when I think about it too long. Then I remind myself to enjoy every second of it—and I do.

“They’re fine,” she says to me as we go to the water’s edge. It’s a beautiful summer’s day, and we’ve brought our Sunday supper outside.

A picnic. Not Mrs. Hutton’s famous pasta this time. Sandwiches. A little

easier to transport.

Of course, there are plenty of pimento olives.

The kids splash in the shallow water, their pants rolled up to the knees, and Ever starts building a sandcastle. She looks just like Stassi did all those years ago, building that giant, complicated monstrosity with all those moats. “Remember when you did that?”

She nods. “I remember you knocking it down.”

“*Me?*” I stare at her indignantly. “You thought—”

Suddenly, there’s a shriek from our daughter as the twins, Hudson and Hollis, stomp the carefully-crafted mounds down. Ever pouts. Leah scolds the older children and Stassi’s eyes go wide.

She looks at me in wonder. “Wait. Are you saying *my brothers* did that?”

I nod. “I was trying to fix the damage. Geez. No wonder you hated me.”

She stares after her brothers, shaking her head, and squeezes my hand tighter. “Those turds.”

I chuckle. “I was a turd, too.”

“Ah, you were. But you’re my turd, now,” she says with a giggle as I wrap my arms around her. Between us, the baby kicks, agreeing with my assessment of myself.

I think I like him already. I’m already planning to make sure to teach him many things. The first is to live openly, and never be afraid to express one’s feelings. Love is a rare and amazing thing, and if you’re lucky enough to feel it, you don’t hide it. You shower everything you possibly can on that person, and you never let them go. Because no matter how wrong the world might tell you it is ... some things are meant to be.

I’m still working at the hospital and was just promoted to department head. Stassi stays home with Ever full-time, and is the most loving, doting, hands-on mother anyone could ever want. Every day, I’ll do my best to give my kids the childhood I never had and the dad they deserve.

I kiss the top of Stassi’s head and go to check on Ever, who is already

rebuilding Versailles. “I love you,” I tell her, sitting in the sand beside her.

“I know, Daddy,” she says, touching my cheek with a sand-crusting little hand. “I love you, too. Build with me?”

“Absolutely.” As I start on the moat, Stassi comes down, lowers herself gently onto the ground, and digs, too.

What started out as a misunderstanding became a life, an incredible life.

Whatever we build now only makes it better.

About the Author

Winter Renshaw is a Wall Street Journal and #1 Amazon bestselling author of contemporary romance novels that have sold nearly 5 million copies all over the world. An Iowa native and a graduate of Iowa State University, Winter still calls Iowa home, where she resides with her husband, three children, and their extremely spoiled dogs.

Winter also writes psychological suspense under her Minka Kent pseudonym. Her debut, *THE MEMORY WATCHER*, hit #9 in the Kindle store and is currently being screen-adapted in South Korea. Her follow-up, *THE THINNEST AIR*, hit #1 in the Kindle store and spent five weeks as a Washington Post bestseller. Over the years, her suspense work has been nominated for International Thriller Writer awards, mentioned by The New York Post and People Magazine, as well as optioned for film and television.

She is represented by Jill Marsal at Marsal Lyon Literary Agency.

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