

A small town,  
second chance  
romance

  
A Crescent Pass  
Novel

# A Forest Between Us



ALLIE WINTERS

# A FOREST BETWEEN US



# ALLIE WINTERS

Copyright © 2022 by Allie Winters

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the author. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

[www.alliewinters.com](http://www.alliewinters.com)

First edition.

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More Crescent Pass](#)

[Other books by Allie Winters:](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

# CHAPTER 1



HARPER

“*N*ever have I ever...” Elena trails off, swirling the liquid in her champagne flute around while eyeing me carefully. “Cut my bangs while drunk.”

I narrow my gaze, dutifully taking a swallow of my mimosa.

She grins smugly. “Kelly’s twenty-fifth was a wild night, wasn’t it?”

I roll my eyes. “You set that question up. You were the one who dared me to do it.” And who had the bright idea to actually give me scissors?

“Don’t hate the player. Hate the game.”

I motion to her glass. “Shouldn’t you be drinking, too? You’ve cut your bangs before.”

She wags a finger at me. “Yeah, but I was sober.”

“You and your technicalities,” I mutter. “Fine, never have I ever kissed a stranger in a Chicago bar.” I know for a fact she has because it was the same night I’d cut my bangs. It had taken them forever to grow out.

She lets out a long peal of laughter, and the two women at the table nearest us on the restaurant’s patio glance our way. Let them look, though. After the week Elena and I had at work, we deserve to blow off some steam.

“Touché.” She tips her glass toward me before draining the rest of it. Taking a drink has never been a punishment for her in our long-running game.

“Never have I ever,” a new voice says, and we both turn to find the third member of our normal Saturday morning brunch trio, Kelly, approaching the table. Her cheeks are flushed, a wide grin spread over her lips as she raises her left hand, a monstrous diamond catching the light. “Been engaged,” she squeals, finishing her sentence.



“Oh my God!” Elena and I shout in unison.

I push my chair back and rush to her, enveloping her in a hug as Elena grabs her hand and inspects the new ring.

“Mateo finally make an honest woman out of you?” she asks.

“Yes.” Kelly radiates delight, glowing with an internal happiness that leaves me with a contact high, my heart bursting with joy.

I lean back, my mouth tipping up at the corners. “Tell us everything.”

The next twenty minutes fly by as she recounts last night’s romantic proposal from her boyfriend of three years.

Reaching over, I grab her hand and give it a squeeze. “I’m so freaking happy for you. You’ve been waiting so long for this.”

“And that rock,” Elena exclaims, still in wonder over the size of the ring. “Your hand’s getting a workout just holding it up.”

Kelly looks down, biting her lip to hide a grin. “I can’t believe he picked this out for me. It’s perfect.”

I tap the table with my index finger to get her attention. “So, what are you thinking for the wedding? Congress Plaza? Stan Mansion? I know you’ve already started planning.”

She hides her smile behind her hand, her ring sparkling brilliantly in the late morning sun. “Who me? I’ve never planned a thing in my life.”

The three of us laugh. The girl is Type-A to the max.

“Okay, so maybe I looked into a few things,” she admits. “But the more I looked, the more overwhelmed I got. I’m tempted to say fuck it and have the wedding in Vegas.”

I smile, signaling to our server that I’d like another mimosa. “Yeah, but then you’ll have to marry for real somewhere else.”

Kelly blinks in confusion. “What?”

“You know the saying.” I make a vague gesture with my hand. “*What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.* Those weddings aren’t real.”

She lifts a brow dramatically. “Um, yes, they are.”

I roll my eyes. “Very funny.”

“Harper, they’re real,” Elena says, uncharacteristically serious. “You’re messing with us, right?”

The beginnings of doubt trickle through my veins, my heart picking up in speed.

No, no. They’re the ones messing with me. Though they rarely take it this far...

Kelly’s gaze darts over my face, her brows knit together now. She pulls her phone out and says, “Siri, are Vegas weddings real?”

“Here’s what I found,” the robotic voice answers smoothly. On the screen is link after link about the validity of a Vegas wedding.

What?

I twist and grab my purse off the back of my chair, rummaging through until I find my phone. Opening the browser, I do my own search, page after page of results telling me that yes, Vegas weddings are perfectly legal.

Oh, God.

Nausea rolls within me, quick and sure, and I tamp it down, clutching my stomach with my free hand.

“Harper, you’re scaring me,” Kelly whispers.

Yeah, I’m scared, too. If Vegas weddings are real, that means I’m...

“Have you been to Vegas?” Elena asks calmly. She’s using the same tone of voice you’d use with a frightened animal you don’t want to run away.

I swallow thickly, trying to get the words to come out, but my body won’t obey my command. I nod instead.

“Did you... marry someone?”

“I think so,” I croak out, memories from five years ago coming back to me.

A tall man with broad shoulders, his quiet strength more memorable than the exact features of his face. Drinking with him at the hotel bar... getting tipsy... getting buzzed... getting sloshed... and then...

Kelly claps her hand over her mouth as Elena asks, “Was it just a ceremony, or did you go to the courthouse and get a license? It’s not legal if you didn’t get a license.”

“I...” My stomach flutters disconcertingly. “The hotel had this wedding package that took us in a limo to the courthouse and a chapel. I thought it was part of the experience...” I trail off, the extent of my past stupidity slamming into me.

A hysterical burble of laughter escapes Kelly from behind her hand. “I can’t believe you’re married.”

“No,” I protest, even though the evidence is clear as day against me.

“What county is Las Vegas in?” Elena asks, on her phone now.

“What?”

“I’m looking at their clerk’s office. You can usually look up marriage records online.”

The three of us are silent as she completes her search, and I stick my hands under my thighs so they stop trembling.

I’d never even questioned my long-standing belief that Vegas weddings are all pretend. Never bothered to look it up after the fact. It had seemed so inconsequential. Just a fun weekend. A day, really. I’d only met the guy that day.

Damn their marketing department.

Elena turns her phone around to face me, expression grim. On the screen is *Calloway, Harper* under the first column. Next to it is *Taylor, Owen*.

That’s right. Owen.

I guess it's official, then. I'm married.

My stomach does another slow roll, threatening to expel the mimosa I just downed.

"What's he look like? Maybe we can find him online." Elena stares at me expectantly.

"Um..." I rack my brain, the fuzzy memories getting a little clearer the more I try to remember. "Dark hair, light eyes, tall..."

"That doesn't narrow it down," Elena mutters, already at work searching on her phone.

I throw my hands up, frustration replacing the nausea. "It was five years ago and I was drunk."

She doesn't bother to hide her smile.

"Ooh, this Owen Taylor's a baseball player. Is this him?"

I study her screen. While the man is good looking, he doesn't ring any bells. "No, not him."

Kelly pulls out her phone too, and we spend the next ten minutes going through every kind of social media profile and image we can find online, but none of them are quite right. Then again, I could definitely be misremembering considering the length of time and amount of alcohol involved.

"The guy doesn't exist," Elena declares in disgust. "You married a ghost."

I motion for her phone. "Let me see that clerk's office page again."

I study the screen, trying to glean any additional information I can, but the only thing there is a column with our names. No date of birth, no place of residence, no picture of the marriage license or certificate. Apparently, I'd have to pay twenty dollars and wait three weeks for them to send it to me by mail.

What a racket.

I hand her phone back to her and stand. "I need to figure this out. Sorry to steal your thunder, Kelly."

She waves off my concern. “What are you going to do?”

I blow out a long breath, grab my purse, and sling it over my shoulder. “Try to get an annulment, I guess. I just have to find him first.”

I give them both hugs and head to the train station around the corner, continuing to search on my phone during the short ride home. There’s still bupkis, though.

How can someone have *no* social media presence? It’s practically criminal in this day and age. Looks like I’ll have to rely on my memory for more clues.

Good luck with that.

I close my eyes, conscious of the other riders, the sway of the train car, my grip on my purse in my lap. What do I remember about that night?

He was in Vegas for work, I was there for a friend’s bachelorette weekend. The girls I was with had left for the airport but I couldn’t get a flight back home until the next day, so I’d struck up a conversation with the cute guy sitting alone at the hotel bar. We’d started taking shots... and maybe gone a little too far. One thing led to another and...

There’s that sickening roll in my stomach again. I push it down, racking my brain for what I can recall about him. He was from a small town, I remember that. Somewhere in... Washington? No, Oregon. Did it have the word moon in the town name?

I open a new tab on my browser to search, but nothing that comes up sounds right. Was it moon? Or something else? Think, Harper, think.

Something about it being the kind of place no one would ever have a reason to go, hidden up in the mountains. Or between mountains? A valley? God, I have no clue.

Exiting the train car when my stop arrives, I hoof it to my apartment and make a beeline for my laptop, ready to do a deep dive on Owen Taylor and his mysterious small town. But no matter what combination of keywords I search for, there’s no sign of him. It’s as if he doesn’t want to be found.

Sighing, I rub my temples as a headache forms. How am I still finding myself in messes like this? Acting without thinking has always got me in trouble, this time being no exception. How in the world could I have fucked up this much? Who doesn't realize they're married?

I'll figure this out, though. There's no other option.

Taking a break to clear my head, I clean up around the apartment, tidying the accumulated mess from the week. It's not until an hour later in the middle of washing dishes that an inkling forms in the back of my mind. It wasn't a valley he lived in, it was something else. God, what's the word?

I steer toward my laptop again, searching for synonyms. Nothing sparks my memory until I scroll further down the list. Pass. Some kind of pass.

I type *Oregon small town pass* into Google and there it is on the second page of results. *Crescent Pass*. I guess I was thinking of crescent moons when I thought it had moon in the name earlier.

A quick search of his name and town yields no results, though. Damn it.

I smack my forehead when the obvious solution occurs to me. If the town has a library, they would know Owen's information.

And lo and behold, the Crescent Pass Library is open right now, according to Google.

I'm nearly giddy as the line rings, and grab a paper and pen off the side table for when they give me his number.

"Hello, this is Abby at Crescent Pass Library," a soft voice answers on the third ring. "How may I help you?"

"Hi, I'm looking for information on one of your residents. Do you know Owen Taylor?"

There's a pause and then her hesitant answer. "Yes, I know him."

Relief splashes hot in the pit of my stomach. Finally I'm getting somewhere. "Great. Can you give me his phone

number?”

“No, we can’t give out a customer’s personal information.”

Wait, what? “But I need to get in touch with him.”

“I-I’m sorry,” she stutters. “That would be a breach of confidentiality.”

My nostrils flare in annoyance. It’s a library, not the FBI. “Well, how am I supposed to reach him? I can’t find him online anywhere. No Facebook. No Instagram. No Twitter. It’s like the man doesn’t exist.”

“Owen’s a pretty private guy. I don’t think he does social media.”

Of course not. That’d be too easy. “Can you give him a message from me, then? My name’s Harper Calloway. I met him five years ago in Vegas—”

“Ma’am,” she interrupts. “I’m not comfortable with this. I have no idea who you are.”

Oh, no. She *ma’am’d* me. “I understand, but I really need to speak with him. I’m his wife.”

The words leave a funny taste in my mouth. I’ve never been remotely close to being anyone’s wife before.

“Is this a prank call?” she asks after a moment. “Owen doesn’t have a wife.”

Well, at least she didn’t say he’s married to someone else. “I know what it sounds like, but I promise I’m not pranking you. I need to get in contact with him.”

“I can’t give you any private information. I’m sorry.”

I bite back the swear that wants to let loose. “What about public information? Is there some sort of database you can access with public records?”

“What kind of public records are you looking for?” she asks warily.

“I don’t know. Anything. I will literally take anything you can tell me about him.”

“Please give me a moment.”

Hold music ensues, some generically pleasant melody that I’ll immediately forget after hanging up. If this turns out to be a bust, how else am I supposed to get in touch with him? If I can’t get information from a freaking library of all places, where can I get it? Will I have to fly to Crescent Pass myself and go door to door until he answers?

“Ms. Calloway?”

I grip the phone tighter. “Yes?”

“My search yielded one result from the county property appraiser. There is a listing of residence for one Owen Taylor in the county. However, I cannot confirm this is the same Owen Taylor you’re searching for. Would you like the address?”

It has to be the same Owen, right? Especially if there’s only one. “Yes, I’d like it.”

I jot down the address, not sure what to do with it once I have it.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“So, just to make sure, you can’t give me his number? His email address? Any kind of direct contact with him?”

There’s a long pause. “No,” she finally says. “I can’t violate our privacy policy.”

I grumble to myself for a moment about how he gave up the right to privacy when he drunkenly married me. “And you won’t relay a message for me?”

“It’s not within the scope of my job to take personal messages for residents.”

Ugh. What a canned response. “Thanks for his address, then.”

I hang up and look at my notepad. *72 Trail Marker Way*. What the hell am I supposed to do with this?

I plug it into Google Maps, but there’s not much to tell from the satellite view. There’s no sign of a house, only trees,



and a glimpse of a dirt path leading from the main road. The rest of the town doesn't look much better. One main thoroughfare with shops on either side, a few streets branching off from it with other buildings, a number of family homes, and that's pretty much it. He wasn't kidding when he said there wasn't a reason for anyone to visit there.

Calling up Elena, I explain what I found and ask her for advice about what my next steps should be.

"I guess you could hire a process server to go out there and serve divorce papers."

I swallow heavily. "Divorce? I don't want a divorce on my record. I'm only twenty-six."

"You act like it's a prison record."

"You know what I mean. Besides, he doesn't even know we're married, either. He can't, right?"

"I'd assume not."

"So I need to talk to him and explain everything. Then he'll agree to the annulment."

"How? All you have is his name and address."

"I... I guess I'll have to fly out there."

She laughs, then quiets a moment later. "Wait. You're serious?"

"What else am I supposed to do? Pay someone to go out there and ask him to call me? The lady at the library already thought I was a stalker. No, I need to physically talk to him."

"Well, what are you going to do about work? Want me to tell Sandra you're deathly ill or something?"

"No, I'll say I have a family emergency. It's technically not a lie."

"When are you leaving?"

"I'll take the first flight I can find. I don't want this hanging over my head. My anxiety's already through the roof."

“Good luck, then.”

“Thanks.”

I’ll need it.

\* \* \*

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, after a fitful night of sleep, a maxed out credit card, and a car rental experience from hell, I’m driving down the surprisingly picturesque main road of Crescent Pass, charmed by the old-fashioned storefronts and vivid fall foliage. Nestled between two mountains in the Cascade Range, the town has a three hundred and sixty-degree view of snow-capped peaks and multicolored forests of blazing yellows and vibrant reds. It’s like I’m in the middle of a postcard.

The flip side of these gorgeous mountain views is that my cell service is practically non-existent and my maps app stopped updating about ten minutes ago. Time to stop and figure out where Owen lives. Might as well load up on snacks for my two and a half hour drive back to the airport, too.

I roll down my window, taking in a lungful of crisp, fall air, and pull into a parking spot in front of an honest to goodness general store, as if I’m back in the 1800s. The only difference is the mannequin in the display window has flannel on instead of a hoop skirt.

Grabbing a couple bags of Doritos and Fritos, I bring them to the counter, swiping a pack of peanut M&M’s at the register, too.

“Passing through?” the elderly man asks as he rings up my purchases.

“Something like that.” I lean closer, marveling at the vintage bronze-plated cash register, complete with clacking buttons and levers. People still use these? “I’m actually trying to find Trail Marker Way. Do you know how to get there from here?”

He eyes me carefully. “You looking for Owen?”

Does my reputation precede me from that phone call to the library? Or is he the only one who lives on that road?

I nod hesitantly, relaxing when he gestures toward the window. “About four miles up the road on the left. Looks more like a dirt path than a road, so be careful you don’t miss it. Don’t think there’s a sign, either.”

Finally. Someone who doesn’t care about privacy issues. “Thank you,” I tell him sincerely. How long would I have spent searching for a street with no sign?

“What business you got there?”

“Just... business.” Probably best not to broadcast my motive for visiting when I’ll never see him again. No reason to make Owen’s life difficult with the people in town.

He makes a gruff noise of acknowledgment and bags up my snacks.

“Your store’s cute,” I comment as I take the bag from him. “Love the old-timey vibe.”

He gives me a deadpan stare. “Glad I have your approval.”

I press my lips together tightly so I don’t laugh and head out, searching closely along the left-hand side of the road as I drive up the street.

There. That has to be it.

I turn, a thick cover of trees shading the narrow path, like someone only cleared out just enough of the forest to drive through. I take in another deep breath of air, wondering if I can somehow bottle it up and bring it back with me to Chicago.

The path opens into a small clearing ahead, with a dusty pickup truck parked next to some kind of workshop, its open barn doors showcasing a number of heavy-duty tools inside. A modernized log cabin sits squarely in the center of the clearing, with a beautiful chalet-style roof and rocking chairs on the front porch. The forest provides a sheltering canopy overhead, and there’s a bark from inside as I park next to the truck.

I grab my things and head up the steps, pausing as the door opens before I can knock. I'm caught off guard for a moment at the size of the man in the doorway, the breadth of his shoulders, the way he towers over me the same as these trees surrounding us.

I forgot how physically aware of him I once was, another memory returning to me of kissing those firm lips, those stormy, gray eyes alight with happiness as a gaudily dressed Elvis declared us husband and wife. And despite being drunk off my ass, feeling like this was the start of something new, that one of my impulsive decisions finally led to something right.

I shake off the sensation, reminding myself that was the alcohol talking, not my rational brain.

"Harper?" he says in disbelief, my name in that deep voice making my belly go warm and loose.

He remembers me?

I thrust the papers in my hand at him, tongue-tied for some reason.

He takes them, his gaze never leaving mine. "What's this?"

"We need to get an annulment."

## CHAPTER 2



OWEN

I blink, unsure what's happening, if I'm actually in the middle of a dream. God knows I've dreamed about this woman enough. "I... What?"

"You're a hard man to get in touch with," she says instead of answering my question. "No social media, no phone number listed online. It's like you don't want to be found."

"I don't." What does that have to do with anything, though? "Did you say something about an annulment?"

She nods, her brunette curls brushing the tops of her shoulders. "Do you remember that night in Vegas? Turns out we actually got married."

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. There's no way. She wasn't even seriously interested in me. She'd given me a fake number. And now she's telling me she's... my wife?

"Did you know?" she asks in that sweet voice.

"No, I... I remember getting drunk with you at the bar, then things get hazy. I vaguely recall getting in a limo... and after that, not much of anything." I'd woken the next morning alone in my hotel room with a massive hangover. "So you're telling me we're married? You're sure?"

"I found our marriage record on the county clerk's site. It's official."

"What did... How did..." I brace a hand on the door frame to steady myself. What the hell is going on?

She points to the papers she handed me. "This is information I could find about voiding a marriage in Oregon. We'll need to file a petition soon."

My head swirls as I skim the pages, unable to make sense of the words. "Can we slow down a second? Here, come in. Duke, move." My German shepherd whines but does as he's told, padding over to his bed in the corner of the living room.

Harper breezes past me, a delicate floral scent lingering. Damn, she smells amazing.

“It’s beautiful in here,” she comments, glancing around my home. “Upscale rustic but still inviting.”

“Thanks.” I stick my hands in my pockets, not sure what else to say.

She presses a hand to her temple. “Sorry. I just finished a campaign for an interior design company. It’s all I can see now when I go to new places.”

“You got a job in marketing like you wanted?”

“I... Yes.” She eyes me carefully, and I get lost for a moment in the deep brown depths. The way she was looking at me that night, gaze sparkling with delight at some joke I’d made... No one’s ever looked at me like that before. “You remember that?”

I shake off the memory. This isn’t the time. “The beginning of the night is crystal clear. It’s only the end that’s blank.”

She nods. “What was your job again? Something with carpentry?”

“Yeah, I do custom woodworking. Lots of yuppies in Portland pay big bucks for pieces.”

She folds her hands in front of her. “Right. So, how should we handle this?”

“I... I guess I’ll call my lawyer.”

Her brows raise. “You have a lawyer?”

“Not on retainer or anything. He handled a property line dispute for me a few years back when I bought this land.”

“Great. Probably best to have someone who knows the law to guide us. I want to make sure everything’s taken care of legally.”

My gaze wanders over her, from those beautiful eyes down to her pert nose and lush lips, her lithe body and toned legs. She was like a fantasy come to life approaching me at that

hotel bar, her effervescent attitude drawing me out of my normally reserved shell, something about her hypnotic, like I couldn't get enough. I'd never met anyone like her—someone so witty, smart, and fun, someone I was so instantly attracted to, so at ease with. Never met anyone like her since, either.

Her showing up on my doorstep is like... a sign. A second chance. As awful as it was to discover she was gone that next morning, this could make up for it.

“You know, if you wanted to give this thing between us a try... I mean, we were obviously attracted enough to each other to get married in the first place.” The tips of my ears burn red, my awkward phrasing hanging in the air. If my family were here, they'd be on the floor howling at my attempt at flirting. “It's just, from that first meeting, it was like we clicked. There was this connection with you I've never felt with anyone else.”

My heart is pounding in my ears, unable to tell what she's thinking. Did she feel that way too five years ago?

Her lips finally tip up in amusement. “You must get a lot of women with that line. A plus for delivery, but I've heard them all.”

My heart crashes to somewhere around my knees. Guess it was one-sided, then. How could I forget she gave me that fake number, too?

“Right. I'll give Larry a call.”

I retreat into the back room, Duke close at my heels. He sits at attention as I slump on the bed and pull my phone out of my pocket, and I scratch behind his ears as I look through my contacts. What the fuck was I thinking saying that to her? Like we're going to pick up where we left off five years ago getting wasted at the bar? She doesn't even live here.

Larry's office line goes to voicemail, not that it surprises me on a Sunday afternoon. And from his message, it sounds like he won't be open again until Tuesday.

“Bad news,” I tell her, rejoining her in the living room. “They're open Tuesday through Saturday. I'll make an



appointment first thing Tuesday morning.”

“There’s no other lawyer in town?”

My jaw firms for a moment. “Crescent Pass doesn’t even have a Wal-Mart. You think we have two lawyers?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Is there another town nearby we can go to? An actual city or something?”

“I’ve known Larry since I was a kid. I trust him to handle this. What’s the rush, anyway? It’s been five years.”

She throws her hands up. “I’m on borrowed time. I can’t leisurely wait for an appointment like you. I need to get back to work.”

“Let me handle the lawyer, then. I’ll call you with whatever I find out.” I stick my hands in my pockets, turning my head to the side. “Not that I have your number,” I mutter.

“No, I want to speak to the lawyer, too.” She jabs a finger at me. “And I gave you my number. Why’d you ask for it if you were never going to call?”

My brows narrow. “You gave me a fake number.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Oh, so you’re Dorothy Fischer?”

“What?”

I pause at the sincere confusion on her face. “That’s who answered when I called.” The lady had sounded as if she was about a hundred years old, confused beyond belief as to why I was calling her asking for Harper.

“You must have misdialed, then.”

“You created the contact in my phone.” I bring it up and show it to her.

She takes my phone carefully, looking up at me with pinched brows. “You still have my number in here?”

I shrug, crossing my arms.

“Looks like the last digit’s off,” she says softly. “It’s a three instead of a two. I... I’m sorry.”

I nod, taking my phone back from her. Guess it wasn't a fake on purpose, then.

"Were you really going to call?"

I glance over, her expression softer now. "Yes," I admit.

She blinks up at me. "But I lived halfway across the country."

I shrug again, unwilling to say anything after she practically laughed in my face before.

"I guess I can wait an extra day," she says when I don't respond. "Nowhere would be open today, anyway."

Duke barks and lifts on his back legs to look out the window, nosing at the blinds, the same as he did when Harper showed up. Who the hell's out there now? Don't they know this is private property?

I peek through the slats and groan. "Give me a sec."

Duke runs into the yard when I open the door, barking happily as my twin niece and nephew exit out of my sister's van to greet him. High-pitched squeals ensue as Jamie finds Duke's rope toy and throws it for him, then Jenny runs after it, too.

Kristen rolls down her window, a weary smile on her face. "Thanks again for watching them," she calls out. "They've been asking all day if it was time to come over here yet."

I rub the back of my neck and shut the door behind me. Not that I'm trying to hide Harper, but I'm still wrapping my head around her even being here. "Uh, yeah, sure." I have a vague recollection of agreeing to babysit. "What was it you're doing again?"

She smooths a hand over her hair. "Getting my hair cut. I didn't realize it's been over a year since I'd last done it until Tanya called me."

Shit. It's not like I can ask her to cancel. Kristen hardly does anything for herself. "Right. Well, have fun. Everything will be normal here."

She gives me a sidelong glance. “Okay...”

She reverses, then stops and pulls forward again. “Whose car is that?” she asks, pointing to the red Kia parked next to my truck.

“I’ll tell you when you get back.” How am I supposed to explain I’ve been married for the last five years?

“Is someone in your house?”

There’s a healthy dose of skepticism in her voice, which I don’t blame her for. I never invite anyone over.

“Just go. You’ll be late.”

She wavers for a moment, then purses her lips, glaring at me as she turns the van around and leaves.

I breathe a sigh of relief, ready to put off my explanation until later.

“Uncle Owen, I need to go to the bathroom.”

I blink, finding Jamie in front of me, holding his crotch exaggeratedly. “Uh...” Harper’s in the house. It’s not like I can hide her forever, though. “A friend of mine is inside, so—”

“I want to meet him,” he exclaims, bathroom request forgotten as he races up the porch steps.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I call for Jenny and Duke, wanting to keep an eye on everyone.

Jamie doesn’t make it in, though, as he stands frozen in the doorway. He looks up at me, eyes wide. “You have a girlfriend?” he whispers.

“No. She’s...” My wife, apparently. “A friend.”

He steps back, suddenly shy as he hides himself half behind me, peeking around my hip as Harper approaches.

“Hi.” She gives a wave and takes a seat in one of the rocking chairs. “I’m Harper. I’m just visiting your uncle for a bit. You’ll have him all to yourself again soon.”

Jamie nods, relaxing as his sister and Duke join us on the porch.

Duke goes straight to Harper, nosing at her hand until she pets him. That's strange. He doesn't usually take to new people so quickly.

"Why are you visiting?" Jenny asks, never afraid to stick her nose in where it doesn't belong. "No one comes here to see Uncle Owen except us and Grandma."

Way to call me out, kid.

Harper's gaze cuts to me and away, so quick I almost miss it. "I... wanted to catch up with him. It's been years since we've seen each other."

Jenny nods, accepting her answer. "How do you know him?"

A nervous chuckle escapes me. "Okay, enough with the questions." I ruffle Jenny's hair and take a seat in the other rocking chair. "Harper, these are my sister's kids, Jenny and Jamie. Guys, be nice to Harper while she's here."

"Oh, you should do Duke's voices for her," Jenny says, her blue eyes sparkling. "She'll love it."

I shift in my seat. "No, let's do something else."

"Please?" Jenny begs, folding her tiny hands under her chin and sticking her bottom lip out so it's quivering.

"Yeah," Jamie pipes up. "I like when you make him act like Mr. Cooper. Please?" He joins in on mimicking Jenny's theatrics.

Heat crawls up my neck. "It's dumb," I mutter to Harper. "You don't want to see it."

She crosses one leg over the other, settling in her chair. "Oh, you've got me intrigued now. Come on, let's see it."

I sigh heavily, not sure how I can get out of this. I should be impressing Harper, not scaring her off. "Okay, fine." Catching Duke's attention, I pat my lap, and he excitedly climbs up. He's too big to sit like this normally.

Crouching behind him as he sits tall in my lap, I take hold of his front paws and do my best imitation of Fred, the owner

of the general store in town. “Back in my day, we didn’t have all these newfangled phones and computers,” I tell them in a crotchety, old man voice. “We used telegraphs and newspapers to get what we needed to know.”

Jenny laughs and claps her hands in delight. I have no idea why she finds this so funny. “You didn’t have an iPad, Mr. Cooper?” she teases.

“An iPad?” I huff. “I was lucky to have a chalkboard in school. Had to walk five miles there in the snow, uphill both ways.” I swing Duke’s arms around, pointing at the kids as they giggle.

I don’t dare peek my head over the dog to see how Harper’s reacting. She’s probably already on the phone booking her flight out of this crazy house.

I play along with their questions for a few minutes longer, then call an end to it, stretching my back. I can’t stay in that cramped position for too long.

Jenny goes to my side, resting her hands on my forearm. “Will you do the southern belle voice next? Please, please, please?”

“No,” I tell her firmly. There’s only so much I’ll put myself through. “It was a mistake to even do it that one time.”

“I’ll do it.”

I glance at Harper, surprised to find her smiling at me.

“If that’s okay with you,” she adds. “Though it might be hard to top your impression.”

Jenny abandons me to clutch at Harper’s arm. “Oh, will you? You have to make Duke sound like a sweet Southern lady. It was the funniest thing ever when he did it.”

Everything is *the funniest thing ever* to her.

“Have at it,” I tell her. Why she’d volunteer is beyond me.

I get Duke off my lap and point to Harper’s. “Sit here.”

Duke looks at me questioningly, then turns to Harper, who pats her hands on her thighs in encouragement.

He gingerly places a paw on her, then another, but when he puts his full weight on her, she groans. “Holy sh—”

She cuts herself off, giving a pained smile. “He’s a big boy, isn’t he?”

“About eighty pounds. Here.” I pick him up and settle him on her lap. “That better?”

She nods, situating herself behind him, and I swear the dog seems like he’s enjoying himself.

She takes hold of one of his paws, placing it on his chest. “I do declare, Miss Jenny, you are the most precious peach I’ve ever laid eyes on,” she drawls in a sickeningly sweet Southern accent.

Jenny smiles, revealing the gap in her bottom row of teeth. “What’s a precious peach?”

“Why, it means you’re cute, darlin’.” Harper carefully extends Duke’s paw to boop Jenny’s nose.

She laughs delightedly and Jamie crosses his arms over his thin chest. “What about me?” he asks petulantly.

“Now you, sir,” she twangs, pointing at him with Duke’s paw, “are a bona fide gentleman. As is your uncle.”

He glances at me and stands straighter. “I’m going to be just like Uncle Owen when I grow up.”

She chuckles. “And what about your daddy? Like him, too?”

I suck in a breath, not quick enough to delay Jenny’s sure-to-be blunt response.

“Our dad’s dead,” Jenny says matter-of-factly.

Yep, there it is.

# CHAPTER 3



OWEN

Harper pops up from behind Duke, her eyes wide.  
“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

Jenny shrugs. “That’s okay. We don’t remember him.”

All right, it’s time to switch gears. I stand and pick Duke up off Harper’s lap, then reach for the basket by the door, pulling out two of Duke’s slobber-soaked tennis balls, and hand one to each kid. “How about you play with Duke in the yard?”

Duke’s tongue lolls out of his mouth, gaze rapt on the ball in Jamie’s hand.

They head down the porch steps, taking turns throwing a ball for Duke, and I relax back into my chair.

“I’m an idiot,” Harper murmurs, watching them play.

I tuck my hands under my thighs, resisting the urge to reach out and comfort her. “You had no way of knowing.”

“I shouldn’t have assumed anything, either.”

“They’re okay. Pretty well-adjusted, all things considered.” Like Jenny said, it helps that they weren’t old enough to remember their father when he passed away.

She sighs, rocking her chair forward and back. “You’re really great with them.”

“I try to help my sister out when I can. And you were a good sport doing Duke’s voice like that.”

She waves off my comment. “I like kids.”

A thought occurs to me. “You don’t have any, do you?”

Her lips quirk to one side. “Out of wedlock, you mean?”

A laugh escapes me.

“No kids,” she confirms.



“You said you wanted to have a big family someday. Three kids, if I remember right.”

She turns to me, brows raising. “So you remember me saying that, but not the part where we got married?”

I hold back another laugh. “The mind works in mysterious ways.”

“I guess so.”

My leg jiggles, curiosity getting the better of me. “Do you remember the ceremony?”

She nods. “It was... pretty tacky. We had an Elvis officiate.”

I cringe.

“And by your request.”

I groan, burying my head in my hands. “I didn’t sing, did I?”

She laughs, the sound sweet and clear. “Maybe.”

“Can’t Help Falling In Love?” It’s the only song of his I know all the words to.

“Yep. It was cute.”

Cute... right. “Sorry you had to witness that.”

There’s amusement on her face as I peek at her. “It would have been better without the slurring, but I enjoyed it at the time.”

I pause, my mental gears turning. “Wait. If you remember all that, then you knew we were married.”

She bites at her bottom lip. “I didn’t realize Vegas marriages were real.”

“What? How?”

“You know, the marketing campaign. *What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*. Stupid, I know.”

“Don’t you work in marketing?”

She squints at me. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

I hold up my hands in a *don't shoot* gesture. "Sorry."

She rubs at her temple. "No, I feel foolish, is all. I should know better. I guess I wanted to suppress the memory. The whole thing was a dumb idea."

"Whose idea was it?" I honestly don't remember. But as into her as I'd been, I wouldn't be too surprised if she says it was me.

"Mine," she admits softly. "It was a joke, but you were on board with it immediately. And I thought, well, *when in Rome*. Since it obviously wasn't real." She rolls her eyes. "It's probably the worst thing I've ever done."

I wince. "I was that bad, huh?"

Her lips twist, but she can't fully hide her smile as she swats at my arm. "You know what I mean." She inhales deeply, looking out at my property. "God, I can't believe I'm here. It's surreal."

"What is?"

She gestures widely in front of us. "Everything. Like I'm in one of those Thomas Kinkadee paintings."

Who?

"All that's missing is a babbling brook," she continues. "With a water wheel or something."

"There's a stream about half a mile east."

She huffs a laugh. "Of course there is. How big is your property, anyway?"

"Forty acres."

"Jesus," she mutters. "And I thought my seven-hundred square foot apartment in the city was living large."

"You're still in Indianapolis?"

"No, I was only there for college. I moved to Chicago four years ago."

"Oh, so still a city girl?"

Her lips tilt up at the corners. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“No, just... different.”

Her smile broadens. “What do you do for fun around here?”

I shrug. “I take Duke hiking with me a lot. There are waterfalls and hot springs not far from here. People go canoeing, caving, camping, you name it.”

“What about less outdoorsy activities?”

“There’s a restaurant in town. And a bar that has dancing at night.”

She still has that amused set to her lips. “Some nightlife you guys have.”

I smirk at her. “We can’t all have live theater and whatnot.”

Jenny runs up the porch steps, breathing hard, and digs through Duke’s toy basket until she finds his frisbee, then runs back to the yard.

“I should let you spend time with them,” she says, standing. “Is there a hotel in town I can book a room at?”

Right. She’ll need somewhere to stay until we meet with Larry. “There’s an inn with a few rooms. We don’t get many visitors, so that’s the only place. Kirkwood’s the next biggest town, about half an hour away. They should have a place if the inn doesn’t.”

She nods. “Is it okay if I go in and make a few calls?”

“Yeah.” I gesture toward the front door. “You’re welcome to do whatever you want in there. It’s half yours, after all,” I joke.

She blinks at me. “What?”

“Because we’re married... never mind. It was a bad joke.”

“Oh.” Her hands twist in front of her. “I don’t want your property or money or anything. I just want to get this taken

care of.”

Shit. Why am I trying to joke with her about this? “Of course.”

She excuses herself inside and I blow out a long breath, watching Jenny and Jamie race Duke across the yard, as if their six-year-old selves could beat a fully grown German shepherd.

It hasn’t even been twenty minutes since Harper showed up, but she’s somehow blown my whole world wide open. Married. How the hell did that happen?

And what will everyone say when they find out?

\* \* \*

FORTY MINUTES LATER, Kristen pulls up and parks behind my truck, side-eyeing Harper’s rental. She runs a hand over her noticeably shorter hair, then pauses as she spies me on the porch.

I give her a wolf whistle, and she rolls her eyes as she approaches. “Shut up.”

“You trying to look good for someone?” I reach out to touch her hair and she bats my hand away.

“No. Tanya said I need a change.”

It’s probably well overdue. Her hair has reached to the middle of her back for the last decade.

“You like it?”

She looks down, the strands falling forward, and she tucks it behind her ear. “Yeah. It’s weird, though. James never liked short hair.”

I shift in my seat, always unsure how to respond when she brings him up. “I bet he’d think you look great.”

She rolls her eyes again. “You sound like Mom.”

“Okay, he’d think you look like garbage. Is that what you want me to say?”

“Anyway,” she says loudly, “are you going to answer me about that car now?” She glances around. “And where are the kids?”

“They’re inside with Harper.”

Her brows narrow. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

I rub at the back of my neck. “Remember that trade show in Vegas I went to about five years ago?”

The confused look doesn’t leave her face. “The one you had to do as part of your apprenticeship?”

I nod.

“I guess.”

“And I said I met that girl...”

Recognition flares in her gaze. “She’s here? The one you were all mopey about because she gave you a fake number?”

“I wasn’t mopey.”

She raises her brows.

“Okay, maybe I was. But she typed in the last digit wrong. It wasn’t on purpose.”

She shakes her head. “So why is she here?”

The tips of my ears heat. “Turns out we’re... married.”

A burble of laughter escapes her. “Be serious.”

“I am.”

She pushes my shoulder. “No, you’re not.”

I throw my hands up. “Why would I make that up?”

Her eyes widen, gaze switching back and forth between the door and me. “You got married in Vegas? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just found out. We were both drunk that night.”

“So, what? She’s moving in with you now?”

“No, she wants an annulment.”

She stares at me for a moment. “You don’t sound happy about it.”

“What are you talking about?”

She leans back in the rocking chair, gripping the arms, but doesn’t respond to my question. “Holy shit, Owen.”

“Larry’s office opens on Tuesday. I’ll get an appointment with him then.”

She chuckles softly. “Mom’s going to flip when she finds out.”

I scrub a hand down my face. “For the love of God, don’t tell her.”

“Maybe she’ll give her matchmaking attempts with me a rest if she has you to focus on. You know she told me a couple of months ago that I needed to go on dates because Jamie and Jenny need a father?”

“Jesus,” I mutter, wincing. Mom generally doesn’t have a lot of tact, but damn.

“You’re secret’s safe with me,” she says, standing. “As long as you back me up that I don’t need to date.”

“Agreed.” If Mom gets wind of this, I’ll never hear the end of it.

Kristen pushes open the front door, but stops in the doorway. I look over her shoulder, finding my living room festooned in white garland. “Jenny, you said you were doing a secret art project, not decorating my house for Christmas.”

“We’re making snowflakes,” my niece says happily, all her focus on cutting the piece of printer paper in her hand.

Harper gives me an apologetic shrug. “She begged me to teach her.”

“Honey,” Kristen murmurs, approaching her daughter. “It’s October. Why are you making these now?”

“I have to get a head start to make all the decorations I want.”

“We have stuff in the garage we’ll put up in December.”

“But last year you said you didn’t have money for the decorations I wanted. So this year I’ll make everything.”

Kristen’s nostrils flare. “I said I wouldn’t buy you the twelve-foot inflatable Santa you wanted for the front yard. That’s different.”

Jenny shrugs casually, apparently not seeing the difference.

“Can we go now?” Jamie asks, setting down his scissors. “My fingers hurt.”

“Yes, we’re going.” Kristen gathers piles of snowflakes, tucking them into her purse. It’s actually impressive how many they were able to produce in such a short amount of time.

“I’m sorry if I started any trouble,” Harper says, moving aside a pile of copy paper. “She was so excited about it.”

“Don’t worry about it. When she gets an idea in her head, all bets are off. I’m Kristen, by the way.” She holds her hand out and Harper shakes it.

“I’m Harper. Owen, um...” She trails off, glancing in my direction.

“I told her,” I say, leaving it at that in front of the kids. Who knows what they’d repeat to their grandma?

“Larry will get whatever you need done,” Kristen says, her purse bulging now with snowflakes. “He took a lot of stress off my shoulders handling some legal things for me a while back.”

Right. James’s will had become complicated after his parents had contested it.

“Good to hear,” Harper murmurs. “I’d like to get everything squared away as soon as possible.”

Kristen wrangles her kids and the rest of the snowflakes out of the house, leaving a stillness in the air after their departure.

Harper and I stare awkwardly at each other for a moment until I clear my throat. “Did you book a room in town?”

“No, they were full. I looked up the hotels in Kirkwood, but they were all booked, too. I guess there’s some kind of festival happening?”

I groan. “That’s right. The Kirkwood Fall Festival. It starts tomorrow and runs through next weekend. You won’t find any hotels within probably a hundred-mile radius.”

Her lips twist. “What am I supposed to do, then? I want to meet with this lawyer, too.”

“Why don’t you stay here?” As soon as I suggest it, the idea feels right.

She glances around the living room. “Where?”

“With me.”

Her brows raise. “Unless you’ve got some invisible wing on the back of the house, I only see a one-bedroom cabin.”

“Not *with me*,” I amend. “You can stay in my room. I’ll take the couch.”

“I...” She crosses her arms over her chest. “I don’t have many other options, do I?”

I mimic her pose. “I’m not trying to trap you here.”

Her lips twist to the side. “Sorry. Guess I picked a bad time to fly out. I had no idea fall festivals were so popular.”

“Well, as you noted with our lack of nightlife, there’s not much else to do around here.”

She gives me a reluctant smile. “Okay, I’ll stay. As long as it’s not an imposition.”

An unexpected sense of satisfaction fills me, but I push it aside. She’s here to separate from me, not get closer. “It’ll be fine. I finished a big project last week, so I don’t have any deadlines coming up.”

“You make your own schedule?”



I nod. “Want to join me and Duke for a hike in the morning?”

Her shoulders lift. “Sure, why not? *When in Rome*, right?”

I won’t mention that that attitude is what got us in trouble in Vegas. Not if she’s willing to spend more time with me. Maybe I could convince her that... What? What exactly do I think will happen? That she’ll magically feel that same initial connection I did? That she’ll want to give things a try after all?

Get a grip.

“Do you have luggage?” I ask her. “I can grab it out of the car for you.”

She holds her hands out wide. “You’re looking at it. I was so focused on finding you, I didn’t consider it might take us a while to even get an appointment somewhere.”

She didn’t bring anything with her? “You can borrow whatever you need. I’ve got extra toothbrushes, spare clothes —”

She snorts. “You think I’ll fit in your clothes?”

Okay, so there’s a bit of a size difference between us. “Use them as pajamas, then.”

I pause, imagining her in one of my tees and boxers, the shirt draping off one shoulder with how large it is on her, the boxers rolled up to showcase her long legs... I mentally shake my head and move toward the bedroom. “I’ll put fresh sheets on the bed for you.”

She looks up at me from lowered lashes. “Thanks.”

I swallow past my dry mouth, reminding myself this attraction is one-sided. She couldn’t have said more clearly earlier she’s not interested.

She’ll stay here until Tuesday, we’ll meet with Larry, and put this behind us. Not a big deal.

Even if a part of me wishes it were.

# CHAPTER 4



HARPER

“Those snacks didn’t cut it for you?”

I pause in the doorway of the general store, letting the door ease shut behind me as I focus on the same man I spoke with when I was here earlier. But this time, I can’t get the image of Owen imitating him out of my mind, Duke’s paws on his hips as he lectured the twins.

“Um, they were fine.” I shake my head to clear the impression away. “I’m actually looking for clothes now.” They must have something if there’s a mannequin in the window.

“Ruth,” he grunts, getting the attention of a gray-haired woman stocking a shelf. “Can you show her those clothes you insisted on buying?”

She bustles over, shooing her hand at him. “Never you mind my husband,” she says. “We have the best selection of clothing east of Kirkwood.”

“Great. I need some basics to get me through a couple of days.”

“You in town for the festival?” she asks as she leads me to the back of the store.

“She’s visiting Owen,” the man calls out.

She stops in the middle of the aisle, turning to me. “Really?”

Based on the gleam in her eye, I’m pegging her to be the town gossip.

“He doesn’t get any female visitors,” she continues. “Are you two dating? I didn’t know he left his house enough to meet anyone.”

“No, I—”

“Unless you’re here to talk to him about a custom piece. I’d love to feature his stuff in our store, but it’s too fancy for what people around here can afford.”

“What kind of clothes do you offer here?” I ask her, avoiding the question. I get the sense whatever I say will spread halfway across the town before dinner time.

She purses her lips but doesn't fish for any more information as she shows me the selection. I pick up a pack of underwear, socks, and some fleece-lined leggings. That should be good enough for an extra two days. I'll just make liberal use of Owen's washer and dryer, too.

“Do you have any boots?” Owen mentioned going hiking in the morning.

“What kind?”

“For hiking.”

“No, dear.” She shakes her head, her gray curls bouncing. “We only carry rain boots. You'll have to drive to Kirkwood for something like that.”

“Think I can get away with wearing these?” I point to my Nikes.

“Oh, those'll be fine. Anything else for you, then? You said you're visiting Owen a couple of days?”

I hide my grin, amused at the way she's practically salivating for details.

“I didn't say that. And that's all I need, thank you.”

She gives me a tight smile. “Of course.”

I pay for my things and take a leisurely walk down the sidewalk, checking out the storefronts. It seems like a lot of the shops are multiple businesses in one. The hardware store also has a pawn shop inside. The health clinic houses the pharmacy. And most surprising of all, there's a combination bakery and florist. I bet it smells good in there.

The other side of the road has a gas station and mechanic down at the end of the block, and next to that are a few empty outdoor stalls. Further down is a separate building that looks like the town's library. Maybe I should pay a visit there tomorrow morning to pick up a book to read.

Crossing the street, I pass the post office and a bar, then pause in front of Cascade Cafe, perusing their menu in the window. My stomach lets out a rumble, reminding me of those uneaten snacks still in my car.

I pick up some takeout, my preferred method of cooking, and ignore the curious stares as I wait for the food. You'd think people here have never seen a stranger.

How soon will it be all over town that I'm Owen's wife? After all, I told the librarian on the phone, and now his sister knows, too.

And why do I even care?

There's noise coming from the building next to Owen's house when I return, and I poke my head in, curious about what he's doing. A huge slab of wood rests on the oversized table in the center of the workshop, Owen's face set in concentration as he studies it. A lock of his dark hair falls over one eye, and he brushes it aside absent-mindedly.

"What are you doing?"

His gray eyes seem to darken as his gaze shifts up to meet mine, all that focus now on me. I press a hand over my stomach, something fluttering in there for a moment before it disappears. That was weird.

"Visualizing this table," he replies.

I break eye contact and wander over to the other side of the slab. "It's a table?"

"It will be." There's amusement in his voice, and I take a quick peek at him, the intensity on his face gone now.

"How do you make it a table?"

His index and middle finger slide along the rough edges of the wood. "I'll cut off the bark here, sand it all down, and seal it. After that, I make the legs, drill in brackets, and attach them. Voilà. Table."

"Wow. Seems easy."

He grins. "You want to make one yourself?"

I laugh at the image of me doing any kind of woodworking. “I’ll pass.”

“You won’t know if you’re good at it until you try it.”

My lips twist. “You sound like my mom trying to get me to eat vegetables as a kid. *How do you know you won’t like it if you won’t try it?*”

“Pretty sure my mom used that on me, too.”

I reach out and trace a finger over the ridges of the bark, then over to the center. “What about this big knot here? Do you have to take this out?”

He shakes his head. “The nice thing about working with wood like this is you want the imperfections to show. That’s what makes it unique. People like having custom, one of a kind things.”

“What if it’s got a crack? Something that makes it unstable?”

“If I have a piece like that, I’ll use an epoxy resin to fill it and then cover the whole top. I’ve made a few with colors, like a river’s running through it.”

“So what will you do with this once you finish it?”

“I’ve got partnerships with a few galleries in Portland. One in Kirkwood, too. Sometimes I’ll even go as far as Salem or Bend if I’ve made a lot.”

I reach out and trace a finger over the bumpy ridges of the bark. “Your stuff sells well?”

He nods. “Never had something take more than a month or two to sell.”

Impressive. “Do you sell your work directly? Either online or here from your shop?”

“Nah. Don’t want to mess with all that.”

“What percentage do these galleries take?”

“Between forty and sixty, depending on the place.”

“Why not cut out the middleman if your stuff is selling well? You could build up a following online and pocket all that extra money.”

He shakes his head before I’m even finished. “I’m happy to let them take their commission if it means I don’t have to deal with customers.”

“You don’t like people that much?”

“I like being... alone.”

I glance out the workshop doors. Is that why he’s isolated himself out here on all this land by himself?

“Sorry I’m crashing your weekend, then.”

“No, you’re different.”

I blink, taken aback by the force in his tone.

He clears his throat. “Sorry. I don’t know why I said it like that. I just don’t want you to think you’re not welcome here. Because you are.” He rubs at the back of his neck. “Shit, I’m rambling,” he mutters.

I press my lips together tightly, not wanting to smile. “How about you take a break and come eat with me? I picked up food at Cascade Cafe.”

He nods, leading the way into his house, and I take a second look at his wood furniture as I unpack the to-go containers. “Did you make anything in here?”

He grabs a fry and pops it in his mouth. “Yeah, pretty much everything.”

Everything? “All this furniture? The tables? The chairs? The couch?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. I mean, not the cushions. I bought those.”

I head over to the kitchen. “What about this?”

He gives a quick nod. “I did all the cabinets and counters.”

Seriously? “What about this?” I slide a hand over the walls.

“Yeah, I did the framing. Got a contractor to help me out with the foundation. Hired out electrical and plumbing, things like that. But I wanted to build it myself for the most part.”

I look around again with fresh eyes, taking in the details in the moulding, the way the furniture complements each other, the cohesiveness of the whole house. The amount of time and effort it must have taken him... “That’s incredible. I can’t even decide on a paint color for my living room wall and you’re over here building an entire home.”

He shrugs again, sticking his hands in his pockets. “It’s not a big deal.”

Okay, doesn’t like praise. Duly noted.

I open the rest of the containers and take a seat at the table. “Dig in. Whatever you don’t want, I’ll eat. I got extras for leftovers, too.”

“I see that,” he murmurs, surveying the smorgasbord I’ve laid out.

He slides a burger and fries over in front of him and I take the grilled chicken sandwich, grabbing a mozzarella stick from the box of appetizers, too. Damn, these are good.

“So we should probably get our story straight,” I say, licking grease off my finger. “For when Larry wants to know what happened that night.”

He pauses mid-bite. “You make it sound like we’re lying.”

“No, but if he asks about a timeline, I want to have a clear answer rather than trying to remember on the spot. Especially if he’s the kind of lawyer who charges by the hour.”

His brows narrow. “Larry won’t fleece us. He’s a good guy.”

“Okay, sorry. Remember—big city perspective over here. I have to recalibrate myself to your small town.”

His lips curl in a smile and he stands, heading to the fridge. “You want a beer?”

“Yeah, sure.”



He pops the top for me and hands me the bottle.

“MadCow Brewing?” I ask, reading the label.

“They’re near Portland. I picked some up on my last visit.”

I take a sip, pleasantly surprised. They’re serious about their craft beer out here. “Okay, so our story. We met at the hotel bar and hit it off. Started taking shots, got tipsy, then drunk. I had the fantastic idea that we should get married. You wholeheartedly agreed. The wedding coordinator at the hotel set us up with their package and whisked us off in a limo to the courthouse for a license, then a chapel. We went back to your hotel room after and you immediately fell asleep. I couldn’t wake you for anything. And the rest is history.”

He stares at me, burger halfway raised to his mouth. “Have you practiced saying all that?”

“No, but I’ve been thinking about it.”

“But it seemed so rehearsed.”

I shrug. “I make presentations a lot for work. I guess I’ve been unconsciously metabolizing that into a speech.”

He sets his food down. “Why did you suggest getting married in the first place?”

“Is that relevant?”

“Larry might ask. Not to mention a judge if we have to go to a hearing.”

I dip another mozzarella stick in the marinara dipping cup it came with, taking my time. “I don’t know. I was there for my friend’s bachelorette party and I guess I was... jealous. She had this amazingly perfect fiance and I’d never had anything serious with a guy.” I take a bite of the fried cheese, unable to enjoy how good it normally tastes. “And then I stumbled upon you in that bar and you were so sweet. Like, actually paying attention to me and having a real conversation, not like those dumb college boys calculating how long it’ll take to get in my pants.”

He raises his brows but stays silent, letting me continue.

“It was stupid, I know. But I wanted to pretend for a night that I was getting married, too.”

“Because Vegas marriages are for pretend.”

I roll my eyes at his teasing tone, glad he didn't say anything about my stupid twenty-one-year-old self. “Lesson learned.”

He grabs a wing from one of the other containers and dips it in ranch. “Have you had any serious relationships since?”

I shake my head. “Call my standards too high, but I've never had anything stick with a guy.”

“What are your standards?”

I sigh. “Considerate, intelligent, attractive. Has a steady job. Cleans up after himself. Makes me feel special.”

“That seems like a pretty basic list.”

“You would think, right?” I smile to myself, taking a bite of my sandwich. “What about you? Anyone serious? Or would that intrude on your alone time too much?”

His lips quirk to one side. “Touché. And no serious relationships. It's never been much of a priority.”

“So why'd you marry me?”

I regret the question almost as soon as I ask it, especially as he shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“Sorry, you don't have to answer that. You were drunk. Duh.”

He nods tightly, an awkwardness settling over us. Is he embarrassed to have drank that much? To have done something so reckless? To have married a stranger?

Or to have married me, in particular?

I clear my throat and stand. “I'm finished. You want any more of this stuff?”

He shakes his head, still not saying anything.

“I'll, um, let you get back to... whatever it is you do at night. Wood carving or something.”

I pack up the leftovers and stick them in the fridge, then retreat to the porch, taking a seat in one of the rockers. I brush a hand over the arm, recognizing the craftsmanship for what it is now. How can he be so modest about having built this house from the ground up and everything inside? And then his joke earlier about the place being half mine... I'd never be so cavalier with something that meant so much to me.

Then again, didn't I get married on a lark, thinking it was all a fun game?

This whole situation is my fault. If I was Owen, I'd be furious if someone had pulled this on me. And instead, he's being reasonable about getting a lawyer, opening up his home to me, inviting me on hikes and whatnot.

What am I bringing to the table showing up unannounced with bad news?

I rest my head in my hands, inhaling deeply, but the cool evening air does little to soothe me. I guess all I can do for now is focus on being a good guest and follow his lead on the annulment process. We'll get the ball rolling on Tuesday and talk next steps, I'll return to Chicago, and pretty soon, this whole thing will be behind us.

I hope.

# CHAPTER 5



OWEN

“Careful about that root there.”

Harper steps over the root I pointed out, her lips pursed. “You don’t have to warn me every time.”

“Sorry. I just want to make sure you don’t—”

I reach out to catch her as she stumbles forward, saving her from a face plant.

“To be fair, you didn’t say anything about rocks.” She straightens her shirt and tightens her ponytail. “But thank you.”

I nod, keeping a close eye on her. “We’ll meet up with the trail in a minute. It’ll be better then.”

Up ahead, Duke bounds through the scrub, on high alert. A moment later, a rabbit makes a break for it, running full-tilt through the forest.

“Duke,” I warn, and he whines, looking after the rabbit one last time before returning to my side.

“I can’t believe how well-behaved he is,” Harper comments. “No dog I’ve met listens that well.”

“You have to train them right from the start.” I give Duke a pat on his rump. “And it doesn’t hurt that he’s the best dog ever.”

“That, too.”

She bends down to give him ear scratches. “You’re the best dog ever, aren’t you?” she murmurs, then gives him a kiss on the top of his head.

“You’re spoiling him.”

She shrugs as she straightens and continues ahead, a mischievous smile on her lips. “So?”

“As long as you don’t give him human food. I don’t want him begging.”

She makes an X shape over her heart. “Promise I won’t.”

There’s a comfortable silence between us as we walk, something about being with her so natural. I was afraid saying goodnight last night would be awkward, but it wasn’t. Somehow, with her, the usual awkwardness with strangers melts away.

There’s another flurry of activity to the east of us as two chipmunks chase each other through the underbrush, and Harper startles. “Are there normally a lot of animals out here?”

“It’s a forest.”

“I guess I thought they’d hide if they heard humans coming.”

I shrug. “Sometimes. We’ll see less once we get on the trail.”

“Have you ever seen anything big? Like a moose or something?”

She sounds almost excited. She’s such a city girl.

“You only see moose further north in the upper part of Washington and Canada. Duke and I ran into a mountain lion last year, though.”

Her eyes widen. “What’d you do?”

“Duke managed to scare it off. I would’ve been in trouble if he hadn’t been with me.”

She bends down again to give Duke a hug, telling him what a good boy he is. I swear to God he smiles up at me, tongue hanging out of his mouth happily. How come he gets all the affection?

“What about bears?” Harper asks.

“Come on.” I wave her forward. “We’ll never get anywhere if we keep stopping. And I’ve never seen any bears around here. You have to go over to Mt. Hood National Forest for that. Same with wolves before you ask.”

She gives me a sheepish grin and catches up to me. “Cut me some slack. It’s my first time in a forest.”

“Seriously?” The idea is unfathomable.

She nods. “Growing up, my mom hated things like camping with a passion. Anything outdoorsy, actually. So we never did them.”

“What about after you moved out?”

Shrugging, she says, “It was never an issue for me. I didn’t know what I was missing.”

“So, what do you think about it now?” I can’t put my finger on it, but for some reason her answer seems... important.

She spins around, holding her arms out wide. “It’s amazing. We’re on our way to a freaking waterfall. How cool is that? Oh, the path.” She rushes ahead, coming to a stop at the edge of the trail. “What’s that?” She points to a huge pile of horse shit, which she narrowly avoided stepping in.

“What do you think?”

I give it a wide berth, waiting for Duke as he sniffs at it.

Her brows knit together in worry. “Was it a mountain lion?”

I laugh, despite myself. “A horse. There’s a ranch north of here that does trail rides when the weather’s nice.”

“And they don’t clean up after them?”

“It’s not like picking up after your dog on the sidewalk. We’re in the middle of nature.”

She raises her hands in defeat. “Excuse the city girl.”

We continue on, the distinctive fast-paced knock of a woodpecker echoing around us. I point it out to Harper, who stops and watches with interest. Duke sits on his haunches next to her, looking up at her with adoration. Guess it only took a few pets to win him over.

And why wouldn’t he be enamored with her? Though a little more subdued than she was five years ago, she’s still that same fun, energetic girl, something about her drawing me close, wanting to be in her orbit.

Tapping her shoulder, I direct her attention to a tree across the way where a northern flying squirrel balances on a limb. “You don’t normally see them out in the morning,” I whisper. “They’re nocturnal.”

“What is it—Oh!”

She gasps and clutches at my forearm as it leaps off the branch and glides to the next tree, the extra skin under its arms creating a parachute-like effect to guide it through the air. This close, that floral scent of hers teases me, complementing the earthy fragrance of the forest, and I can’t help but wish she didn’t let me go so quickly, pink touching her cheeks.

“Sorry. I got excited.”

I shrug, brushing the feeling off as we continue down the trail. “No problem. You have to get your forest fix before you go back to Chicago.”

“Yeah. Don’t think I’ll be able to convince my friends to take a trip out with me somewhere nearby.”

“They’re not outdoorsy either?”

She snorts. “Even less than me. And forget about hiking. The only reason I’m keeping up with you is because I take spin classes at my gym three times a week.”

I’ve never understood why people pay to exercise inside a building when they could literally do it outside for free, but I keep my mouth shut. “You’re close with your friends?”

She nods, sidestepping another pile of horse shit in the middle of the trail. “They used to call me, Elena, and Kelly The Three Musketeers at work back when Kelly worked with us.”

“You miss them?”

She gives me a look. “It’s been one day. I’m fine.”

“Do they know about...”

“Us?” she finishes. “They were the ones who told me Vegas weddings are real. I thought they were messing with me at first.” She sighs. “Turns out I’m just an idiot.”



Shit. I shouldn't have teased her about that yesterday. "You're not an—"

She pats my arm comfortingly. "It's okay. I'm telling myself it could happen to anybody. But yeah, the three of us get together every Saturday for brunch. And I go out with Elena most days on our lunch break."

"Did you tell your work why you're here?"

She hedges for a moment. "I said it was a family emergency. Technically not a lie, I guess. A spouse is family." Her gaze cuts to me and away. "Elena already said our boss grilled her for details first thing this morning."

I check my watch. "It's only eight-thirty."

"Two hour time difference," she says. "Besides, we start at eight a.m. sharp. Sandra gets pissy if anyone's late."

"That's your boss?"

She nods. "And I want a promotion, so I can't piss her off. But in my favor, in the last two months we've had people out on extended leave for all sorts of reasons. Wedding, bereavement, sick kids, mental health crisis, you name it. I can afford a few days."

"So what is it you do, exactly?" I don't have the first clue about anything to do with marketing.

She launches into an animated explanation about her job as a Marketing Specialist, which is apparently different from the Associate she was previously and the Coordinator she wants to promote to. There are also Strategists, Analysts, and Supervisors, but they all sound like synonyms to me.

I try to keep track of everything she's saying—stuff about campaigns and brand awareness and pricing strategies—but most of it flies over my head.

"You know," she continues, glancing over at me, "I'd be happy to audit your business and come up with a marketing strategy for you."

I nearly laugh. "And how much would that cost me?" She mentioned running national campaigns at her fancy Chicago

firm.

She grins mischievously. “Oh, you couldn’t afford our prices as an actual client. No offense.”

“None taken.” I’m small potatoes compared to the businesses she works with.

“I meant pro bono. As a thank you for letting me stay here.”

I run a hand over my beard. “I mean, I guess you can. But like I said, I let the galleries handle that stuff.”

“I promise it’d be worth your time. You could easily scale up to double what you’re making now if you have the right systems in place.”

Scaling? Systems? Sounds complicated already. “Uh... sure. I’ll take a look at whatever you come up with.” Actually doing it’s another story, though.

She gives me a sidelong glance. “You’re not just humoring me?”

I rub at the back of my neck, unsure how to answer. The twisting sensation in my stomach dissipates when she finally laughs.

“I’m teasing,” she says. “And don’t worry. Anything I suggest will involve zero in-person interactions.”

That actually does make me feel better.

“Whoa,” she exclaims, stopping in the middle of the path. “Now what will we do?” She points ahead to the river that bisects the trail.

“We’ll cross it. The falls aren’t too far beyond here.”

“How?”

“On that.” I motion toward the log that spans across both banks.

The corners of her mouth tilt down. “Excuse me? That rickety thing is about to float away at any moment. And how’s Duke going to cross? He can’t balance on that.”

“He’s a dog. He’ll swim.”

As if on cue, Duke splashes in and doggy paddles to the other side. He scrambles up the opposite bank and shakes the water off his fur, then barks at us, as if to tell us to hurry up.

“I’ve crossed this a hundred times,” I tell her. “It’s fine.”

She approaches the thick log, pausing at the edge. “You sure?”

“Yes. See?” I walk across, barely needing to balance. I had no idea this would be a big deal to her.

She still waffles, indecision on her face as she studies it.

“Some people straddle it and scoot across,” I suggest.

She gives me a look like I’m deranged. “And get splinters in my butt? No, thanks.”

“We can turn around.”

“No, I—” She wipes her palms on her leggings. “I can do it.”

She makes no move to cross, though, staring at the water below.

“Here.” I return to her and hold my hands out, palms up. “Let’s take it one step at a time.”

A tingle runs up my forearms as she firmly grasps my hands. Taking a step back, I guide her across, matching her pace. Honestly, we’re probably more at risk going this slow than if we walked at a normal stride.

Her balance goes wonky about a third of the way over, and she grips my hands like a lifeline, stopping completely.

“You okay?”

She nods and looks down.

“Don’t look down. Eyes up.”

Her gaze snaps up to meet mine. “I may or may not have a thing about heights,” she whispers.

Yeah, that was obvious.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” I swallow hard, hating how intensely that came out. “I mean, you don’t have to worry about falling.”

Her shoulders drop and she nods again, resuming her snail’s pace.

Halfway across she says, “We’re like Johnny and Baby.”

“Who?”

“You know, the scene from *Dirty Dancing*? Where they practice dancing on the log?”

“Never saw it.”

“What? It’s a classic.”

“I think our definitions of classic are different.” I take a larger step backward, hoping she doesn’t notice. If I can keep her distracted, we’ll get there before nightfall. “If you want a classic 80s movie, then nothing beats *The Terminator*. Although *Die Hard* is a close second.”

She groans. “You’re one of those guys.”

“Which ones?”

“The stupid action movie kind.” Her statement’s balanced by a grin. “Have you seen any rom-coms?”

I shrug. “Not high on my list of priorities.”

“Your sister didn’t make you watch any growing up?”

“I remember one. I was probably about nine. After that, I left the house whenever her or my mom turned one on.”

“What was it?”

I rack my brain, trying to recall. “Something about losing a guy in a week.”

“*How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“You should rewatch it. You might like it as an adult.”

“We could watch it tonight,” I find myself saying without really thinking about it.

She smiles, her warm, brown eyes crinkled at the corners. “Okay—Oh!” She glances around us. “We’ve crossed.”

I was wondering how long it would take her to notice. “And you made it in one piece.”

She looks down at our still joined hands. Now that she no longer has a death grip on them, I can appreciate how soft they are against my work-roughened palms.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize.” She gently releases me. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Seriously, if she ever wanted to hold my hand again—or anything else—I’d be game.

She leans down to pet Duke when he comes over to us, tail wagging. “I can tell you’re a woodworker,” she says to me, pointing to my hands.

I shrug. “Comes with the territory.”

“I didn’t mean it as a bad thing. Just...” She pauses, staring at my hands again. “An observation.”

Her cheeks pinken and she looks up at me, then away. “How much further to the falls?” she asks, striding ahead. Duke’s close at her heels, happy to be on the move.

What just happened? Did I miss something?

I shake off the feeling and follow her, already getting the sense it won’t be the first time she’ll confuse me.

# CHAPTER 6



HARPER

Get a grip, Harper. He was leading you across a river after you freaked out, not holding your hands.

They'd been so deliciously rough, though. And when that image popped into my head of him moving those hands over my bare backside, calluses sliding against my skin... I shiver again.

No, stop thinking about that.

"We could take one of two ways," he says, bringing me back to the present. "The easier, roundabout way is another twenty minutes. Or there's a shortcut that'll get us there in about seven, but it's steeper."

"The faster way is fine." Maybe the waterfalls will cool me off.

"Up this ridge to the right, then."

Wait, that thing? Steep is an understatement. We'll practically be rock climbing.

Owen whistles for Duke and points toward the ridge, and the dog happily bounds up the hill. How in the... Well, if a dog can do it, I guess I can, too.

Halfway up, my calves are burning, but I breathe through the pain, not wanting to admit I'm in over my head.

"You okay?" he asks, not even winded. His mountain man calves are probably rock hard with muscle.

"Yes. Great. I love climbing mountains."

"Uh huh. If you need help, let me know."

Right. What's he going to do? Give me a piggyback ride the rest of the way up?

A rock slips out from under my foot, and my arms flail for a moment to steady myself. He's right there, though, his palm pressing against my lower back to stabilize me.

“I got you,” he murmurs, and another wave of shivers washes over me before I shake them off.

“Thanks.” I forge ahead, needing his hand off me before I do something stupid like ask him to move it even lower.

“See that boulder?” He points to where Duke’s waiting. “We’ll use that to get over the edge to the falls.”

Does he mean we’ll climb it? That’s impossible.

When we reach the large rock, he picks Duke up and sets him on top. From there, Duke’s able to make it the rest of the way on his own up the even steeper terrain.

“Am I supposed to... jump?” I ask, already knowing I’ll make a fool of myself. There’s no way I can scabble up this.

“Here.” He bends low and laces his fingers together. “Step into my hands and I’ll lift you.”

“Okay...” I do as he says, surprised when he raises me with no problem. I steady one foot on the rock, then the other, balancing myself. All right, I got this.

Wait. I don’t got this. “Owen,” I yell as I tip backward.

He braces a palm as high as he can reach on my back from his lower vantage point and pushes, propelling me forward. I sink to my knees, panting heavily. Holy shit.

Owen backs up and gets a running start, easily making it up the boulder in this move that reminds me of something those parkour guys do. He squats next to me, laying a hand on my shoulder. “You weren’t going to fall.”

I will my heart to stop racing, for my breathing to return to normal. This is ridiculous. “It seemed like it for a moment.”

“I would have caught you.”

I nod and my stomach settles at the assurance in his voice. “Maybe you could stick close by me? Apparently, I’m more accident-prone than I thought.”

“Of course.”



He stands and holds his hand out for me to take, just as warm and rough as it was earlier, and keeps hold of it as we walk up the last bit. Duke nuzzles my other palm, sticking by my side. It sounds silly, but in between the two of them, it feels like nothing bad can happen.

I look ahead, my jaw dropping as I finally register the sound of flowing water and the sight in front of me. “Oh my God, it’s beautiful.”

Water spills down moss-covered rocks in rivulets, collecting in a small stream that must feed back into the river we crossed earlier.

“Jamie and Jenny like taking the hike out here with me, too,” he says. “Jamie especially loves watching the water.”

“Wait. The six-year-olds cross that log? And climb up that boulder?”

“Yeah...”

Well, shit. Maybe my spin class isn’t doing as much for me as I assumed.

I push that thought out of my head. “Can we get closer?”

“Down that way.” He moves so he’s in front of me. “I’ll go first. Be careful with your footing.”

I use his hand for leverage as I carefully follow him, praying nothing slips out from under my feet. But there’s something about having him right there for support that makes it easy, knowing he’d catch me if I fall.

When we reach the bottom, he murmurs, “You did good.” My belly dips low as he squeezes my hand before letting go.

Why in the world am I reacting like this? You’d think I’d never been around a guy before. That no one’s ever touched me. But I’ve never met anyone else so... rugged before. So capable.

I bite my lip, giving him a once-over when he turns away, taking in the size of him. His flannel overshirt does nothing to minimize the thickness of his upper arms. And coupled with those muscular thighs...

Oh my God, snap out of it. This is not the right time. Or person. I'm getting an annulment from him. Literally seeking to legally dissolve any kind of connection between us. I shouldn't be looking at him at all.

I move toward the falls, letting thoughts of Owen drift away like the water dripping down, focusing instead on the beauty of this place. The green of the moss is vibrant against the oranges and reds of the changing leaves, the water rushing down in some parts and a mere trickle in others. Birds chirp in the surrounding trees and with the way the light shines down, there's something almost... mystical about it.

"What is it?" Owen asks, stopping next to me.

"Hmm?" I glance over, the spell broken.

"You had this look on your face, like you were mesmerized."

My lips quirk to the side. "I think I was. There's something calming about being here."

He nods as if he understands what I mean. "It's soothing. Peaceful."

"I can't imagine living within walking distance of something like this. That you have this scenery all the time. Do you ever get bored of it? Or not see it in the same way as someone who's seeing it for the first time?"

He shakes his head before I'm finished talking. "I always appreciate it. Living here, so close to nature... It's important to me. A part of me. I couldn't stand being in a place where they bulldoze everything to put up another retail shop you don't need."

Ah, what he doesn't know about me is I love to play Devil's Advocate. "Yes, but on the other hand, haven't you ever been so lazy you couldn't possibly leave your house, and UberEats delivers dinner right to you? Or ordered something on Amazon and it's on your doorstep a few hours later? Ya'll have no convenience out here."

He strokes his beard, mouth tilted up at the corners. "I'm not that desperate."

I grin at him. “Oh, Mister High and Mighty. Next time you’re craving McDonald’s at midnight, don’t come crying to me.”

“Have you seriously done that?”

“No,” I admit. “But it’s nice to have the option.”

He lets out a soft chuckle and touches my elbow briefly. “I’ll be over there with Duke.” He motions to a clearing away from the water. “He found a stick he’s begging me to throw.”

I wait till he’s gone to glance down at my elbow, still feeling the imprint of his touch there. I have a jacket on, so it’s not like he even touched my skin, but it tingles where he made contact. Something about the familiarity of it, like it was natural to so casually touch me...

Then again, didn’t I hold his hand the whole way down that ridge so I wouldn’t fall and bust myself up? I’m losing my mind up here at this high altitude. He’s being friendly while we find ourselves in this ridiculous situation. There’s nothing to read into.

Despite the tingle that lingers.

\* \* \*

THOUGH IT’S ONLY my third trip into town, there’s something already routine about it as I drive through the main street and park in the miniscule lot next to the library. After finishing the book I brought with me for the plane ride, I’m in desperate need of new reading material.

It didn’t take much convincing to get Owen to let me borrow his library card. What am I going to do? Rack up a mountain of overdue fees in one day?

Pushing through the double doors, I pause for a moment, surveying the single, open room. I don’t know why I was expecting something bigger. It’s not like it’s the Tardis where it’s magically larger on the inside. Compared to the ten-story behemoth of a library I visit back home in Chicago, though... it’s a bit lacking.

There's an empty desk squarely in the center, with rows of shelving behind it. Computers are over to the left, and a small children's area to the right.

"Harper!"

I'm bum rushed by something with brown pigtails suddenly hugging me around the waist, and it takes me a moment to realize it's Jenny. Beyond her is her brother, shaking his head.

"What in the world are you doing?" a woman in her mid-fifties mutters, prying Jenny off of me. "I'm so sorry," she says to me.

"Oh no, it's fine."

"Grandma, we know her," Jenny says in an exasperated tone, as if it's obvious.

The woman looks down at her. "You do?"

"Yeah, this is Harper. Uncle Owen's friend."

"I didn't realize," she says slowly, her brows knitting. "How exactly do you know my son?" she asks me.

Oh, this is Owen's mom? Duh, Jenny called her Grandma.

"Um, from around..." I trail off, totally unprepared for this. I only came to pick up a romance book.

"Are you visiting Crescent Pass to see him?"

I can't put my finger on it, but there's something in her voice that sounds... excited. Am I imagining that?

"I'm here on business," I tell her, hoping the vague answer satisfies her. How many times will I use that excuse?

A workroom door off to the left opens and a blonde woman pushes a book cart through.

"What was your name again?" Owen's mom asks me.

"Harper."

The blonde looks up. "Harper? You're real?"

I glance at her nametag. *Abby*. She's the one I talked to on the phone. "Yeah, it's me." What else can I say?

Owen's mom glances between us curiously.

Abby bites at her bottom lip and makes a sound of nervousness. "I have to admit, I thought you were a prank caller."

A spreading sense of doom steals over me. Her mouth opens again and I know exactly what she's going to say, but there's no time to stop it.

"So, you're really married to Owen?"

Blood rushes to my head, leaving me dizzy for a moment, but I still register Jenny's gasp and Jamie's noise of disgust.

My gaze meets Owen's mom's, her mouth hanging open. Of all people to say that in front of, did it have to be his mom?

"Sort of," I stammer. How do I explain this? "It's complicated."

"You're married to my son?" Owen's mom asks, her face a picture of shock.

"Yes," I mumble weakly, not sure what else to say.

She clasps her hands to her chest. "Oh, honey. Welcome to the family."

She pulls me into a hug, my jaw dropping. Okay, that wasn't the reaction I expected. Shouldn't she be mad Owen kept this from her? Actually, shouldn't she verify this with him first, rather than take the word of a random stranger?

"Tell me everything," she says, her voice dripping with excitement. "Did you elope? When, though? He hasn't been out of town for ages."

I extract myself from her grip and back away slowly. "Let me call Owen. I'm sure he can explain this better."

I turn and flee the library, frantically searching through my purse for my phone. I almost drop it in the gravel outside, but manage to pull up his freshly entered contact info and press the green phone icon.

“Pick up, pick up, pick up,” I mutter, pacing the lot.

“Hey,” he answers. “You find the library okay?”

“Yeah, and guess who’s here?” I don’t give him a chance to answer. “Your mom. And the librarian spilled the beans that we’re married and your mom is so excited. I swear she was about to start asking about grandbabies. I need you here now.”

There’s a rustle over the line, as if he’s moving. “Give me ten minutes.”

“Hurry up,” I grit out, hoping they can’t hear this ludicrous conversation from inside.

He lets out a soft curse. “She’s calling me now. I have to go. I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

I hang up and internally debate what I should do as I pace the parking lot. Get in the car and start driving in any direction? No, I can’t do that. How will that look to Owen’s family? And Jenny seemed genuinely excited to see me. I shouldn’t ghost her because I’m too much of a chickenshit to face her grandma.

I slip back inside the library and scope out the situation. Owen’s mom is on the opposite side of the room in between two rows of shelves, talking intently into her phone. Owen must be getting an earful. Abby is laying coloring sheets out in front of the kids at a child-sized table in the children’s area, a box of crayons between them.

Abby glances up at my return and joins me a moment later.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t even think about Mrs. Taylor being there.”

I smile thinly at her. “Guess you could call that a *breach of confidentiality*. Isn’t that what you told me when you wouldn’t give up Owen’s number?”

Her mouth opens and shuts like a fish, her face crestfallen.

Shit. There I go saying the wrong thing again. “Sorry, that was uncalled for. It was an honest mistake.”

“No, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I sigh. “I guess it was bound to come out at some point. Don’t they say there are no secrets in a small town?”

She bites at her bottom lip. “Only if you don’t tell anyone.”

I take a second look at her. “Are you implying you have a secret?”

She points to herself. “Me?” she asks in a squeaky voice. “No. Of course not.”

That means she definitely does.

Not my place to get involved, though, I remind myself.

“So, I guess you got in contact with Owen,” she says. “If you’re here and all.”

“Yep. I had to show up at his house from the address you gave me.”

“Really?” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe he didn’t tell anyone. Even his mom or Kristen.”

My lips twist to the side, unbidden. “Well... he kind of didn’t know. We were both pretty drunk, and Vegas does some crazy things to people.”

Her eyes widen. “That doesn’t sound like Owen at all.”

“Not much of a wild guy?”

She makes this half-laugh, half-snorting noise. “No.”

Interesting. “Have you known him a long time?”

“Since we were kids. I’m best friends with his sister. But he’s always been one to keep to himself, especially after he bought that land outside of town.”

I nod, another thought nagging at me. “Has he, um, ever dated anyone that you know of?”

Not that it matters, per se. I’m just... curious.

She shakes her head, something in my gut easing. No, bad stomach. This knowledge means nothing to me.

“Nothing serious. I think his mom tried to set him up a few times, but it didn’t work out. If he’s dated someone outside of town, I don’t know about it. Although, Kristen mentioned someone... Oh.” She pauses, considering me. “I wonder if...”

“What?”

The front door swings open, Owen there in the doorway, hair disheveled. His phone’s at his ear, gaze searching until it lands on me. There’s an intensity surrounding him I wasn’t expecting as he strides to my side and hangs up.

“You okay?” he murmurs, gaze roaming over me, as if he’s looking for something physically wrong.

“Yes,” I tell him, still confused about whatever it was Abby was saying. “You got here quick.”

“You said you needed me.”

We stare at each other for a beat, until his mom interrupts the moment.

“How could you possibly think of divorce?”



# CHAPTER 7



OWEN

I turn to Mom, internally sighing. “Mom—”

“You haven’t even given this a chance. At least try to work things out.”

I guess she’s already forgotten my request for her not to embarrass me. “There’s nothing to work out,” I mutter, keeping my voice low so the kids don’t overhear. Thank God we’re the only people in here, and Abby’s familiar enough with Mom’s style of drama. “Harper came here for an annulment and I’m trying to cooperate with her as much as possible.”

She throws her hands up in the air. “By divorcing?”

“Mrs. Taylor,” Harper interrupts, glancing between us. “We’re just fixing a mistake that never should have happened to begin with.”

Mom’s mouth tightens, and I tug her away from Harper and Abby before she says something she can’t take back.

“Why are you doing this?” I whisper once we’re out of earshot.

“Doing what?”

Like she doesn’t know. “Making this harder than it needs to be. She doesn’t want to stay married. There’s no point to this.”

She trains her eagle-eyed stare at me. “But do you want to?”

“Want to what?”

“Stay married to her.”

I keep my gaze on the ground, unwilling to look her in the eye. Who knows what she’d claim to see in there? “What makes you think that?” I ask, not really answering the question.

A scoffing noise escapes her. “You think I don’t know my own son? You’d never get married unless you were sure she was the one.”

My nostrils flare in annoyance. “I was drunk.”

She makes a shooping motion, as if my reason doesn’t matter. “I bet your heart knew. You don’t take chances like that.”

“Mom.”

She flinches at my hard tone, but how else am I supposed to get through to her when she gets in this state of not taking no for an answer?

“Harper wants an annulment,” I tell her, enunciating each word. “Plain and simple. I don’t want her feeling guilty about it, so please don’t make a scene.”

“You care about her,” she murmurs.

“Mom...”

She raises her hands in defeat. “Fine, fine. I don’t get why all you kids are determined to be alone, but I guess it doesn’t matter what I think.”

I keep my eye roll contained. “Thanks.”

My sarcasm seems to fly right over her head as she reaches out and squeezes my arm. “I just want you to be happy. You’re all by yourself out there in your cabin.”

I shake my head, not wanting to get into it for the umpteenth time with her, and join Harper again. “You ready to go?”

“I still haven’t got a book.”

Right. That was the whole reason she came here. “Come on.”

I ignore Mom’s not-so-subtle staring and lead Harper over to the fiction section. She pulls out a paperback from the shelf and scans the cover, then puts it back.

“Sorry for making you drive out here. I freaked out when she hugged me.”

I rub at my temples. Mom did what? “I’m sorry you had to deal with that.”

She removes another book off the shelf to inspect it, but soon returns it to its spot. “She seems like the type to get involved in your business all the time.”

I nod. “Normally, I have nothing going on, though.”

She gives me a self-deprecating smile. “And then I showed up.”

“Yeah...” I rub at the back of my neck. “Is your mom like that, too?”

It takes her a moment to answer. “I’m lucky if she remembers to call me twice a year.”

“Oh.” How am I supposed to respond to that? The idea is... unimaginable.

“Shit, that sounded bad, didn’t it?” She chuckles softly. “It’s fine, really. I’m just not used to your family dynamic.”

“You’re not close with your family?” She must not be if she talks to her mom that little.

She shrugs, then crosses her arms over her chest. “My two super introverted parents never could figure out what to do with their extroverted child. But it’s fine. I visit them for Christmas every year, and they call for my birthday and Thanksgiving.”

That’s the second time she said it’s fine. Even I know that means it’s not.

“Enough about my family.” She waves a hand around, as if she’s mentally dismissing them. “I need to find a book.”

She moves further down the aisle, searching through the rows, but I stay where I am, watching her. Now that I think about it, she didn’t mention her family at all that night in Vegas. No wonder she freaked out if Mom hugged her right off the bat.

So if she's not close with her parents, who does she have in her life? She mentioned a couple of friends, but is that it? What about siblings? Even a pet?

"Think I found a winner," she says, holding up a paperback.

I keep my thoughts to myself as I join her at the reference desk. She presents my library card to Abby, who checks her book out and apologizes once again for everything that happened.

"It was an honest mistake," Harper tells her, smiling. "Seriously, no hard feelings."

Abby smiles back tentatively, then retreats to the other side of the library as Mom approaches.

I move closer to Harper, ready to intervene if Mom starts in again about divorce.

"I didn't mean to make a fuss earlier," Mom says. "I only want my boy to be happy."

Harper stares at her for a moment. "I understand," she replies softly. "You raised a great guy."

Mom's eyes light up with hope, but she thankfully keeps any opinions of hers about reconciling or God knows what else to herself. "If I don't see you again before you leave, have a safe trip home."

Harper hugs her book to her chest. "Thank you."

"And if you decide to come back and visit—for any reason—you're always welcome here in Crescent Pass."

I usher Harper out of the library, giving Mom a look as I pass by her. Could she get any more obvious hinting that she wants Harper to visit me?

"Should I pick something up at the cafe for dinner while we're in town?" Harper asks when we reach her rental.

"No, I'll make something."

Her brows raise. "You cook?"

“Yeah. Does that surprise you?”

She shrugs, a smile playing around her lips. “A little. I’ve never met a woodworking chef before.”

“I wouldn’t call myself a chef, but I know enough to get by.”

“So, what’s for dinner?”

“I was thinking pan-fried chicken and potatoes.”

She gives me a look I can’t interpret. “And that’s a casual meal for you to make?”

“Sure.”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

I squint at her. “Why would I lie? It’s not even a complicated dish.”

“I don’t know. It sounds fancy.”

Frying up chicken and potatoes in a skillet is fancy? “You don’t cook?”

She glances away. “I never really learned.”

Does this have to do with the mother who barely calls her?

“How about I teach you how to make it, then? You can impress your friends when you get back to Chicago.”

She bites at her bottom lip, unsuccessfully hiding a smile. “Okay. I’ll see you at home.”

There’s a pull in my lower stomach at her mention of my place as home, as if we’re a couple that lives together. I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it, but there’s something about it that affects me all the same.

She gets in her car and reverses out of the lot, but I take a moment to gather myself before leaving, Mom’s words from earlier swirling around in my head.

That I care about Harper.

That my heart knew she was the one when I married her.

That I want to stay married to her.

Didn't I think those same things when Harper showed up on my doorstep? Except, there's one more crucial detail.

Harper doesn't want to stay married to me.

\* \* \*

“AH, SHIT.”

“What is it?” Another cut? A burn? Who knew one person could attract so much bad luck?

“The oil splattered on my arm. Here.” She hands me the tongs and moves to the kitchen sink to wash off her inner forearm. “I thought you said cooking was relaxing.”

“I mean, normally it is. For me.”

She makes a noise I can't describe as anything other than disgruntled.

“I can finish up,” I tell her, moving the potatoes around in the pan so they don't burn.

She shuts the water off and pats her arm dry with the towel hanging off the stove handle. “No, I want to help. Really. But I swear, every time I try something in the kitchen, it turns out like this.” She holds up the finger we already bandaged after she nicked it cutting the potatoes. “What are the chances?”

“The odds seem against you,” I admit. “My house isn't going up in flames, is it?”

Her mouth quirks to one side as she takes the tongs back from me. “Guess we'll find out, won't we?”

Her comment would be funny... if it didn't hold a grain of truth in it.

She flips a few of the potato wedges over, revealing their golden brown undersides. “Okay, so these are almost done. Does the chicken have to marinate much longer?”

“No, we'll cook it after these finish.”

“What do we have to do?”

“Once the pan is empty, we’ll turn down the heat a little and melt some butter, then layer the chicken in.”

“What about the garlic?”

“We’ll add it about thirty seconds before the chicken’s done. If you add it too early, it’ll burn.”

She pokes at the potatoes with the tongs, moving them around the skillet. “How do you know all this? Did your mom teach you?”

I nod. “She made sure we were all self-sufficient when we were teenagers.”

“You and your sister?”

“And my brother.”

“Oh, there’s a third one of you? Surprised I haven’t run into him by now.”

“Very funny.” I point to a potato she needs to turn over before it burns. “Grayson doesn’t live here.”

“Wow, he escaped? What did your mom say about that?”

“She begged him not to leave, obviously. But there’s no changing his mind once it’s made up.”

“You know, it’s nice that she cares about you all so much.”

Does this have anything to do with her own parents’ lack of caring? “Family means everything to her.”

“Is that why she was so adamant about you not divorcing?”

A sigh escapes me. “Yeah, I guess.”

“What about your dad? I haven’t heard about him yet.”

I take the tongs from her and place the potatoes on a paper towel-lined plate. “He passed away a few years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

I nod, turning down the heat on the burner. “Let’s melt two tablespoons of butter to cook the chicken in.”



She hesitates for a moment, then does as I say, the two of us silent as the pat of butter slowly spreads over the pan.

“I didn’t mean to bring up old hurts,” she finally whispers.

“You’re fine. You can add in the chicken now.”

She turns to me instead. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?”

“Your dad. I’m sure it had a big impact on you.”

“Do you want to talk about your parents?” I fire back without thinking.

We stare at each other for a moment until I break the connection and place the chicken in the skillet. “Sorry.”

“No, I shouldn’t have pressed.” She twists her hands together in front of her. “I have a bad habit of doing that.”

I hand the tongs to her. “You’ll want to flip those in a minute.”

She nods, turning back to the stove.

I keep my gaze on the butter gently bubbling in the pan as I sort through how to respond to her. It’s not that I can’t talk about Dad, but I never know when it’ll hurt and when it won’t.

“I miss my dad,” I finally tell her as she flips the cutlets over. “But it gets better as time goes by.”

She pauses, tongs in mid-air. “I wish my mom was more like yours.”

I blink at her stupidly. “What?”

She glances over her shoulder, her cheeks pink. “Sorry, I’m not sure where that came from. I was just thinking I’d rather have someone who cares too much than too little.”

I run a hand over my beard, unsure how to respond. “In a way, I guess it’s a good problem to have. But not in the moment when she’s meddling.”

“She’s always been like that?”

I nod.

“What would she have done five years ago if you’d realized we were married then?”

“Probably driven me to Indianapolis herself so we could work things out.”

She presses her lips together, barely hiding her smile. “At the library, she welcomed me to the family. Didn’t know a single thing about me, but still accepted me, no questions asked.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, just... different. Everything’s so different here,” she murmurs.

I can’t tell if she means it in a good or bad way, but I resist the urge to ask, instead finishing up dinner and bringing it over to the dining room table.

Her eyes widen as she takes her first bite of chicken. “Holy crap, this is good.”

“And you doubted me.”

“More like doubted myself. I pretty much survive on takeout and those pre-made salad kits from the store.”

“Well, you can cook for yourself now.”

“I’ll be calling you from Chicago with a skillet full of burned chicken asking what went wrong.”

My stomach sinks. For a moment, I’d forgotten she was going back. Having her here already seems so right.

So what am I going to do once she’s gone?

# CHAPTER 8



HARPER

I roll over, stretching against the soft sheets as morning light filters through the curtained window. I can't believe how well-rested I've been sleeping in his bed. Not that I knew what to expect when coming here, but it wasn't this house that looks like it could belong in *Architectural Digest*. Aren't bachelor pads supposed to be dilapidated pigsties?

There's sound coming from the living room and I sit up in bed, tuning my ears to hear what's going on. Owen's saying something about an annulment... Oh, he must be talking to Larry.

I tiptoe across the room and open the bedroom door, pausing when I spot Owen's back. He's shirtless, a pair of plaid pajama pants slung low on his hips. Whatever he's saying on the phone slips in one ear and out the other as my focus narrows on the subtle flex of his muscles, his broad back a delicious, golden tan that I itch to run my hands over. His body wasn't made in the gym, but rather by hauling all those huge slabs of wood around in his workshop. Hiking God knows how many miles daily. Hell, maybe he's out there in the forest bench pressing fallen trees. I wouldn't put it past him.

You'd think I'd never seen a man's torso before with the way my gaze devours him, but I can't stop myself, especially as he shifts so I can see the front of him, too. Defined pecs, a flat stomach, and a dark trail of hair that leads...

A flush steals over me as I realize what I'm doing and my head jerks up, only to discover he's looking at me with equal interest. He gives me a once-over, his slow perusal heating my blood.

"You're wearing my clothes," he says, his voice lower than normal.

I glance down at myself, remembering that I'd raided his closet last night for a shirt and pair of boxers to wear to bed. He said I could, right? "Sorry. I needed something to sleep in."

“Did you do that Sunday night, too?” he asks, his gaze stuck on my legs.

I nod, thrown off by this different side of him. Since I showed up here, he’s been so respectful, other than that joking pickup line he’d first used about giving things between us a try. He was kidding... right?

He shuts his eyes and turns away, setting his phone down on the coffee table. “Yeah, makes sense. Borrow whatever you need.”

I twist the hem of my shirt around my finger... his shirt, I mean. “I wasn’t snooping,” I blurt out. “I just needed clothes.”

“Harper.” He glances over his shoulder, but this time he doesn’t look at my body. “I meant it when I said you’re welcome to anything in this house. You can take a flannel or something for today, too.”

“When’s our appointment with Larry?”

He sighs. “His secretary said he’s booked solid until Thursday. I was able to get us in for noon that day.”

Thursday? I should be frustrated. Should tell him I can’t stay here that long. That I need to return home. To my job. My friends. My life.

But instead, I say, “Sounds great.” I can’t explain it, but there’s something about my time here that feels... unfinished.

His brows raise as he rubs at the back of his neck, his bicep flexing enticingly.

No, don’t look at that.

“Thought you’d give me shit about having to stay until Thursday, to be honest.”

I shrug. “It’s out of your control.”

His gaze narrows. “You’re being suspiciously agreeable. What happened to the girl who showed up on my doorstep Sunday demanding to see a lawyer then and there?”

My lips twist. “I might have come on a little strong. But I’m kind of... enjoying myself here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, where else am I going to visit waterfalls? And spend half a day lounging on the couch reading a book? Or learn to actually cook a meal?”

“What do you do at home?”

I cross my arms over my chest, leaning against the door frame. “Mostly work. I’m usually at the office late. Or I hang out with friends. I guess I never let myself slow down. Or just be... alone.”

He studies me for a moment. “You get lonely?”

I shrug. “I haven’t consciously thought of it like that before. But... maybe.” I give him a small smile. “I’m not like you.”

His mouth quirks to the side. “Point taken. Well, you’ll have to get your fill of all these special Crescent Pass things while you’re here, then.”

I nod. That’s a good way to put it. Like I’m soaking up this experience while I have the chance. “Do you have time for another hike today?”

“Yeah, of course. Let me just get ready.”

He points behind me toward his bedroom and I move aside, taking one last mental snapshot of his bare chest before it’s covered in flannel. Who knew he slept shirtless? Or that he was so sculpted under those clothes?

I glance up, afraid he caught me looking, but his gaze is on my legs again. Is he a leg man? The boobs and butt don’t quite cut it for him?

Not that it matters, I remind myself. It’s simply... interesting to know. A mere observation. The same way I’ve noted he takes his coffee black in the morning. Nothing to read into.

But that doesn’t stop the little thrill that runs through me.

\* \* \*

“SO WHERE ARE we hiking to today? A secret cavern? A mystical lake?”

He glances over, a smile playing over his lips. “I set the bar too high taking you to that waterfall first thing, didn’t I?”

“Oh, definitely. I expect all our hikes to be that good.”

“So there’ll be more?”

His question throws me off for a moment. “I mean, if you’re willing.”

“Didn’t take you for much of a hiker initially.”

Neither did I. “It’s... growing on me.”

He nods, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “How about a hot spring, then?”

My brows raise. “There’s a hot spring hidden around here? How are people not all over that?”

“This isn’t a tourist attraction, trust me. It’s more bathtub-size and nowhere near a trail.”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t bring my bikini?”

I don’t think he’s even aware of doing it, but his gaze rakes me up and down again. It’s my own fault for mentioning bikinis, though.

I look away, but stupidly forget to watch where I’m going and stumble over a tree root in the path. The ground rushes forward, but I can’t do anything to stop the inevitable as my hands skid over leaves and dirt to break my fall, and my ankle twists painfully over the root.

“Shit,” I yell, loud enough to startle a pair of birds out of a nearby tree.

Owen’s right there, kneeling next to me, his expression worried. “You okay?”

It's never a good sign when people get serious when you fall rather than laugh.

"My ankle." I gingerly sit up, wiping my palms on my leggings.

He moves down to my foot, carefully pushing up the bottom of my pants to reveal my ankle, and swipes his thumb gently over the area. A shudder runs through me, surprised at the bolt of pleasure from his touch.

He removes his hand immediately. "It hurts that much?"

Oh, he took my reaction as one of pain?

My head tilts down, hiding the heat on my cheeks. "Mm-hmm," I mumble, not wanting to admit what it actually was.

"Let's get you back to the house. I'll carry you."

He maneuvers me in his arms and lifts me with ease, surprising me yet again. How strong is he? Maybe he really does bench press trees or something.

I loop my arms around his neck, surreptitiously breathing in his woody scent as he brings us back home. He even smells like the outdoors. Like it's a part of him. Would he smell the same in Chicago?

Duke whines, looking worriedly up at me as he trots at Owen's side.

"I'll be okay, boy," I tell him, wishing I could reach down to pat him. How is it that after only two days I'm already concerned about reassuring this dog?

A part of me wishes I'd fallen a little further on the trail because too soon we're back at the house, and after he fumbles to open the front door, he's laying me on the couch.

"Will it hurt too much if I take this off?" he asks, pointing to my sneaker.

"It's fine. Feeling better already."

"Let me inspect it, at least."



He slowly removes my shoe, being careful not to jostle my ankle, and studies the area. “No swelling or bruising. That’s good. How about you ice it and rest for a while?”

He doesn’t give me a chance to answer before he’s gathering pillows to prop behind me and under my foot, then heads to the kitchen, where he returns with one of those flexible gel ice packs from the freezer and positions it over my ankle.

Next, he retrieves the book I checked out from the library, handing it to me, then places the TV remote within reach. “Need anything else? Water? A blanket?”

I shake my head, a sensation low in my belly simmering at him taking care of me like this. I’ve never had a guy do this kind of stuff for me. “I’m fine. Really.”

“Humor me, then. Take some time to relax. Oh, you’ve got something—”

He picks a leaf out of my hair, his face so close to mine...

I lean forward and kiss him without a second thought, his lips warm, his beard tickling my chin the slightest bit... Oh, shit. I shouldn’t be doing this.

I startle back, his eyes just as wide as mine.

“Thank you,” I blurt out. “That was a thank you kiss. For helping me with my ankle.”

I’m a liar with a capital L, but he seems too stunned to call me out on it.

He blinks, his lips parting. “Right,” he says faintly. “I should, um, get to my workshop now.”

“Of course. You have work to do. Thanks again.”

He nods, confusion lurking in his gaze before he turns away and strides out the door.

Duke pads over, sticking his nose into the palm of my hand, and I scratch behind his ears, wishing he was lap dog-sized so I could cuddle him tight. “What the hell am I doing,

Duke? I can't be kissing Owen. I'm practically divorcing him."

He makes what I swear is a sound of agreement and rests his chin on my stomach.

And now I'm talking to a dog. Great.

My head thumps against the pillow behind me and I stare up at the polished wooden beams running across the ceiling, my mind going back to that brief moment of contact between Owen's mouth and mine. How... natural it had felt. How right.

My fingertips brush over my bottom lip, imagining if I hadn't moved away so fast, if he would have kissed me back, pressing me into the couch with that big body...

No, no. Not thinking about that. I need a distraction.

I stretch my arm out toward the coffee table and grab my phone, then bring up my messages.

Me: *How's Sandra handling the news that I'll be out longer?*

Elena's reply chimes almost instantly.

Elena: *Girl, her hair's on fire. She's finally realizing how much you do around here.*

Is it wrong that I get a sick kind of satisfaction from that?

Me: *Maybe that betters my chances for a promotion.*

Elena: *Or she goes the opposite way and says you're not "reliable" for taking time off.*

Me: *Screw that. I've worked there four years and have barely got a thank you from her when I'm damn good at my job.*

Elena: *Don't tell me you're thinking of leaving and shacking up with your hubby in Oregon.*

I grin, chuckling to myself. She's a real comedian.

Me: *I admit, it's better out here than I expected. But once I get this annulment, I'm on the first plane home. And you know I could never leave you and Kelly.*

Those two are like my family.

Elena: *Love you too, babe. But you shouldn't stay here for us. What if things change?*

I frown. What's she talking about?

Me: *Are you planning on leaving?*

Elena: *No, I'm just saying. Things could change in the future.*

There's no way she would bring that up unless something was definitely changing.

Me: *What do you know?*

It's a minute before she responds again, and I spend the time idly scratching Duke's ears, my brain racing to figure out her cryptic remark.

Elena: *Kelly mentioned she's looking for a bigger place with Mateo.*

Me: *In Chicago?*

Elena: *I don't know. She might have been talking about a house. For eventual kids and stuff.*

Real estate in the city is insane. That means she must be going to the suburbs. Which means I'll never see her again.

Me: *How many people have we lost to the suburbs in the past few years?*

Elena: *You don't have to tell me twice.*

Me: *Well, I won't tell her you mentioned it. And you don't have to worry about me abandoning you.*

She sends back a bunch of heart emojis and I set my phone down beside me.

I guess I can't be mad at Kelly. She's talked before about wanting to start a family as soon as she gets married. And now that she's engaged, it makes sense that they'd be looking to upgrade from their one-bedroom apartment.

The dynamic will be weird without having her ten minutes away to get together anytime we want, but who am I to talk?

I'm in the middle of cleaning up my life, and she's moving on to the next stage of hers. At least I still have Elena.

And for now, I need to focus on keeping myself occupied until Thursday's appointment with the lawyer.

Not doing stupid things like kissing my soon-to-be ex.

# CHAPTER 9



OWEN

I stare at the slab of wood on my workbench, my mind unable to focus enough on sanding it down. The only thing my brain wants to do is replay those brief seconds where Harper's lips were on mine. How incredibly soft they were. How time had seemed to stop.

And how I was so fucking frozen with surprise, I didn't even kiss her back.

Not that it was a real kiss, I remind myself. It was a thank you kiss, whatever the hell that means. Is that a normal thing? She made it seem like it was, but no one I know does that.

Then again, who's going to kiss me? Kristen? Mom? No, thanks.

What I need to do is stop daydreaming. If I let my mind wander too much, I'm liable to end up with a handful of splinters.

Loading a playlist on my phone, I turn up the bluetooth speakers in here, getting lost in my work for a few hours until my stomach is rumbling. And as if I conjured her, Harper's there in the doorway of my workshop, holding a bag in her hand.

"I picked up a sub and chips for you from the cafe," she says, placing the food near me. "Thought you might be hungry."

I nod, still unsure how to react after that kiss. Or, not-kiss. "Thanks."

"This already looks a lot different." She motions toward my project. "Have you ever filmed a time-lapse of you working on something from start to finish?"

"No." Why would I do that?

"Do you have a portfolio of your work?"

"No."

She makes a sighing sound. “Any pictures at all?”

“Maybe a few on my phone.”

Her lips compress. “You’re making this kind of difficult.”

“Making what difficult?”

“My audit.”

That’s right. I forgot she was doing that. And the more I think about it... it would probably be a waste of her time. “You don’t have to do anything extra. Seriously.”

“Don’t you want your business to grow?”

I give her a half-hearted shrug. “I like where I’m at.”

“Sorry. I keep forgetting. You’re the antithesis of every person I work with.”

“Is it actually that cutthroat?”

“In the world of marketing? Sort of. We’ve had times where a disastrous campaign cost people their jobs.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, if it’s a big enough account. And there’s no coasting. You have to constantly prove yourself. That you’re the best.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

She grins widely. “I live for the challenge.”

Better her than me, then. “Didn’t you say you wanted to rest while you’re here? Do something other than work?”

She waves a hand, dismissing my question. “I like keeping busy. And this is a side project, not work.”

“What about your ankle? Shouldn’t you be resting?” She’d seemed in such pain earlier when she’d tripped.

“Completely healed. It wasn’t as bad as I first thought.” She points a finger at me. “Why are you afraid of growing your business?”

I blink at her, thrown off by the change in topic. “I’m not afraid.”

She gestures around her. “This is your livelihood, right? At some point, you have to take a step forward. Get to the next level. Are you afraid you’ll fail if you expand?”

“Harper, I’m not one of your clients. You don’t have to pitch to me. If I expand, that means I have to hire someone to help with the extra work. And then someone else to handle calls and emails and all the stuff I don’t want to deal with.”

“So, what’s the problem? You still won’t have to talk to customers.”

“Yeah, but then I’m in charge of employees.” I shake my head. “I like working alone. I am one hundred percent good with making enough to live comfortably. I don’t need the latest car or luxury vacations or whatever else people spend their extra money on.”

Her brows knit. “Don’t you at least want a healthy savings account? What if you have an accident and can’t do woodworking anymore? What if there are medical bills?”

“I have savings, don’t worry.” That’s the benefit of never going out and spending money. It mostly all sits in the bank.

Her mouth twists. “Fine. But let me at least make you a website. And social media accounts. And a portfolio. It couldn’t hurt to have them.”

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about her so far, it’s that she doesn’t give up easily.

“I’ll allow the website and portfolio, but I draw the line at social media. There’s no way I’ll ever keep it updated.”

She considers me. “Fair enough. Can I get the contact info of the galleries you partner with?”

I grab my lunch and lead her into the house, digging through the small filing cabinet in my closet for the paperwork. I hand her the stack and she idly sorts through it as we sit down at the table to eat.

“Are these your receipts?”

I unwrap my sandwich, my stomach rumbling. I’ve had more takeout with her in the past few days than I’ve had in



months. “Yeah, from this year.”

“And this is the price of the piece?”

I glance over at where she’s pointing on the sheet she’s holding up.

“That’s my cut of it.”

Her brows raise. “So the price is twice this?”

“Roughly, yeah.”

She rifles through the sheets. “You said these are all from this year? How many do you sell a month?”

“Four or five, usually.”

I go ahead and eat, unable to wait any longer as she flips through the papers.

“Well, shit. No wonder you said you’re making enough.”

Did she think I was lying or something?

“And you’re sure you don’t want to sell direct? You could make twice what you’re earning now.”

“Yeah, but I’d have to deal with—”

“What if I did it?”

“What?”

She bites at her bottom lip. “I could handle all the customer stuff. You’ll deal with me, right?”

My stomach rises with anticipation. Is she saying... “You’d move here?”

She gives me a funny look. “No, it’d be remote. I can do everything from Chicago by email or phone.”

My stomach drops. “Right.” Why the hell would I think she’d stay here? She’s made it clear she doesn’t want that.

“And I could take a commission on every piece sold. I’d create and maintain your website, your online store, answer customer inquiries and issues. All you’d have to do is deliver the item after I tell you when and where. What do you think?”

She can't hide the excitement on her face, the way she's practically vibrating in her seat. How could I possibly say no to her? Especially when it means I'll have a ready-made excuse to keep talking to her after the annulment.

"Yeah, that sounds great."

"Really?"

She gets up and hugs me, her arms squeezing tight around my shoulders. This time, I have the presence of mind to return her hug, her soft curves heavenly under my fingertips. I didn't have the chance to appreciate how she felt in my arms when carrying her back to the house earlier, too worried about her ankle.

But all too soon, she's gone and gushing about what a great opportunity this is and how much I won't regret it.

"You don't have a non-compete clause in any of your contracts with the galleries, right? You must not if you sell your pieces at multiple places."

I shake my head. "No, I can sell on my own whenever I want."

"Great. Maybe I can go out to take pictures of your work tomorrow."

"At the galleries?"

"Yeah. And I'll get started on your site today."

"You're going to do it? Isn't that hard?"

"It's not like I'm coding it from scratch. I'll use something that has a drag and drop editor."

What the hell is she talking about?

"Don't worry," she assures me. "I guide clients on how to do it all the time."

She goes into details about what she has envisioned and I agree with pretty much whatever she says, not knowing half of what she's explaining. Something about optimizing SEO and claiming a Google knowledge panel.

“We have to celebrate tonight. How about we go for drinks at that bar in town?”

At Harry’s? “We got in trouble last time we were at a bar.”

She ducks her head down, but not quick enough to miss her smile. “True. But we’re already married. It’s not like we can do it again.”

She looks up at me from under lowered lashes, something teasing lurking in her gaze. I lean toward her, nothing in my mind but discovering what exactly that look means, then remember myself and stand swiftly.

“Yeah, we can go to Harry’s. Just let me know when.” I stuff the last of my sandwich in my mouth and throw the to-go container in the trash. “I’ll be in the workshop,” I mumble.

I stalk outside, mentally berating myself for... Well, I’m not sure exactly what I was doing, but it couldn’t have ended well.

I’ll limit myself to one drink tonight and that’ll be that. No funny business. She’s made it clear she’s not interested in staying, so there’s no use in trying to start something up.

Despite how I keep reacting to her.

\* \* \*

MY EYES TAKE a moment to adjust to the dim lighting inside Harry’s bar. Why the hell are there so many people here on a Tuesday night? Doesn’t anyone stay at home anymore?

“Looks like nothing’s changed,” I mutter, surveying the area. There are still the dark booths in the back corner filled with the town regulars, and the jukebox too, playing some Fleetwood Mac song that a few couples are dancing to. Over the bar, the lone TV is showing a Mariner’s game, and a group of men shout something indistinguishable at it.

At least people are occupied enough that we can escape notice. That is until Ruth Cooper catches sight of us.

She makes a beeline for us from her spot in the back. “Oh, honey, you’re still in town?” she says to Harper, though her gaze is on me. I deliberately avoid meeting her eye.

“Yeah, this place is great,” Harper replies easily. “Thought I’d extend my visit a few days.”

Technically not a lie, I guess. Just not for the reasons she’s implying.

“And you’re here on business, you said? Isn’t it a little late in the day for that?”

Ruth’s on the hunt for gossip and I try to steer Harper away, but she answers before I can tell her to grey rock her.

“Well, when you own a business, you sometimes work unconventional hours.”

“And what exactly is it you do? I can’t imagine you’re a woodworker like Owen here.”

“Ruth, this isn’t an interrogation,” I interrupt.

“Oh, she knows I don’t mean it like that.” Ruth pats my forearm like I’m a child she’s placating. “We just look out for our own here in Crescent Pass.”

Harper smiles, as if she’s amused with the interaction. “I’m a marketing specialist. I’ve been auditing Owen’s business and coming up with new strategies for him to implement.”

Again, technically not a lie. She must be good at her job if she can accurately bend the truth like this.

“Ah.” Ruth deflates some. I guess the reason wasn’t as salacious as she was hoping for. If she got wind of who Harper actually is to me...

“Thanks again for showing me those clothes from your store. They’ve really come in handy. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’re going to get drinks.”

“Of course, dear,” Ruth says faintly, her gaze like a hawk as she watches Harper loop her arm through mine and lead me away.

“Felt like I was in an interview,” Harper whispers as we make our way to the bar.

“Don’t take it personally. She’s like that with everyone.”

She looks up at me, a playful look in her eyes. “I bet you avoid her at all costs, don’t you?”

I nod. “Ruth has to be the first to know everything in town. She’s worse than my mom.”

“I’m surprised your mom hasn’t mentioned it to anyone, then.”

“She wouldn’t do that to me.”

“You want to keep me a secret?” she teases.

“No.” I clear my throat, hating how quickly I said it. “Not at all.”

“I was kidding. It makes sense not to broadcast it when I’ll be gone soon.”

Right. She’ll be gone.

I ignore the way my stomach clenches and say, “I don’t think half the town would believe it, anyway.”

“That’s right, Mister Recluse. How’s it feel to be out and about?”

I shrug. With her on my arm, it’s not nearly so bad.

“Owen,” Harry calls out from behind the bar. “Haven’t seen you in here for a while.”

I approach him and shake his hand. “Yeah. Been a while. You know I’m not big on going out.”

“Looks like you’ll make exceptions for some people, though.” He nods to Harper. “What’s a pretty girl like you doing with this guy?” he asks her good-naturedly.

Harper flashes him her mega-watt grin. “Helping with his business. I’m doing some marketing work for him.”

“Didn’t know you were doing that well to be hiring out of town marketing.”

I shrug noncommittally. It feels wrong to outright lie, even though I don't want to share the real reason she's here, either.

"Well, good for you," Harry tells me. "What are you two drinking tonight?"

Harper orders a Blue Moon while I get a whiskey, and I quickly usher her away before Harry can ask her any more personal questions, but we're soon bombarded by Tanya. As the town's only hairdresser, she's another one to have her finger on the pulse of town gossip.

"Who's your girl?" she asks, taking a sip of her drink.

"Oh, she's not my..."

I drift off when I spy Harper's amused expression. She finds this funny, doesn't she? Fine. She can explain herself to everyone, then. I don't know what I was thinking agreeing to come here to begin with.

Harper expertly handles Tanya's probing questions, and I hang back as more people approach, curious to talk to the newcomer. I end up at the edge of the crowd and take a seat at the bar, sipping on my whiskey as Harper holds court.

I get a sense of how she must be at work, something about her making people want to listen, to gravitate toward her. I thought it might just be me she had that effect on, but I guess not. The realization that there's not some special connection between us, that it's this way with everyone...

I slam back the last of my whiskey, ignoring the sharp burn of alcohol, and push that thought aside as I order another. I meant to only have one, but...

"She seems popular," Harry comments as he hands me a fresh drink.

"Yep." I take a long swallow, debating whether I should savor the rest or get a third. God knows what I'd say to her if I got too drunk, though. I'll switch to water after this.

"She's not here only for business, is she?"

I glance at him, his knowing smile making my stomach flip disconcertingly. "What do you mean?" Does he know?

Did Larry say something? Abby? My mom? There are too many people involved now.

He chuckles. “With the way you’re looking at her, you can’t tell me it’s only business on your mind.”

I shut my eyes, my chin dropping to my chest. That’s the problem with living in a small town. Everyone knows everything about you, and feels they have the right to comment on it, too. Can’t anyone mind their business anymore?

“Your dad would be happy to see you with someone.”

My chin digs further into my chest as I take a deep breath. “I’m not with her.” Harper made that clear from the beginning.

“Interested in someone, then. You’ve never dated any of the girls in town.”

Is it that obvious I’m into her? Sure, I’ve known Harry my whole life, but it’s not like he *knows* me. If he can see it that easily... Can Harper?

“She’s leaving in a couple of days,” I tell him.

He grins widely. “Doesn’t mean you can’t have fun while she’s here.”

The jukebox kicks over to a new song, something by the Eagles I don’t remember the name of. Guess Harry only plays music from the 70s.

Harper approaches and sets her empty bottle on the bar counter. “I was afraid you’d left there for a minute.”

“I was just letting you do your thing.”

She smiles. “Shouldn’t you be introducing me to everyone? You’re the local.”

I rub at the back of my neck. “Seems they like you better.”

“That’s because I talk to them. A novel concept, right?”

She says it teasingly, but something about it rubs me the wrong way. “Why are you bothering? You’re leaving soon.”

Her lips turn down at the corners, but before I can tell her I didn't mean that, a guy I went to school with interrupts us, asking if Harper wants to dance with him.

"Yeah, sure," she replies, giving me a look I can't quite interpret before she heads off with Greg to the dance area.

"Smooth," Harry says once she's gone.

I rub my temple, not needing his commentary.

"Go ask her to dance."

"I'm not making a fool of myself out there." I've never danced in my life.

"Then sit here and sulk."

And this is why I don't go out. "What are you, a love expert or something?"

He considers me. "Probably the closest thing this town's got to one. You know how many couples I've seen get together in this bar?"

There's no chance of us being a couple, though. We're actively trying to get rid of that designation.

I don't answer him and he shakes his head, eventually wandering over to the other end of the counter. I stare down into my drink, swirling the last of the amber liquid around before finishing it off.

What the hell am I doing here?

Harper's hips are swaying out on the dance floor, and even though she's not dressed for clubbing in leggings and one of my borrowed flannels, she's easily the sexiest woman out there by far. Greg's hand brushes her arm, and my jaw clenches before I look away. I've never had an issue with Greg before, but if he thinks he's going home with her...

I'm out of my seat before I know it and striding toward the jukebox. I search through the selections, not sure what I'm looking for until I spot it. The King.

I wipe my palms on my jeans and pick the one song I shouldn't.



Our wedding song.

# CHAPTER 10



HARPER

The beginning notes of “Can’t Help Falling In Love” play from the jukebox, my stomach fluttering as I glance over at the bar stool I left Owen at. He’s not there, though.

I shake my head, feeling stupid that I thought for a second

—  
“Mind if I cut in?”

I look up at Owen, his gaze on my dance partner. I never even caught his name, too worked up over Owen’s comment earlier. He made it sound like I’m... abandoning him or something.

The guy nods and steps back to make room for Owen, then asks another woman to dance.

“Sorry for acting like an ass,” Owen whispers. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

I shrug. “It was the truth.”

“Maybe. But I didn’t need to say it that way. You like getting to know people. I still don’t understand why, but you do.”

I press my lips together to hide my smile. “Will extroverts and introverts ever be able to peacefully coexist?”

“Ah, the age-old question. I’m willing to give it a try, at least.”

From the speakers, Elvis croons about fools rushing in. “Did you want to dance?” I ask. That’s why he came over here, right?

He nods, stepping closer.

I skim my hands up his arms, admittedly taking a bit too long to settle my palms on his shoulders. The feel of his biceps underneath his flannel is worth it, though. “You can put your hands on my waist.”

He swallows, his big palms curving right above my hips.

“You seem nervous.”

“No, I... Okay, maybe a little.”

“Why? It’s just me.”

He stares at me for a moment, then looks down at his feet.

“I know.”

The way he’s acting... “Have you danced before?”

He shakes his head.

This man kills me. “Didn’t you have dances in school?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t go.”

Of course not. Mister Anti-Social would never. “Well, this is the perfect song to start with.”

I guide him to the rhythm, not that it involves much more than simply swaying to the beat, and he masters it soon enough, the tightness in his shoulders easing.

“See? You’re a natural.”

He makes a sound of skepticism. “If you say so.”

I grin, subtly inching closer. “How come you never believe me?”

“I’m still dancing, aren’t I? I wouldn’t do this with just anyone.”

“You wouldn’t dance with any of the other girls here?”

“No.”

My heart drums in my chest for a moment before I tell it to stop. “Only your wife?” I whisper, making sure no one’s near enough to hear.

I regret the question almost immediately, especially as heat flashes in his gaze, the same as when he was looking at my legs this morning. What am I doing? Taunting him?

I swallow thickly, the tension in the air suddenly unbearable. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

He's silent, his only response a slight flexing of his fingers on my waist.

"One day, my mouth's going to get me in serious trouble. More than it already has, I mean."

"What kind of trouble has it got you in?"

"You know, letters sent home in school because I talk too much, making an idiot out of myself by blurting stuff out and saying the wrong thing, convincing strangers to marry me in Vegas hotel bars. Those kinds of things."

The seriousness surrounding him seems to fade. "Just the usual, then."

"For me, yes."

He nods. "You don't have to worry about saying the wrong thing with me. I know it's always coming from the right place."

My heart melts a little. Does he have any idea how many times growing up my mom lectured me about watching what I say?

"Trust me," I joke. "You don't want the unfiltered version running in my head."

"What are you thinking now?"

"That I like dancing with you."

Okay, that wasn't as bad as it could have been.

"Really?"

Why does he seem surprised? "Why wouldn't I?"

He rubs at the back of his neck. "I don't know. Just, you were so adamant about getting the annulment..."

Does he think I hate him or something? "I still like you as a person. As a friend. And now a business partner. That's what we're celebrating tonight, right?"

The song ends and he steps back. "Right. The business."

I can't explain it, but it's like a change comes over him, some kind of invisible curtain slipping between us.

“You want another drink?” he asks, already retreating.

“Sure.”

I watch him, nothing outwardly different as he gets a Blue Moon from the bartender and brings it to me. It just... feels that way. God, I’m losing my mind.

We find a booth and I tell him about the other ideas I’ve come up with for his business since we last talked this afternoon and how I plan on driving over to Portland tomorrow. I need to get photos of his current work to build his portfolio.

“You want me to go with you?”

“No, I’ve got it. I feel bad taking up so much of your time already.”

His gaze travels over my face. “You’re not taking up any of my time. I like you being here.”

I pick at the edge of my beer bottle label, peeling it away from the glass. “I do, too.”

I can’t explain it, but it somehow seems wrong to admit that. Yeah, I told him earlier I was enjoying my time here, but this feels like I’m... betraying Chicago or something. My friends. My job. My life.

Logically, the thought is ridiculous. Having a good time here isn’t a crime. But I’m also telling my work I’m in the middle of an emergency and making my coworkers pick up the slack. I’m not at home celebrating Kelly’s new engagement with her. Instead, I’m discovering that outdoorsy, small towns aren’t at all what I thought they were. Everyone here tonight has been so welcoming. Some of them nosier than others, sure, but so am I. I can’t fault them for that. And while I assumed there’d be a lack of things to do, I haven’t found myself bored at all.

And then there’s Owen. The reason I’m here. And the more time I spend with him... the more I don’t want to leave just yet.

Except, I have to. I don’t belong here.

“Maybe we should get home,” I say, standing.

He nods and leads me out of the bar. I get a few waves from people I talked to earlier and I wave back, hoping they don't strike up a conversation again. I'm suddenly not in the mood.

He opens the passenger door of his truck for me in the parking lot and I get in, the two of us silent on the ride home.

“You okay?” he asks as he shuts the engine off in his front yard.

I nod as I unbuckle my seat belt.

His brows raise. “Nothing to say? That's a first.”

I twist my lips to hide my smile. “Just tired.”

“That much social interaction will take it out of you,” he says teasingly.

“I've been here too long already. You're rubbing off on me.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing.”

“No, not bad. Just different.”

He stops me as we walk up the porch steps. “Seriously, are you okay? You seem off.”

I shrug, not wanting to explain my weird mood to him. Not even knowing how to describe it. “I've got a big day tomorrow. Maybe I'm subconsciously worried about it.”

He moves in closer, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear that the breeze blew out of place, and I find myself leaning toward him, not sure what's happening but wanting it all the same. His lips press against mine for the briefest moment, his hand cupping my cheek softly, and a delicious warmth fills my stomach, wanting more even as he pulls away.

“Thank you.”

I blink up at him, my mind too muddled to figure out what he's saying.

“That was a thank you kiss,” he says. “For all your help with my business.”

Right. The stupid thank you kiss I made up.

“You’re welcome,” I whisper, the warmth running through me melting away. It wasn’t an actual kiss. Just a gesture of thanks. “I should get to bed.”

I open the front door and speed toward his bedroom, shutting it quickly behind me. He was being nice, not anything more.

I shouldn’t want anything more, either. I’m leaving after we meet with his lawyer. Returning to Chicago to my apartment. My friends. My job. My life.

I’m probably only feeling this way because I had a couple of beers tonight. I’m not thinking right. That’s it.

Everything will be back to how it should be in the morning.

\* \* \*

I MAKE the turn onto Ninth Avenue in the Pearl District, marveling over all the quirky shops and restaurants in the Portland area. I’ve never seen this many breweries in my life.

After parking outside the first gallery on my list, I’m interrupted by my boss calling me. Great.

“Hello?”

“Harper, hi.” Sandra’s voice is sickeningly sweet, the same one she uses with clients she’s trying to win over. “Sorry to bother you in the middle of your family emergency, but I have a time-sensitive question for you. Do you have a copy of the Clarke account file?”

I mentally run through the accounts I’m currently working on. “That’s not one of mine. I think Damien’s running it. It’s not on the shared drive?”



She lets out an exaggerated sigh. “I know Damien’s in charge of it. He accidentally deleted the file and we can’t recover it. Please tell me you have a backup.”

“No, I only keep backups of my own accounts.”

“Fucking Christ,” she mutters, all traces of sweetness gone. “From now on, I want you to keep backups of *all* our accounts, not just your own.”

Oh, so it’s my fault Damien’s an idiot and deleted his own file? Duly noted. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And when will you be back in the office? We could really use you to put out some fires around here.”

Shouldn’t that be her job? “Well, I’m in Oregon right now. There are some legal issues I have to take care of, but I’m meeting with my lawyer tomorrow morning to get it straightened out, and then I’ll fly home.”

“Oregon? You never mentioned you were going out of state.”

“It was necessary.”

“And legal issues? Were you arrested or something?”

If I was arrested, I wouldn’t be talking to her on my cell, would I? I keep that thought to myself, though. “No trouble with the law. Just a personal family matter that needs to be taken care of ASAP.”

“So you’ll be in the office late tomorrow? Great, I’ll have you present to the Clarke executives.”

Whoa, whoa. “You want me to present on an account I don’t know anything about and have no information on? I won’t even be back by then.”

“You said you’re meeting with your lawyer in the morning and flying back. And you’re the best at smoothing out ruffled feathers with clients. Damien’s not good at that kind of thing.”

So the solution to Damien being bad at his job is to throw me under the bus? I don’t think so.

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, making sure not to blurt out my actual train of thought. “My appointment is at eleven and it may take a while. Then, *if* I can get a nonstop flight the same day, I still have to drive two and a half hours to the airport, return my rental car, and take a four hour flight home. Plus, it’s a two hour time difference, so it’ll be even later there. There’s no way I’m making it in time for this presentation.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line for a few seconds, then an aggrieved sigh. “Fine. We’ll reschedule the presentation for Friday.”

I press my lips together tightly, biting my tongue. “You should plan on me not being there, just in case. I can’t guarantee they’ll even have a flight tomorrow afternoon. I might have to wait until Friday to fly out. Besides, it’s not my account and I’m not prepped on the details.”

“Can you give the presentation remotely?”

Is she serious? I told her I don’t know anything about it. “I don’t have my laptop with me and I can’t guarantee a stable wi-fi signal.” I haven’t had a problem yet at Owen’s house, but maybe I’ve been lucky.

“Can’t you borrow a laptop from someone? Or use your phone? I’m sure the signal isn’t that bad.”

“I’m in a small town in the mountains. With my luck, one bad storm could knock out the power. And I really need to concentrate on this issue I’m having. I won’t be able to help Damien on this one while I’m out of the office.”

She lets out her third sigh of the call. “Not much of a team player,” she mutters.

I clench my jaw hard to keep in the expletive that wants to let loose. Is there seriously no one else that can help with this? As the manager, shouldn’t she be the one prepared to step in when things go wrong?

“You know under normal circumstances I’d be happy to help out,” I tell her in a controlled voice. “But I’m asking for some grace and understanding while I go through this personal

issue. This is the first time I've ever had something come up in four years of working there."

"Well, don't make it a regular thing," she replies. "And let me know when your flight home is. I'll figure something out for the Clarke account."

She hangs up without saying goodbye, and I stare at my phone in disbelief. "What a fucking bitch."

I don't feel better for voicing the thought aloud, though. In fact, I feel worse. Why am I working for someone who treats me like this? After seeing the way Owen works, being able to do whatever he wants with no one harping at him all the time... That would be the dream, wouldn't it? What if I really was a marketing consultant like I told everyone in the bar last night? Free to pick and choose who I work with and what I do, being my own boss...

Oh my God, I'm delusional. The amount of people who can successfully run their own business is incredibly small. Owen probably spent a long time building up his woodworking skills to the point where he can work on his own like this.

And meanwhile, I'm stuck working for the Wicked Witch of the West.

# CHAPTER 11



HARPER

I push the thought aside and open the car door, mentally switching gears. I'm Owen's employee now, not Sandra's.

A woman in a deep blue tunic greets me at the entrance, her turquoise jewelry and long, silver braid over one shoulder instantly putting me at ease. I have the sense I could ask her to align my chakras and she would.

"Hi, I'm Harper Calloway. I called earlier about—"

"Owen's furniture, yes."

She leads me away from the canvas art at the front of the shop and towards the back, where bigger pieces sit.

I catch sight of a huge farmhouse table, instantly knowing it's Owen's. "That's his, isn't it?"

She nods, smiling to herself. "It sold within a week of being here. The buyer's arranging his own transportation to pick it up."

Circling the table, I run a hand over the polished surface, marveling at the detail. "The legs look almost like roots. Like it's coming out of the ground."

"It's generated quite a bit of interest. Most of his pieces do."

I pull out my phone and snap a few pics, bending down to get a better angle. "How often does he display his work here?"

"Usually every couple of months, as long as we have the room. I'd like to showcase more of his pieces, but they're almost always bulky. And from what I understand, it's just him at his workshop, so he doesn't produce as often as I'd wish." She traces one of the chair tops, the sides of it carved to appear as if vines are snaking over it. "I'm friendly with another gallery owner a few blocks away, and she's said the same things. She even keeps a waitlist to notify customers when something's available."

He didn't tell me all that. Probably being modest, as usual.

"I was surprised to hear he hired someone to create a portfolio for him," she continues. "Is he expanding his production?"

I give her a second glance, wondering now if her new age persona is merely a selling tactic. It seems there's a sharp, entrepreneurial mind underneath the exterior.

"No, he's said he doesn't want to hire anyone to work directly with him in the shop. But I'm building a website for him to establish an online presence. I'll make sure to feature your gallery as a place customers can buy his work."

She nods appreciatively.

"You wouldn't happen to have pictures of his previously sold pieces, would you?"

One of her brows raises. "Perhaps for an exclusive agreement to showcase his work here?"

Oh, she's crafty. "I'm sorry, I can't promise that."

She shrugs. "It was worth a shot. Yes, I'd be happy to share a few photos."

I give her my email address and thank her for her time, then make my way to the other gallery she mentioned a few blocks over. Here, an elaborately carved writing desk is on display with the same nature motif as the dining table. Leaves and tendrils climb their way up the sides, so realistic I'm half-surprised they're wooden when I run my finger over them. If he's capable of this level of craftsmanship, why don't the pieces in his house feature these details, too?

The owner gushes over Owen's work and is much more forthcoming with photos of previously sold pieces. This will make my job a hell of a lot easier putting together a portfolio for him and means I won't need to travel down to Salem or Bend to see what they have on file. I can't believe he didn't take photos of his work himself.

Before I leave Portland, I pick up a case of beer from the brewery Owen mentioned liking and a few souvenirs for Elena

and Kelly, then make the long drive back to Crescent Pass, the beautiful fall scenery helping to pass the time.

I stop at the library in town to check out another book, still holding Owen's library card hostage. I may or may not have stayed up late finishing the last one. I couldn't sleep because of thoughts of a certain kiss—

Nope. Not thinking about that. As I told myself approximately a thousand times last night, it didn't mean anything.

“Harper!”

Jenny excitedly waves from her spot over in the children's section, but doesn't run over to bum rush me this time. She's coloring a picture, a few crayons scattered in front of her on the table. Next to her, Owen's mother also waves. Jamie's the only one that doesn't seem to notice me, engrossed in the book in his hands, his lips mouthing the words as he silently reads.

I walk over to them, getting a few curious glances from other people in the building, including Abby, who's helping someone on the computer. “I didn't realize you guys would be here.”

“Oh, we're here pretty much every day after school,” Owen's mom says. “I watch these two until Kristen gets out of work.”

“Are you retired?”

“No, I'm a teacher at their school.”

“Not our teacher, though,” Jenny says matter-of-factly, still focused on her coloring page. “That would be a conflict of interest.”

I exchange looks with Mrs. Taylor, who merely shakes her head, as if remarks like this are a common occurrence.

“Are you here for another book?” she asks politely. “You're quite the reader if you've gone through the last one so soon.”

“Well, I have more time on my hands than usual.”

“I see you’re using Owen’s library card.” She points to the card in my hand. “You two must be getting on well if he gave you that.”

She makes it sound like it’s a promise ring. “We’re trying to make the best of the situation.”

She presses her lips together tightly while smiling. It’s so obvious she wants to ask more about me and Owen, but has to restrain herself. “And how much longer will you be in town?”

“We have an appointment with Larry tomorrow. After that, we’ll figure out next steps.”

Before she can discourage the annulment again, Jenny pipes up. “Will you still be here on Saturday? Me and Jamie are singing with our class.”

“Um...” What, now?

“At the festival,” Mrs. Taylor explains. “It’s an annual thing here.”

“Right. The festival. That’s why I couldn’t get a hotel room.”

Interest alights in her gaze. “You’re not at the inn?”

Ah, crap. This will only fuel the fire. “No, I’m staying with Owen.”

“Oh.” She nods, the gears in her head spinning. “It must be nice to reconnect with him after so long apart.”

This is crazy. Shouldn’t a mother be concerned about her son moving too fast in a relationship? She seems to be actively encouraging it, though.

“He’s staying on the couch,” I blurt out, not wanting her to get the wrong impression. “There’s nothing...” I glance at Jenny, careful not to say anything too revealing. “Nothing untoward happening.”

I swear to God Owen’s mom looks disappointed at that news. “Owen’s always been a gentleman.”

“Grandma, can I pick out another book?” Jamie asks, closing the one in his hands.



“Of course, sweetie. Take your sister with you.”

Jenny sighs but gets up and follows her brother over to the low shelves with beginner reader books.

“Now, Harper.” Mrs. Taylor reaches forward and covers my hand with her own. “I know Owen asked me not to interfere, but I want to make sure the two of you don’t make a hasty decision with this annulment.”

I cover my mouth to hide my smile. She’s relentless, isn’t she? “Shouldn’t you... I don’t know, be discouraging this? The marriage was a drunken mistake. We only knew each other for a few hours.”

Her lips purse. “First of all, call me Cheryl. And secondly, I know my son. He wouldn’t have married you unless he was sure.”

What was it Owen had said when I showed up at his house on Sunday? Something about us clicking. Having a connection. That was a line, though. Wasn’t it?

I shake my head, focusing on the present. “I’ll be honest, if I lived here, it’d be a different story. I could maybe see something happening between us.” Okay, could definitely see something, but she doesn’t need to know that. “But I don’t live here, so it’s a moot point. I’ve built a life in Chicago, and I can’t see Owen leaving his cabin to come out there and find out if this leads anywhere. That may not be what you want to hear, but it’s the truth.”

She doesn’t seem as disappointed as I thought she’d be. If anything, she seems pleased. “I like how forthright you are,” she says. “Owen’s always been one to keep his cards close to his chest. You would help bring him out of his shell.”

Wow, she’s not letting this go, is she? So the opposite of my own mom, who’s never displayed the slightest interest in my love life. Although she’d definitely disapprove if I told her I’d gotten hitched in Vegas to a stranger.

“What about his past girlfriends? Did you say the same thing to any of them?”

She gives me a sad smile. “I’ve tried setting him up with girls in town, but it never goes past a single date. Kristen’s the only one of my kids to ever get serious about someone, but she’s alone now, too. We all are.”

Oh God, that got depressing. “Maybe they haven’t mentioned it?”

She shakes her head. “I could see Grayson doing that, but Owen wouldn’t. He’s not the type to hide things or play games. He’s like his father, in that regard. Falls in love once and that’s it.”

My first urge is to laugh, but I hold it in. “Mrs. Tay—” I clear my throat at her pointed glare. “Cheryl, I mean. Owen doesn’t love me. That’s not what this is.”

And again, she doesn’t seem deterred by my statement. “I think you’d be surprised at how he really feels. He keeps everything too bottled up to let it out, though.”

My belly dips disconcertingly. “Did he tell you something?”

“No. But a mother knows.”

That seems like a stretch to me, but what do I know? Her parenting style is wildly different from my mother’s.

The twins return with an armful of books each. “Look, Grandma,” Jenny exclaims. “They have Fancy Nancy books.”

“And Elephant and Piggie,” Jamie adds.

“That’s great.” Cheryl smiles warmly at them, then turns back to me. “Just think about what I said. Sometimes the best decisions are made with the heart, not the head.”

I nod, sensing she won’t drop it otherwise.

“Are you coming Saturday?” Jenny asks me again.

That’s right. I never answered her. “If I’m still here, I’d love to.”

She squeals in excitement, earning a sharp look from Abby across the room.

At least the children's area is tucked away in the corner of the building out of earshot from others, except for loud squeals. Everyone would know Owen's business otherwise.

"I'm going to look for a book now." I gesture over my shoulder toward the fiction shelves. "I'm sure Owen will keep you updated on what the lawyer says tomorrow."

Cheryl leans in to give me a hug, and I close my eyes briefly, unintentionally imagining her as my own mother before I remember myself. "I have a feeling I'll see you again before you leave."

My mouth opens and shuts, not sure how to respond, and instead I make my goodbyes to Jenny and Jamie before traveling across the room to search for a book.

Well, that was unexpected. A little unsettling, too. She basically implied Owen's in love with me, when that's obviously not true. He'd be mortified if he heard her talking about him like that.

Maybe it's best to keep this visit to myself. I don't want to cause drama between him and his mom, then dip back to Chicago and leave him with the mess. I'll tell him the good news about the gallery photos and stay quiet about my library excursion.

In love with me. How ridiculous. We've essentially known each other for a matter of days. We're meeting with a divorce lawyer tomorrow.

But that doesn't stop a tendril of warmth from snaking its way through my chest at the thought.

# CHAPTER 12



OWEN

“*I*’m getting the hang of this hiking thing,” Harper says as she passes the property line back to my house. “Did you see me climb the boulder today? So much better than last time.”

I keep my grin to myself. I didn’t want to make a big deal of it earlier in case she was self-conscious. “You’re learning.”

“Maybe I’ll look for trails near me when I get home.”

“You’ll have to let me know how it goes.”

Now that we’ll be in regular contact about my business, I at least have a legitimate reason to talk to her again.

My back twinges and I stop for a moment, holding my side. I’ve got to figure out a more comfortable position to sleep on the couch.

“You okay?” she asks with concern.

Now she sounds like me. “Yeah, fine.”

“Is your back hurting?”

“A little. Nothing to worry about.”

Her fingers twist together in front of her. “It’s from sleeping on the couch, isn’t it? We can switch tonight. I’ve taken your bed way too long.”

“You’re my guest. I’m not going to make you do that.”

She bites at her bottom lip and glances at me, then looks away. “We could always share the bed. It doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

I keep my gaze straight ahead, not wanting her to see how much I like the idea. “Yeah, okay.”

“It’s a big bed,” she continues, though I already agreed. Is she trying to convince me? Or herself? “And we’re both adults. We can share it without anything... happening.”

I swallow roughly, trying my damndest not to imagine what might happen lying next to her in the dark. Her backside pressed to my front, teasing me as she shifts, my dick lengthening against her. Slowly rocking, her movements encouraging me, until I slip in. Sinking into her all the way, pumping into her from behind, her cries spurring me on...

Fuck. I'm not supposed to be imagining that.

I ignore the flush of warmth that travels over me and swallow hard, getting rid of any trace of lust in my voice. "Of course. Do you, um, have any idea how long you might stay after today?"

Her hands tug at the bottom of her shirt, another flannel she's borrowing from me. The thing drowned her when she first put it on, but with the sleeves rolled up and the ends knotted around her waist, it seems purposeful. Not that I've been particularly paying attention to how she looks in my clothes...

"I was actually talking about that with my boss yesterday. I haven't booked a flight home yet, so in case there isn't one available later this afternoon, the earliest I could get to Chicago would be midday tomorrow. And it doesn't make sense to miss a whole week and come in for a half day on Friday when everyone's probably leaving early for the weekend, anyway. Plus, I'm kind of interested in this festival you all keep hyping up so much..."

She tugs again at her shirt, drawing my eye to the sliver of skin exposed at her waist. I resist the impulse to trace a finger over the area. "All of that to say," she continues, "would it be okay if I stayed until Sunday?"

She could stay forever if she wanted. "That's fine with me."

She gives me a relieved smile. "I thought you'd want your house back to yourself."

"No, I... I like you being here."

I swallow hard again, wondering if I revealed too much, if she'll think it's a pickup line or something like she did before.

Or if she'll pull away, realizing this hasn't been a casual thing for me since the beginning.

And the longer she's here, the harder it'll be to say goodbye.

But instead of doing either of those things, her smile turns sly and she moves closer, wrapping her arm through the crook of my elbow. "You don't like being alone as much as you thought you did, do you?"

"With the right person, it's not so bad."

Her face pales. Ah, shit. I shouldn't have said that aloud.

"There's a spider," she whispers, pointing ahead. "On your porch."

What?

I glance in the direction she points where a wolf spider rests on the first step. "Just give it a wide berth."

Her nostrils flare as she looks up at me. "And what if it jumps on me and eats my face off?"

How'd she leap to that conclusion?

"Here." I unwrap her arm from mine and move forward, brushing the spider to the edge with the toe of my boot. "All gone."

"No, it's not. Now it's lurking. Waiting for a chance to get me."

"It's a spider. It doesn't have an agenda."

She shakes her hands out in front of her, giving a full body shudder. "I've got the heebie jeebies now."

"I didn't know you felt so strongly about spiders."

"Yeah, like any reasonable person does. That thing was the size of my fist."

It wasn't a quarter of that, but I don't argue with her. "Well, out of sight, out of mind."

"Maybe for you," she mutters, eyeing the porch steps. "Okay, I'm making a run for it."

She bolts up the steps and into the house and I calmly follow behind her, amused at her antics as she checks the rooms carefully for any other arachnid trespassers.

“Okay, we’re all clear.”

“Good, I was worried.”

She pushes my shoulder playfully. “Don’t be like that. Not all of us are mountain men who live out in the wilderness.”

She doesn’t move away, her hand lingering on my arm. And even though I have long sleeves on, I swear her touch burns right through the flannel.

Her cheeks pinken as her hand drops. “I should go take a shower before our appointment.”

“Yeah, sure.”

She retreats to the bathroom, my mind filling in the gaps of her naked in the tub, her slick body covered with soap, those delicate hands washing herself...

Damn it. No. Didn’t I just tell myself I’m not imagining stuff like that?

I put away the clean dishes from last night in an attempt to distract myself and pause when I hear my name coming from the bathroom. What the hell?

Harper calls out louder and I unfreeze, heading to the bathroom door. My hand hovers over the knob for a second before I stuff it in my pocket. “Yeah?”

“Do you have any more shampoo?” she shouts from over the spray of the water. “The bottle in here is empty.”

Shit. I forgot I used the last of it yesterday. “There’s a new one under the sink.”

“Can you hand it to me through the curtain? I don’t want to get the floor all wet.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, inhaling and exhaling deeply. Why is she doing this to me?



Opening the door, my gaze immediately lands on her panties on the ground. They're black and unadorned and not anything particularly sexy—probably part of that pack she bought for cheap at the general store—but I can't look away all the same. You'd think I was a horny teenager based on my response to them, lust curling low in my belly, an image popping in my head of her seductively sliding them off, a sly smile playing over her lips as she watches me, gauging my reaction.

“Owen?”

I blink rapidly, willing away the fantasy, and retrieve the shampoo bottle from the cabinet. “Got it. I'll hand it to you through the front.”

Her fingers slide through the gap between the shower curtain and the wall, blindly grasping until I put the bottle in her hands.

“Thanks.”

I slip out of the bathroom, shutting the door gently behind me. Is it my imagination or did her voice sound off? Like she was nervous or... Jesus. I need to get a grip. It was a normal interaction for her. Totally non-sexual. Asking someone to hand them a shampoo bottle, no private body parts seen, simply a friend helping the other.

That's what she'd told me at the bar the other night, right? That she liked me as a person. As a friend. And honestly, it's probably more than I could have asked for. She wants an annulment. To be out of my life in any kind of romantic way.

Except, that's not what I want. The more I spend time with her, the closer we get... I want her. Plain and simple.

And even knowing she wants to separate, I can't shake the sense that there's still a spark between us, grasping on to those slightest bits of encouragement she's shown me.

Kissing me in thanks for helping her with her ankle.

Her gaze fixed on my torso as she'd sleepily stumbled out of the bedroom the other morning.

Blushing as her hand rested on me before her shower.

Do those things mean something? Am I putting significance where it doesn't belong?

Or are my instincts right?

My dick twitches as I imagine myself heading into the bathroom and her opening the shower curtain instead, inviting me in with her. Shucking my clothes and crowding her into the back of the tub, skimming my lips over her neck, breathing in that floral scent of hers. Tasting her sweetness as I explore her kiss, her mouth opening under mine, eager for my tongue. My hands tangling through her soft tresses, roaming the curves of her body, learning every dip and hollow of her. Pressing our lower halves together...

I suck in a breath, fully hard now. Shit. This wasn't supposed to happen.

I keep an ear out for the spray of the shower as I fumble to the bedroom, locking the door behind me. I've never had a need to lock this before, debated whether to even put one on when installing it, but I'm grateful for it now as I slip my pants down and grip my cock.

I shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't be giving in to the desperate urge to touch myself to thoughts of Harper. It'll only make it that much harder to resist her in real life, to remember that she'll never be mine like that.

But I'm too far gone.

My hand slides up and down my dick, imagining that first moment our lower halves meet and the rush of pleasure that follows. Teasing her wet pussy with my cock, rubbing the head right where she needs it. The way she clutches at my shoulders, telling me she wants me, one of those alluring legs of hers hitching over my hip to pull me closer.

Sinking into her heat, the sensation beyond comprehension as I make a guttural sound of satisfaction, everything in my world settling into place. Each time I draw out and back in, a little more of me falling under her spell. She's the only one I want. The only one I crave like this.

My strokes increase, both in my fantasy and in real life, my breathing picking up, wishing so badly it wasn't all in my head. That this could really happen. For me to somehow convince this headstrong woman to give me a chance. Give *us* a chance. If reality is half as good as what my imagination can come up with, the two of us would be explosive together.

Hearing her moans of delight as I pump inside her. The sweet sting of her nails on my shoulders as she grips me tight. Her thighs trembling as she takes everything I give her, her cries growing louder as she reaches that edge, gasping my name as I make her come. Pouring into her after, the release like nothing I've experienced before.

A tingle races down my spine, my lower belly clenching, ready to come for real.

Oh, shit. Not—

I jet on the bedsheets, biting my lip to keep my groans contained. But a part of me wants to let loose, to see if she hears me. If she likes the idea of me jacking off to fantasies of her.

I pant heavily, bracing a forearm on the mattress, and as the haze leaves me, I shake my head, thankful I had the sense to stay quiet. She wouldn't like me doing this. In fact, she'd probably be horrified. And now that I've let myself do it once... It'll be hard to keep from doing it again.

Grabbing a few tissues off the nightstand, I clean off and tuck myself back in my boxers, praying she's still in the shower and didn't hear any of that. What was I thinking to do that with her in the house?

I strip the bed and carry the bundle of sheets to the washer, but I'm not halfway across the living room before the bathroom door opens. "Are you doing laundry?" Harper asks. "Mind if I stick some stuff in, too?"

"Sure," I croak out, hugging the bundle tighter to my chest. If she sees what's on here...

"Good idea to wash those," she comments as she returns with a pile of clothes in her arms. "I can put them in the

washer.”

She moves to take the sheets from me and I evade her, hightailing it to the washer. “I can do it.”

God, she probably thinks I’m a nutjob.

She sidles next to me as I cram the load inside the machine. “Anal about your laundry?”

A choking noise emits from my throat. “Something like that.”

She places her clothes atop the sheets and I dump detergent over them before twisting the start dial. That was too close.

“Are you grabbing a shower before we meet with Larry, too?”

Oh, no. The word *shower* is going to be a trigger now, my mind immediately racing to us together in it again.

“Do I smell that bad?” I joke, trying to distract myself.

She leans in and makes a delicate sniff, my heart picking up in speed with her this close. Looking up at me with a grin playing over her lips, she says, “You smell like the outdoors.”

I swallow hard. “Is that good?”

Her smile widens. “Yeah, I kind of like it.”

Is she... flirting with me?

I lean down, unable to help myself, and kiss her full lips, groaning at the taste of her. At how much I’ve wanted to do this for real and not just as a pretend thank you kiss. There’s no way I can pass this off as a thank you, either. Not with the way my blood is pumping in my veins, with the way I can’t hide my urgency, my enthusiasm. A part of me is caught in my fantasy again.

She kisses me back, hesitantly at first, then harder, until she’s matching my pace, her hand cupping my jaw, opening her mouth under mine.

Oh, fuck, yes. An eager Harper is all I’ve ever wanted.

Except, she's suddenly gone, her eyes wide as she stares at me from several feet away, hand over her mouth. "Owen, I..."

She trails off, no apparent end to her sentence. But it's not like I have anything to add. I can barely even get my breathing under control.

The silence between us thickens, until it's a tangible presence in the room. I can't apologize, though. Not when I've wanted to do that since the first moment I laid eyes on her in that Vegas hotel bar. Did we kiss the night of our wedding? I never asked her if she remembers doing that.

"We shouldn't have done that," she finally says, looking away. "We're about to meet a lawyer to get an annulment."

My jaw tightens, but it's not like I have anything to counter that. It's a fact.

Her fingers tug at the bottom of her shirt, the same one she was wearing when she showed up on my doorstep four days ago. How in the world has she only been here four days?

"It wouldn't make sense to start anything up," she stammers, her cheeks flushed. It's the first time I've seen her flustered like this.

"You're right," I murmur, even though a part of me wants to throw caution to the wind and tell her I want to do a hell of a lot more than just kiss her.

"Even if there is an... attraction," she adds, seeming not to have heard me.

"You're attracted to me?" I blurt out. Now I'm like her, saying the first thing that comes to mind without thinking about it.

She looks up at me, those rich, brown eyes of hers unfathomable. I wish I could read her better, that I could tell what's going through her mind.

Because I have no idea where to go from here.

# CHAPTER 13



HARPER

Am I attracted to him? Is he kidding me?

With that muscular lumberjack physique? With those kissable lips hidden in his beard? With those soulful gray eyes boring into me, searching for everything I'm not saying?

I glance back at my feet. "It doesn't matter. I'm leaving this weekend." Maybe it's not even a good idea to stay that long. Especially when...

Oh, God. I invited him to share the bed tonight. How can I sleep next to him after he kissed me like that? The way he let go, no restraint, as if a dam had broken. As if it was... necessary.

"I know you're leaving." There's something almost like bitterness in his tone, but it's not as if he didn't know from the beginning.

I don't want to argue about it, though. What is there to even debate? I'm leaving. End of story.

"I'm going to get ready," I murmur, retreating to the bedroom. I can't stand to hear that mix of sadness and accusation in his voice again.

The car ride is silent into town when we finally leave half an hour later, my knee bouncing up and down the whole way. Why'd he have to muddle my head like this right before we have an official meeting about separating?

I put it out of my mind as best I can as he holds the door open for me at a small building just off the main street in town. Further down, there's also a police and fire station, as well as an elementary school.

"Owen, hi," the receptionist says. She looks curiously at me, then back at Owen. "I was surprised to see your name on the appointment list."

Her gaze shifts to me, unabashedly staring, but Owen either doesn't pick up on it or doesn't care. "Is Larry ready for

us?”

“He’s finishing up with Henry now.” She brings a hand to one side of her mouth. “Divorce,” she whispers.

Oh, God. What kind of secretary is she to be spilling people’s secrets like that? What happened to confidentiality?

“What was the reason for your visit?” she asks outright. “I need to update your file.”

Yeah, right.

“Larry knows,” Owen replies, not giving her anything.

She gives him a tight-lipped smile in response. “You can take a seat until he’s ready for you.” She gestures to the two chairs by the door.

“Is she a town busybody, too?” I whisper to him when we’re out of earshot.

His crossed arms tighten over his chest. Oh, crap. I forgot we’re not speaking after the *incident*. “Yep,” he says after a while, staring straight ahead.

The contents of my stomach roll around unsettlingly. I hate people being angry with me.

“Please don’t be mad about—”

“Not here,” he breathes, barely audible. “And I’m not mad.”

“You’re clearly not happy.”

He’s silent, his jaw clenching.

“Owen.” I shift until I meet his gaze, the dullness there surprising me. What’s going on with him? “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he mutters, shutting his eyes.

He doesn’t seriously expect me to believe that, does he?

I glance at the receptionist, her watchful stare making me pause.

Owen’s right. Not here.



We sit in silence again, the tension unbearable until the door to Larry's office opens and a large man with red-rimmed eyes exits. That would be the future divorcé.

The second man who exits isn't nearly so sad, his gray hair parted neatly to one side and blue eyes clear and compassionate. "Owen, come on in."

We follow him into his office, and I shut the door securely behind us, not wanting any gossip to leak through.

"You must be Harper," Larry says and holds his hand out for me to shake, his grip firm. "Sounds like you two have got yourself in quite the pickle."

"Um... yes." What else is there to say?

He takes a seat behind his desk and motions for us to sit as well. "How about you tell me what happened?"

Pausing a moment, I wait to see if Owen takes the reins, but he's still stone-faced. Guess I'll do the talking, then.

I recite the same story I told Owen the other day, a furrow forming between Larry's brows the longer I continue.

"So you knew you were married the whole time?"

"I—" I clear my throat, not liking the look in his eye. "I didn't think Vegas marriages were real."

My cheeks flush at the unimpressed stare he gives me, but he thankfully doesn't comment on my naivete. "Hopefully, that works in your favor, but I wouldn't bank on it."

"So, what does that mean? They'll deny the annulment? We have to stay married?"

Something flutters in my chest but I ignore it, waiting on his response.

"No, you'll file for divorce instead."

I slump back in my seat, pursing my lips. Divorce? That seems so... final. Like a failure. I don't want to be divorced in my mid-twenties. "Isn't that expensive?"

He shrugs. “Depends on how hard you make it for each other with your division of assets. Luckily, there are no custody issues to sort out.” One of his brows pops up. “I assume there are no children?”

My hand rests over my stomach unconsciously until I snatch it away and tuck it under my thigh. What am I doing? “No, there’s not. And we’ve agreed that we don’t want anything from each other.”

“Really? You’d legally be entitled to half his property. Half his business. Half his house.”

Owen stiffens next to me, and I resist the urge to smooth his ruffled feathers. Whose side is this lawyer on? “I’d never do that to Owen. He earned everything he has.”

The sly smile Larry gives me makes me think he said that on purpose to see how I would respond. And I guess I... passed?

Everyone in this town is way too involved in other people’s business.

“All right, if you’re set on an annulment, you’ll need to decide which one of you will be the petitioner. I’d recommend Harper, since she was the one who instigated this.”

I nod, avoiding the troubled mood emanating from Owen.

“You’ll have to go to the county clerk’s office and ask for a petition for annulment. Fill it out and feel free to call me if you need help with it. Once you file the papers with them, Owen will need to be served. Someone other than the petitioner has to do it, so you can hire a service or have a person you trust do it.”

“Maybe your sister?” I offer, turning to Owen. “I don’t think your mom would help.”

He makes a grunting sound of agreement. “Yeah, Kristen will do it. I’ll give her a heads up.”

“Great,” Larry says. “You’ll file your response and wait for your court date. In the meantime, gather all the evidence you’ll need to support your claim. This could be personal

testimony, documents, witnesses, et cetera. Then expect a hearing before a judge in a few months—”

“Months?” I interrupt. “I thought it might be a few weeks.”

“Unless you happen to personally know a judge and can get on their docket faster, you’ll have to wait for however long it takes.”

I bite my bottom lip, keeping to myself how stupid the court system works. “So there’s a chance we could go through this whole rigmarole for months and they’ll still reject the annulment?”

“Yes,” Larry replies, unfazed.

“Even though neither of us believed we were married?”

He spreads his hands wide and makes a shrugging gesture. “The fact that Owen doesn’t remember the events of the night because of his level of intoxication will help your case. He clearly couldn’t make a sound decision.” He points a finger at me. “But you remembered everything and kept it to yourself for five years.”

“I didn’t know—”

“Yes, yes. I know. But you need to come up with a more stable argument if you’re using that as your defense. That you two had no contact with each other during the ensuing time will help your case, too. Judges don’t like to see two people in a committed relationship requesting an annulment.”

“No, there’s no... relationship.” I cough into my hand, studiously ignoring Owen next to me. Why, oh why, did he have to kiss me like that right before this meeting?

“Well, hopefully you get a lenient judge.”

“Do you know any of the judges? Could you talk to someone for us? Make sure they understand?”

His brows narrow. “You’re not suggesting I’d bribe them?”

No, that’s not what I meant. But thankfully I don’t have to respond as Owen cuts in.

“You know she’s not suggesting that.” He stands and holds his hand out to Larry to shake. “Thanks for meeting with us. We’ll file that paperwork with the Clerk’s office. And I’d appreciate your... discretion with this. People think Harper’s in town to help with my business.”

He nods and shakes Owen’s hand. “I wish you both luck. And I’ll do what I can to make this process easier for both of you.”

We leave and I politely smile at the receptionist on our way out, praying she didn’t hear any of that in there.

Owen opens the passenger door of his truck for me and pauses. “The courthouse is about an hour away on the other side of the county.”

“I’ll head over this afternoon.” It’s not like I have anything else pressing to do.

His gaze flicks over me, not settling anywhere. “You want me to go with you?”

For a two-hour round trip drive with this awkwardness between us? No, thanks. “I’ll be fine by myself.”

He nods, looking down at his scuffed boots.

God, I hate this. “Owen, I can see about a flight later today \_\_\_”

“No.” He lets out a deep sigh, some of the tension in his broad shoulders lessening. “I want you to stay till Sunday like you planned. I’m sorry for being a grumpy ass. I’m sorry for...” He takes a moment to swallow. “For kissing you.”

I want to tell him he doesn’t have to apologize. That I liked it. That if our situation was different, I’d do it again.

But that wouldn’t serve any purpose. It would only confuse things more.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I just don’t want things to be weird now.”

“No, it won’t be.” He seems to shake off the rest of his tenseness, his gaze clear as he meets my eye. “I’ll behave.”

Behave? That makes it sound like he's holding himself back. Like he would want to do... more.

A tingle runs over me, from the tips of my breasts to deep in my lower belly. No, no. Wrong thing to focus on.

"Are we good?" he asks, cautious hope in his voice.

I study him closer, noting the knit between his brows, the way he's shifting his weight between his feet. Is my answer that important to him?

I reach out and squeeze his hand. "Yeah, we're good."

He gives me a brief smile and closes my door before heading for the driver's side.

It's not as simple as saying things are good now, though. Not when I keep internally reacting to him.

Guess I have to behave, too.

\* \* \*

FILING the papers at the clerk's office was easier than expected, but now I have to face a much harder task.

Owen's family.

Not that Kristen was mean or anything during the few minutes I met her Sunday afternoon, but I sensed a little standoffishness. Then again, Owen had just thrown her for a loop telling her we were married. And I was essentially babysitting her kids with no idea of who I was.

Ugh. When did my life become so ridiculous?

I pull into the parking lot of a small building in the center of Kirkwood, *The Kirkwood Chronicle* in bold letters along the side. Owen said she works as a copy editor here.

The woman at the front desk directs me toward a cubicle near the back, Kristen's brown bob visible over the gray partition.

She looks up as I approach, prominent dark circles under her eyes catching my attention.

“Are you okay?” I blurt out. Damn it. I shouldn’t have said that.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Is it that obvious?”

“I’m sorry,” I rush to say. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, no.” She waves off my apology. “I haven’t been sleeping the last couple of nights.” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “They’ve laid a few people off here and I’m worried...”

“Oh, yeah. I understand.” My thumb fiddles with the clasp of the manila envelope in my hand.

“Are those the papers I have to give Owen?”

“Yeah.” I give them to her. “Thank you for helping us with this. The sooner we can get all the paperwork filed, the better.”

She shakes her head slowly. “I still can’t believe he’s married.”

“It’s not for real, though.”

“I know, but... When he came home from that Vegas trip and told me about you—” She cuts herself off abruptly, her blue eyes widening.

“What are you talking about?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.”

“No, really. Tell me.” She can’t say something like that and not expect me to go crazy. Owen talked to her about me five years ago?

She presses her lips together tightly, glancing around the room as if Owen’s going to pop up from behind the copy machine. “He said he met this amazing girl,” she reluctantly tells me. “Someone he connected with, which, if you know Owen, is a big deal. But then it turned out the number you’d given was a fake. He was kind of broken up about it.”

My mouth opens and shuts, but I don't know what to say. "It was off by one digit. And I... I was just having a fun night. I was twenty-one. Not thinking about the future or anything."

"I get it. We all do dumb things at that age. I mean, look at me. One night of not being careful with a condom and I'm pregnant with twins." She holds a hand to her temple. "Shit. I shouldn't have said that, either. I love my kids. But they're also... a lot sometimes."

I give her a weak smile. "How are those snowflakes Jenny made?"

A burble of laughter escapes her, a slightly hysterical edge to it. "She's made even more. I don't know where she found so much paper."

"Not that I'm an expert, but they seem like great kids."

She pauses for a moment and takes a breath. "Thank you. And could you not tell Owen that I told you that stuff? About him or the..." She stands quickly to look in the adjacent cubicle, but it's empty. "The condom thing? He doesn't know the twins were an accident. None of the family, actually. James and I got married right away. Oh God, I'm babbling." She physically places her hand over her mouth.

"Your secret's safe with me. I promise."

She nods. "Thanks. I'll drop by after work to serve Owen the annulment papers."

"Okay." I don't leave just yet, though, something nagging at me. "If you, um, ever need someone to talk to... especially someone who's not family, I'm happy to listen."

Some of the tiredness surrounding her seems to clear. "Thank you."

I smile and exchange numbers with her before returning to my car, my brain turning back to what she said about Owen. I can't believe he told his sister about me. That I was amazing, that I—

Oh my God. That first day when I showed up, he said he'd felt a connection. He asked if I wanted to give this thing

between us a shot... and I turned him down. Practically laughed in his face assuming it was a line.

I internally cringe, my cheeks heating. Knowing him now, of course it wasn't a pickup line. He doesn't do stuff like that. What must he have thought when I said that? That I was a total bitch?

And the way he kissed me this morning, with such need... Has he been holding a candle for me all this time?

No, that's crazy. I'm giving myself way too much credit.

But... he hasn't dated anyone else. Has he been waiting for me?

Jesus, Harper. Get a grip. He wouldn't have dated anyone, regardless of me.

Besides, what am I supposed to do with this information? It doesn't change our circumstances. Doesn't change that he has a life in Crescent Pass and I have one back in Chicago. Even five years ago it wouldn't have worked. We were still two-thousand miles apart.

I rub at my chest, ignoring the fluttering going on in there. That really needs to stop.

Especially before it gets any worse.



# CHAPTER 14



OWEN

Duke lifts his head from his spot in the corner, attention tuned toward the open door. How long have I been working?

I shut the lathe off and set down the table leg I was making, steeling myself for Harper's presence, the way she seems to take up all the air in the room, the way my body gravitates toward her. I need to stop reacting to her like that.

It's not the girl I've been trying to put out of my mind all afternoon, though. It's Kristen.

My mood darkens when I spot the manila envelope in her hand. Three guesses as to what's in there.

"Got a little frosty in here," she says, making her way around the workbench in the center of the room. Duke comes up and noses her palm, then returns to his bed.

"I can turn on the space heater."

"No, I mean your mood. Like a big storm cloud dropped over you when you caught sight of this." She waves the thick envelope in her hands around.

I roll my eyes. "You're being dramatic." How in the world did she notice that? Am I that easy to read?

She makes a noncommittal noise before turning serious. "Owen Taylor, you are hereby served with papers for your annulment to Harper Calloway."

I take it from her, tossing it next to the table leg.

"Hey, that was supposed to be official."

"Yeah, well..." I trail off, not knowing where I'm going with the thought.

"Mom said you're still in love with her."

If I roll my eyes again, they might get stuck in the back of my head. "Mom needs to mind her own business."

She snorts. “Like that’ll happen.” She leans against the workbench and crosses her arms over her chest. “I talked to Harper for a bit when she stopped by The Chronicle.”

“Yeah?” What’s she going to tell me? That I’m making a mistake letting Harper go, too? Does no one realize she doesn’t want to stay married?

“She was nice. I can see why you were... I don’t know, drawn to her. There’s something about her that made me keep talking.”

I nod, knowing exactly what she’s referring to.

“How are you holding up?”

I suck my teeth in annoyance, the sound making her brows narrow.

“Don’t make that noise to me,” she says. “I’m trying to be sympathetic to your moping.”

“Jesus, I’m not moping.”

Duke perks up at our raised voices, but I signal for him to stay where he is.

“Sure looks like it from where I’m standing.” Her hands move to her hips, just like Mom does when she’s riled up. I don’t dare point it out, though. “It’s five years ago all over again.”

I scrub a hand down my face. “I kissed her earlier and she rejected me. Again. And she’s supposed to stay with me the next two days and I promised it won’t be weird, but it obviously will.”

Her ire vanishes. “Shit, Owen.”

“I just...” God, I would never say this stuff to her under normal circumstances, but nothing about the last week has been normal. “I thought maybe there was a chance, but I was wrong. She made it clear she’s leaving this weekend and doesn’t want to start anything up. And yeah, that fucking sucks, but it’s her decision and I have to respect that.”

“You are in love with her,” she whispers.

Why does everyone keep saying that? In actual number of days I've spent with her, I've known her for only a week. That's not enough time to fall in love with someone. Even if they tick all your boxes. And you can't get them out of your head. And the thought of them leaving makes your chest physically ache...

Damn it.

I rub my breastbone and mutter, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Owen..." The pity in her voice is unbearable.

"Seriously. I don't. But thank you for helping with this." I gesture toward the envelope on the table. As much as I wish it wasn't an issue to begin with, I'm in over my head, apparently. "I know you're busy with the twins."

She lays a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I'm never too busy for my little brother."

A small smile escapes me. I haven't been littler than her in a long time. "Thanks."

"I have to get the kids." She hitches her thumb behind her. "But call me if you need anything."

I nod, watching her bend down to scratch Duke under his chin, then leave. Releasing a sigh, I pick up the table leg I was working on, then set it down, no longer in the mood to work. It's about quitting time, anyway.

A mouthwatering aroma hits my nose as I walk in the door to the house and I pause in the entryway, drinking in the sight of Harper bopping around the kitchen, singing to herself in a sweet soprano some top forty hit I couldn't tell you the name of. She flips over the chicken cooking in the skillet with a pair of tongs, then refills a coffee mug with a bottle of zinfandel from the counter and takes a long sip. She resumes her song, her hips wiggling, and I bite my lip to keep myself from laughing as my chest glows with warmth.

Why the hell am I moping like Kristen said when I've got an amazing girl in my kitchen dancing, singing, and making

me dinner? I need to appreciate the time I have with her, not wait in dread for her to leave.

“Need help with anything?”

Her song stops mid-sentence as she swivels toward me, her wine nearly sloshing out of the cup. “How long have you been standing there?”

I join her in the kitchen, glancing at the chicken breasts she’s sautéing. They look as good as they smell. “Long enough to know you’re a singer as well as a dancer.”

A pretty flush takes over her cheeks. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. You’ve got some talent.”

She tucks her hair behind one ear, smiling at her feet. “You’re in a better mood than I thought you’d be,” she murmurs.

And if she’d visited me a few minutes ago in my workshop, she’d have been right about the bad mood. But I don’t want to waste any more time with her. “Is that why you made dinner? To soften me up?”

Her grin grows wider as she meets my eye. “Maybe.”

Christ, that smile, the sparkle in her gaze... I have to remember she’s not flirting with me. That’s just how she acts.

I stick my hands in my pockets so I won’t reach for her. “I told you I’d behave.”

She nods. “Earlier, you seemed so...”

I clear my throat, interrupting her. “I’m all good. Promise. Now, what can I do to help?”

She eyes me skeptically for a moment, but directs me to take over the chicken while she prepares a salad, and the mood in the room lightens as we finish cooking and eat at the table, her enjoyment of the food just as obvious as when we cooked on Monday.

“You ready to learn a new recipe now that you’ve mastered this one?”

“Whoa, whoa. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I haven’t mastered anything by any means.”

“I’d say this is pretty good.” I spear a bite of chicken with my fork and pop it in my mouth, savoring the butter garlic flavor.

“I can’t wait to make it for Elena and Kelly. They’re going to die when they see me cook.”

“I bet they’ll be impressed.” I shift in my seat, not liking the reminder of her returning to Chicago, even though it’s a fact. “You, uh, have any plans for tomorrow?”

Her brows raise. “What do you think?”

I guess that’s a no. “You up for taking a trip?”

Excitement flashes in her gaze. “Like our waterfall one?”

“I was thinking of going out in my canoe. There’s a river about a twenty-minute drive from here that’s pretty calm.”

“You own a canoe? Let me guess—you handmade it yourself.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Well, yeah...”

She chuckles, seeming pleased with herself. “Of course you did. Yeah, I’d love to. I’ve never been canoeing.”

“Of course you haven’t,” I fire back without heat.

“Touché.” She smiles at me again. “One more thing to check off my bucket list. Oh, and I have a bucket list item for you, too.”

The gleam in her eye has me wary. “You do?”

“Want to watch *Dirty Dancing* with me tonight? You said you’ve never seen it.”

She already made me watch *How to Lose A Guy in 10 Days* with her the other night. Like I’m going to say no to her, though. “Yeah, sure.”

After dinner, Johnny does his best to teach Baby how to dance on the screen, “Hungry Eyes” playing over the montage. I glance at Harper on the other end of the couch, my body

itching to scoot closer, to close the cushion-sized distance between us. To lay an arm over her shoulders and tug her into my side, inhaling her sweet perfume. To dip my face down and skim my lips over the delicate column of her neck...

Shit. This is exactly where my mind isn't supposed to go. How many times do I have to remind myself?

I shift in my spot, refocusing on the movie, but it's much more fascinating to watch Harper instead. The way she brings her hands to her chest when something heartwarming happens on screen. The way she mouths the lines along with the characters. The way she looks over at me, a question in her dark eyes as she asks, "What is it?"

I shake my head, turning back to the TV. "Nothing."

Patrick Swayze's dance moves aren't enough to hold my attention, though. The countdown to bedtime is on. And more specifically, time to *share* the bed. My dick twitches behind my fly and I clear my mind, not letting the thought go further.

Maybe I should stay on the couch tonight like I've been doing. Even if my back twinges at just the idea of doing that. A sore back surely has to be better than a sleepless night. There's no way I'll be able to fall asleep with her less than a foot away in my bed.

"Seriously, what's wrong?"

Crap. She's on to me. "I have a confession," I tell her gravely.

Her brows rise as she waits for me to share.

"I think I have a crush on Patrick Swayze," I say with mock seriousness.

She picks up a couch pillow and swats me with it, laughing. At least it got her off my tail.

A gentle shower starts up outside, drumming against the roof in a steady beat. And even as I do my best to pay attention to the rest of the movie, the lulling rain and darkness seem to press in tighter and tighter, whispering *almost bedtime, almost bedtime* in my ear.

“Mind if I get in the bathroom first?”

I blink, glancing up to realize the movie is over. Damn, how long was I in my head? “Yeah, sure.”

When she leaves, I wash up the few dishes in the kitchen sink, trying desperately to focus on anything but Harper in my bed soon.

Why the fuck am I overthinking this, anyway? She hasn't seemed nervous all night.

I put the last dish in the drying rack and brace my arms on the counter. I need to get myself under control.

“Bathroom's all yours.”

I pop up, my back protesting the sudden movement.

“I heard that crack from here,” she says, wincing. “A good night's sleep in your bed will help with that.”

I grimace silently. There goes my half-baked idea to tell her my back is fine and I'll sleep on the couch after all.

She's in bed by the time I'm done brushing my teeth and changing, already turned away from me to face the window, snuggled up in the blankets. She looks over her shoulder, her eyes heavy-lidded. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I cautiously ease under the covers beside her, listening to her soft, steady breaths as she drifts off.

Wait, is that it? All of that worrying about sharing a bed just for her to... fall asleep? I'd laugh if it wouldn't wake her. God, I'm such an idiot. How fucking presumptuous of me to assume something might happen or it would be awkward. As usual, it was only me feeling anything.

I turn to face the door, the uneasy energy that's been building within me the last few hours finally dissipating. In its wake, something else creeps in to settle in the pit of my stomach, but I can't quite place it. Frustration? Disappointment?



I pull the blankets tighter around me and force my eyes shut, but I have a feeling sleep will be a long time coming.

# CHAPTER 15



HARPER

“Almost there.”

My gaze cuts over to Owen and back out the windshield, taking in the gorgeous autumn day. “Great.”

He studies me, but I pretend like I don’t notice, staring straight ahead.

“You okay?” he asks.

Ugh, why can’t he be oblivious? Everything was going fine last night and then I had to go and ruin it this morning.

I rub my forehead, remembering how wonderful I’d felt upon waking, my body warm and loose, a delicious outdoorsy, evergreen scent in my nose. Snuggling into the wall of warmth surrounding me, it had taken me a bit to register where I was—draped all over Owen, my arm slung across his chest, leg hitched over his hip, practically mauling him in his sleep. I had to disengage as silently as I could, praying he didn’t wake.

And all that wouldn’t be a big deal, except I haven’t been able to think of anything else since. The solid strength of him under me, the heat he was radiating, his masculine scent... Wait, did he ask me a question?

Oh, right. If I’m okay. Clearly, I’m not.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Are you?” That was a stupid question. Of course he is. He was sound asleep while I was all over him. “I mean... Look, the river.”

Thank God we’re here. Maybe I can focus on something else now.

I help him get the canoe out of the bed of his truck once we’re parked, not that I’m much use, and watch him as he positions it perpendicular to the short stretch of rocky shoreline.

“It’s okay to leave your truck here?” I ask, motioning toward the vehicle. We’re not even in a parking lot.

He shrugs. “Small town, remember?”

Right. How could I forget?

“You’ll sit in the bow,” he says, stabilizing the back of the canoe.

“Um, English, please?”

He smiles. “The front of the boat. Grab the oar on the seat when you sit down.”

I take a deep breath, praying I don’t make a fool of myself trying to get in, and fumble my way to my seat without tipping the whole thing over. Look at me, a regular outdoorswoman over here.

Owen sits behind me and maneuvers us away from the edge and out into the calm waters. “You ready to paddle?”

I awkwardly hold up my oar, not exactly sure what to do. “I’ve never used one of these before.”

“Watch me.” I twist to see how he does it. “One hand on the butt of the paddle, the other on the shaft.”

Butt and shaft? Who named these things?

He strokes the paddle into the water a few times, the action smooth and seamless. Of course he makes it look easy.

“The power behind your movements should come from your core more than your arms. Start out on your right side and let me know when you’re ready to switch. We should always be paddling on opposite sides.”

I nod and face forward. “How fast should I go?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll match whatever pace you set. We’re not in any rush.”

I start off slow, getting used to the feel of the canoe and paddle, and eventually pick up speed, the cool breeze heavenly as the October sun shines softly down on us.

“When was the last time you went canoeing?”

“I took Jamie and Jenny out a couple of times over the summer.”

“And how do I compare with them?”

There’s silence from behind me. Crap. And just like with hiking, I’m at the level of a six-year-old. If that.

“You know, you don’t have to answer that. Tell me about the festival tomorrow instead.”

He tells me about Jamie and Jenny’s choral performance with their class, the midway rides and games they have every year, and the artisans selling their wares.

“Have you ever set up a booth there?” I ask him, paddling toward a bend in the river.

“To do what? Sell tables? No.”

“I swear, I’ve never met anyone so unconcerned with growing their business.”

“And I’ve never met anyone so single-mindedly focused on it.” He says it good-naturedly, but it reminds me all the same that our goals are different.

“Are you regretting hiring me to do direct sales?”

“No. As long as you handle all the logistics, how I sell my stuff doesn’t matter much to me.”

Glad he’s come around, then.

A movement along the bottom of the canoe catches my eye, but it’s too quick to tell what it is. Probably water from the oar.

“So, your family will be there tomorrow, right?” If Jenny and Jamie are performing, Kristen and Cheryl will likely be there, too. Maybe we could—

Water drips on my shoe and I smooth it away, then freeze. That wasn’t water that caught my eye. It’s a monstrous wolf spider, even bigger than the one on the porch the other day.

I scramble backward, the boat rocking as a scream is trapped in my throat. Why, oh freaking why, are all these spiders popping up? Shouldn’t the cool weather be killing them off?

Owen says my name but I can't concentrate on him, my vision laser-focused on what this spider's doing. I move back more carefully, until I'm practically in Owen's lap, and that's when the spider makes a break for it, scuttling right toward me. I shriek and jump up, Owen's harsh exclamation barely registering as the canoe tips dangerously, water rushing in. Good. Maybe it'll drown the spider.

Oh, wait. Not good. I attempt to overcorrect the balance issue by lurching to the other side, but all that does is worsen the problem, the boat teetering on one edge until it goes over, flipping us overboard.

The chilly water hits me with a shock to my system, soaking me to the bone.

"Harper!"

I turn toward the sound of Owen's panicked voice, his hands gripping my shoulders, keeping me afloat. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"Where is it?" My gaze cuts through the river's surface, searching, but there's nothing to see. "Is it gone?"

"Is what gone? What the hell happened?"

"The wolf spider. It was coming at me."

His grip on me tightens. "You tipped the canoe over a spider?"

I finally look at him, his deep voice breaking through the insanity that briefly overtook me. "Um..."

Oh, shit. What have I done?

He rakes a hand through his dripping hair, water droplets clinging to his eyelashes. "Swim to shore. I'll get the canoe."

That's all? He's not going to yell? Shake me? Tell me what an idiot I am?

"Are you mad?" The question slips out before I can stop it. "Wait, don't answer that." Of course he's mad. He's soaking wet in the middle of a river. And it's not exactly the season to go swimming.

He stares back at me as he treads water, searching my gaze, and a small smile finally creeps over his lips, as if he can't help it. "I could never be mad at you."

An ooey, gooey warmth steals through my chest and I impulsively move in closer, kissing him softly. "Thank you."

He gives me a dry look. "I thought we were done with thank you kisses."

I shake my head. "Not if you give me a reason to do it. Anyone else would have been furious at me for dumping them in a river."

He rubs at the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. "You want me to be mad?"

"No, I—"

"Come on, your teeth are chattering."

Oh, they are.

He pulls the canoe behind him to the bank, his shirt clinging to him, muscles flexing as he moves through the water. Those same muscles I was draped over this morning in bed.

No, no. Don't think about that.

Water trickles off my clothes as I wade back the last stretch to dry land, creating a puddle underneath me. That cool breeze that felt refreshing earlier is now icy, needling my skin with tiny prickles.

I help Owen pull the canoe up to the shore, then roll it upside down to let the water drain out.

"I need to get the truck," he says.

I squeeze the water out of my hair as best I can, already anticipating a hot shower back at his place to get this river funk off me. "I'll wait here."

"You sure? You look pretty cold."

Crap, my teeth are chattering again, aren't they? Walking might warm me up a little, but I also have no desire to move

around in squishy shoes. “I’m fine. Really.”

I watch him leave, biting my lip as he strips off his shirt and wrings it out before he’s out of sight. The heavy muscles in his upper back tense enticingly, and I force myself to turn away. I shouldn’t be ogling him. I’ve put him in a terrible position having to clean up this mess I’ve made.

I have no idea how long he’s gone, but the wind does its best to leave me chilled. And yet, it somehow doesn’t manage to dry me off by the time he returns with the truck, my clothes still sopping wet.

“You’re shivering,” Owen murmurs as he steps out of the cab. “Come here.”

I gladly step into his arms, surprised at how warm he is. Or maybe I’m just that cold.

My head rests in the crook of his neck, my body flush against his, hands sliding around his waist. As much as I shouldn’t be encouraging this kind of closeness, I can’t help but savor it all the same. “Sorry if I’m making you colder.”

“You’re fine.” He runs a hand down my back, his big palm warm and heavenly. He stops at the edge of my jeans, right where he should. Where a gentleman would. Where I outright asked him to yesterday when I said we shouldn’t start anything up.

So why am I tempted to tell him to go further?

No, no. Bad Harper. I already pushed it kissing him impulsively like that in the water. Why do I keep doing these things to myself?

I move back and look up at Owen, but his gaze seems stuck on my chest. I glance down to find my nipples beaded, poking through the plastered fabric as if announcing *hey, look at me!*

I clear my throat and his head pops up, a flush running over his cheekbones. “I’ll get the canoe,” he mutters, turning away from me.



Retreating to the truck, I turn up the heater and attempt to dry out my clothes as he loads the canoe in the bed.

“Sorry I ruined the trip,” I whisper as he gets behind the wheel and adjusts the vents.

“Harper.” He waits until I look over at him. “You didn’t ruin anything.”

Pretty sure I did, but I appreciate his insistence all the same. “Maybe before I leave, we could have an uneventful trip. You know, where I don’t freak out over crossing logs, or twist my ankle, or tip over canoes...”

He lets out a sound of amusement as he reverses and starts back toward the main road. “I guess that stuff is pretty par for the course with you, huh?”

I smooth my palms down my wet jeans. “Seems like it. And... sorry for kissing you, too. Especially after I said we shouldn’t.”

“I’m not sorry. You can kiss me anytime you want.”

I cover my mouth to hide my grin, a flush of warmth stealing over me that has nothing to do with the truck’s heater. “Seriously, Owen.”

He reaches over without taking his eyes off the road, and fumbles for my hand. I place my palm in his, enjoying how his work-roughened fingertips slide against my skin.

“Did you book your flight for Sunday already?”

“Yeah, I did yesterday.” My thumb traces over a circular scar on his knuckle, unable to help myself.

“So you’ve got less than two days left. I don’t want to spend the rest of your time here pretending anymore. So just know that if you feel like kissing me, you absolutely can.”

A thrill runs through me and I quickly tamp it down. What’s there to be gained from acting on his invitation? I’m leaving soon. But still...

“Were you pretending before?”

“No, but I wasn’t being forthright, either.”

“So why say something now?”

He’s silent for a moment, taking the turn that’ll bring us to the highway. “What do I have to lose?”

I study our joined hands, the light dusting of hair on his forearms, over to the sinewy muscles of his upper arm. “When I showed up Sunday, you asked if I wanted to give this a shot. It wasn’t a line, was it?” I keep mum about what Kristen said yesterday, not wanting to betray her confidence.

“No.”

I nod, not sure what else to say. It doesn’t change anything. “I’m sorry I thought it was.”

He shrugs lightly. “You didn’t know me then.”

The rest of the ride back is silent, his hand still in mine. There’s not exactly tension between us per se, more of an unspoken... knowing. That if things were different...

No. Best not to go down that road.

# CHAPTER 16



HARPER

I sit up in bed, panting heavily, and place a hand on my chest, willing my heart to slow down. It takes a moment for my surroundings to come into focus, the sheets twisted around my legs finally registering.

It was just a dream. An awful, hyper-realistic one for sure, but ultimately an amalgamation of everything going on in my brain lately.

Lying on my deathbed, cold and alone, regret filling me so strongly, it was a visceral ache. I'd waited all those years for the right guy to come along, but no one had ever compared to... Owen. He was the standard I'd measured every other man by. My whole life wasted because I'd abandoned him in Oregon.

I shake off the thought. God, this is ridiculous. It was a dream. And the only reason I had it was because of what Owen said on the way home. Making his... intentions known. But he left the ball in my court. It's my choice if I want to act on it.

I can't, though, right? It would only make things harder when I have to leave.

Or maybe...

No, no.

I throw off the sheets, willing myself to fully wake. I need to get out of this weird headspace.

Wait, where's Owen? He's supposed to be here, too.

I glance at the alarm clock on the nightstand. One a.m. He went to bed at the same time I did a couple of hours ago. Then again, he was also tossing and turning before I drifted off. Did he ever go to sleep?

I pad out to the living room, holding my finger to my lips as Duke lifts his head off of his dog bed in the corner. The place is silent, moonlight streaming in through the open blinds

to cast long shadows across the room, and I tiptoe over to the windows. There.

Owen looks over his shoulder as I open the front door, then turns back, resting his elbows on the porch railing. “Can’t sleep?”

“I had a bad dream.” I join him, crossing my arms over my chest to keep the chill away. “Aren’t you cold out here?”

All he has on is a thin shirt and those same cotton plaid pajamas slung low on his hips.

“I’m fine.”

Looking out at the expanse of his front yard, there’s something almost otherworldly about it in the dead of night like this, the moon bright enough to see by, the air sharp and brisk against my bare arms.

“You can’t sleep either?” I ask him, the mundane conversation welcome after the subtle tenseness surrounding us all afternoon and evening. Sure, we’d acted like everything was fine, but was it?

He shakes his head and glances over at me. “Hey, you’re shivering.”

He holds an arm out, creating space between him and the porch railing, and I hesitate for a moment before sliding in, his front deliciously toasty against my back. I’m caged in by his arms, but instead of it feeling restricting, there’s a sense of safety instead. Like he’s protecting me.

I lean against his chest, breathing in deeply, my body easing. How is it that the same person who causes so much tension within me also has me relaxing the most?

“I can’t sleep next to you anymore,” he murmurs.

Well, there goes the relaxing. “Why?”

He sighs heavily, his breath tickling the back of my neck. In front of me, his hands tighten on the porch railing.

“Owen, why?”

I'm not sure why I'm pushing it. I know what he's going to say, but a part of me wants to hear it, anyway.

"You know why. I can't sleep. All I think about is you."

My stomach flips. "I'm not that special."

"You are to me."

My eyes squeeze shut, glad he can't see my face. Why did I come out here? I knew what would happen.

Any kind of willpower I previously had crumbles as one of his hands leaves the railing to snake around my waist, his hold loose enough to allow me to leave if I want.

I don't, though. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

He leans down, whispering his lips over the side of my neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps that has nothing to do with the chilly air.

"I want you, Harper."

A ragged breath escapes me, but I stay silent, wanting to see what else he says.

"I'm going to miss you like crazy when you leave." His lips skim down to the top of my shoulder, the soft kisses he presses there burning through the fabric of his borrowed shirt. "But I don't want to regret not asking for one night with you."

The idea is tempting. Okay, more than tempting. Practically a medical necessity based on the lust rising within me. "Just one night?"

"If that's all you'll give me."

My belly dips low. Am I seriously considering this?

I take stock of my body and discover, yes, I'm absolutely considering this. "What did you have in mind?"

His hand moves up my stomach and teases the underside of my breast over my shirt, my breath hitching.

"Is this okay?" he asks from behind me, his fingers moving torturously slow over the area.

I nod, my knees going unsteady as he shifts higher, his big palm cupping me, hot through the thin fabric.

He groans softly in my ear, the sound causing a bolt of arousal to lance through me. There's nothing I want to hear more than him groaning like that again.

I grope blindly for his free hand, and upon finding it, bring it up to place on my other breast. Oh, God, yes.

I melt against him as he squeezes me gently, reveling in the feel of him touching me until I need more. "Harder," I whisper, bringing my hands up to cover his, encouraging him to use more pressure.

He does as I ask, and when I lift the hem of my shirt, he quickly puts his hands underneath, skin to skin, his calluses deliciously rough on the sensitive area.

I'm breathing heavily, loving this new connection, especially as he rolls my nipple between his fingertips until it's a hard bud. I press back against him, his length thickening against my ass.

Oh, God, he's big.

I snake a hand down, rubbing myself over my boxers, needing relief from the growing restlessness within me.

One of his hands leaves my breast and gently captures my hand, moving it aside. "Let me do that."

A whimper escapes me, loving the sexy confidence in his voice.

My head falls against his shoulder, my back arching as his fingers replace mine, rubbing me first over my boxers, then slipping inside, only the thin fabric of my underwear separating him from touching me fully.

His fingers find my cleft, teasing me, and my panties grow wetter with arousal as he plucks at my nipple with his other hand, the action making me inhale sharply.

"Touch me," I murmur, pressing my lower half forward into his hand. "Finger me."

He makes that low, growly sound in my ear again, his fingers moving the edge of my underwear aside to glide along my wet seam.

I grip the porch railing in front of me, holding in a cry, the sensations too much and yet, not enough as his middle finger presses in up to his knuckle, my inner walls gripping him tight.

“Christ, you’re wet,” he mumbles, pulling out and back in, starting up a steady pace. “I turn you on that much?”

I nod, my knees going wobbly. My hold on the railing in front of me is the only thing holding me upright. “More than you know.”

He kisses me behind my ear, shivers washing over me, and adds a second finger, the sensations within me multiplying. I stare blindly out into the yard, the realization dawning over me that we’re doing this outside. I’ve never been so uninhibited with a man.

It’s not like we’re in any danger of being caught in the dead of night, though, especially on his private property miles from town. Guess there are advantages to him being out in the middle of nowhere.

He builds me up, higher and higher, his kisses now trailing over the nape of my neck, his fingers circling my clit, and I can’t hold in my moan this time as I reach that crest, desperately wanting to hurdle over the other side. My knuckles whiten on the railing as I grasp it tighter, his hand on my breast squeezing roughly, and a keening cry escapes me as I fall over the edge, my pussy milking his fingers, spasming against him.

“Oh, God,” I murmur, over and over again as I come down from my high, his touch never leaving me, wringing out every last drop of pleasure he can.

When he finally withdraws, I turn in his arms and cup his face, searching his gaze. Lust shines brightly, along with masculine satisfaction. He knows he did a good job getting me off. Underneath that, there’s more, though. Affection. Caring. Something deeper, too.



I bring my lips to his, hardly able to believe this is our first kiss of the night, needing to convey to him everything I can't say in words. Passion and gratitude and a desire to do that again as soon as possible.

I snake a hand between us, slipping my tongue in his mouth as I cup him over his pajama bottoms, his dick straining against the cotton.

He makes a noise of contentment, pushing his hips into my hand, but despite his body's actions, he still says, "You don't have to reciprocate. I wanted to do that for you."

He's too gentlemanly. And that only makes me fall for him a little more. "And I want to do this for you. You wouldn't deny me, would you?"

He smiles against my lips. "Hell, no."

He reaches down and pulls the front of his pajamas and boxers down, just enough for his dick to spring free, the velvet over steel feel of him making me ache anew as my hand wraps around him.

He moans low, gripping my waist as I stroke him, his thumbs circling my hip bones. Oh God, he's going to rev me up all over again at this rate.

"Your hand feels amazing," he whispers. "I've imagined your touch so many times."

I kiss him, then bring my mouth to his neck, following the column of his throat downward with my lips. "And how does reality compare with your imagination?"

"It's so much better. Everything with you is better."

A spark lights in the center of my chest, and I don't rush to stamp it out like I might have before. I let it linger, enjoying his praise, his pleasure.

He mumbles my name, bringing one hand to my lower back, the other to the nape of my neck to hold me in place as he gives me long, drugging kisses, pulling me further under his spell. My pace slows, leisurely stroking him in time with the way he kisses me, rubbing my thumb gently over the head.

“Fuck, Harper.” He pushes himself further into my hand, clearly wanting more.

“You like that?” I do it again, catching a bead of pre-cum that leaks out, and let go of him to lick it off my thumb, holding eye contact with him all the while.

His gaze grows impossibly hotter, his lips parting in desire as he stares back at me. He kisses me roughly then, thrusting into my hand as I stroke him, picking up the pace, his encouragement spurring me on.

When he comes in my hand, I swallow his pleasure, imprinting on my mind exactly what he sounds like, loving the deep growl at the back of his throat, the way it seems to come out involuntarily, like he can’t help himself.

He sags against me for a moment, resting his forehead on my shoulder, his breathing heavy as he collects himself. A tendril of satisfaction weaves its way through me, that I could bring this big, strong man to this state. That I have such a hold over him.

He strips his shirt off, using it to clean off my hand, then himself, and pulls his boxers and pants back up before tossing the shirt on the ground. “You’re incredible,” he murmurs before kissing me again, his hands cupping my face. “I can’t get enough of you.”

*Me either*, I think, but I don’t voice it aloud. As much as I enjoyed that, I’m already dreading leaving him on Sunday. I knew it would happen, but like he said, I might have regretted not acting on this attraction more.

“It’s a good thing you have your own place out in the middle of nowhere,” I say instead, trying to keep things light. “Ultimate privacy.”

He runs his hands down my shoulders and arms, until he intertwines his fingers with mine. “I want you to know I’ve never brought another girl here. You’re the only one.”

That glow in my chest is back, and though I shouldn’t like his words so much, it doesn’t change that I do. “That’s good to hear.”

He squeezes my hands. "I can't imagine ever feeling the same way about anyone else."

My lower lip trembles for a moment before I firm it. "You can't say stuff like that."

He nods, looking down at our feet. "I know." He tugs me toward him, then wraps his arms around me, holding me securely.

I turn my face to the side as I hug him back, tears gathering in the corners of my eyes as I listen to his steady heartbeat. What did I do to deserve this man?

And how will I forget him when I'm gone?

# CHAPTER 17



OWEN

Harper yawns widely from the passenger seat next to me, her hand coming up to cover her mouth.

“Tired?”

She glances over at me, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she smiles. “Well, *somebody* kept me up in the middle of the night.”

After we’d gone back to bed, I’d made her come again before snuggling her in tight to my side for the rest of the night.

I reach over and take her hand, bringing it to my lips for a soft kiss. “And was it worth it?”

Her smile grows. “Absolutely.”

My lips move to her inner wrist, teasing the delicate skin there, and she sighs in pleasure.

“Where did this suave Owen come from?”

Is that how she sees me? “It’s more that I’m comfortable with you. I wouldn’t...” I clear my throat. “You know I wouldn’t do this with anyone else.”

“Is it wrong that I like that it’s only for me?”

What’s she talking about? “Why would it be wrong?”

She smiles again, but this time it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Because I’m leaving.”

I swallow hard, the reminder a shock to my system. How does that tiny detail keep slipping my mind?

“Let’s just have a fun day,” she says, waving off her statement. “Only happy thoughts from now on.”

I nod, my previously buoyant mood tempered. I can’t dwell on her departure, though. I’ll never enjoy the time I have with her if I do.

Kirkwood's fairgrounds are crowded when I pull my truck into the wide field that serves as a parking lot, and I text Kristen that we're here. Jenny and Jamie's performance should be soon.

Kristen: *We're over near Pavilion A. Jamie's super nervous.*

I put my phone in my pocket and take Harper's hand, leading her to where we need to go.

"Don't a lot of people from Crescent Pass come to this?"

I sidestep a mother trying to coax her toddler back into his stroller. "Yeah."

She motions toward our joined hands. "Are you sure you want them to see us together?"

"Why wouldn't I?" She's not... ashamed or something to be seen with me, is she?

"You might get questions or unwanted attention."

I stop us for a moment and kiss her deeply, enjoying how her eyes sparkle as I pull away. "I'd rather deal with that and get to hold your hand."

She seems pleased by my statement, the way she's biting at her lip to hide her smile making my chest warm.

But it's not long before I have to put my money where my mouth is as we run into none other than the town gossip, Ruth Cooper. Her gaze zeroes in on our hands, lips pursing. "Thought you were here for marketing," she says to Harper, clear accusation in her voice. Why the hell does Ruth even care?

"I am," Harper says easily. "You should see the website I'm building for Owen." She brings her free hand to her mouth in a chef's kiss gesture.

"Doesn't look like you're working much right now."

Harper's smile grows, as if she's taking enjoyment out of this interaction. "Nothing wrong with mixing business and pleasure."

Ruth shakes a bag of caramel popcorn in our direction. “Don’t you go breaking Owen’s heart once you traipse back to whatever big city you said you were from.”

Harper’s smile drops.

“Leave it alone, Ruth,” I warn her, hating the bleak look that enters Harper’s eye.

I steer Harper away from the busybody, resting a hand on the small of her back to guide her through the crowd. “Don’t pay any attention to her.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t thought of myself.”

“I’m a big boy. I know what’s coming.”

Sure, it’s unfathomable that after tomorrow she’ll be gone, but... No. Harper said only happy thoughts today.

“Pavilion A is up ahead. After we listen to the kids’ performance, we’re free to do whatever else we want.”

She walks beside me, stopping once to pull her phone out of her back pocket. I don’t mean to, but I catch a glimpse of two women on the screen, holding up cocktails and smiling brightly.

Harper glances at me, then turns it more my way. “That’s Elena and Kelly. It’s our weekly brunch time.”

“You’ll be there for brunch next week,” I tell her, trying to cheer her up. It doesn’t seem to work, though, her lips tipping down at the corners instead.

“Yeah, I will.”

“Are you... looking forward to seeing them?”

“Of course.” She sounds like she means it, but there’s still an air of sadness about her, too. Did what Ruth said affect her that much? “I should probably get some more souvenirs for them today, actually.”

“I’ll help you look later.”

She’s slightly better by the time we reach Kristen, who’s frantically trying to make her kids presentable before their

performance.

“How in the world did you manage to mess your hair up between the house and here?” she asks Jenny as she attempts to tighten her ponytail.

“Leave it alone.” Jenny bats away her mother’s hands. “I like it this way.”

“Half of it is falling out.” Kristen licks her index finger and wipes at Jamie’s cheek. “And how did you get dirt on you?”

Jamie groans loudly, looking green around the edges. “Mom!”

“I want you two to look nice. They’re recording this.”

“Uncle Owen,” Jenny squeals as she spots me. She runs forward, wrapping her tiny arms as far as they’ll go around my waist. “And you brought Harper.” She hugs Harper next, who seems to brighten under Jenny’s interest. “I’ve been practicing our song all week. It’s going to be *so* good.”

Jamie doesn’t appear to agree with that statement by the way he rolls his eyes.

“You doing okay?” I ask him quietly as Jenny monopolizes Harper’s attention, telling her all about the things she’ll do at the festival after their performance.

“Maybe a little nervous,” he hedges, scuffing the toe of his shoe in the dirt.

“I’ll let you in on a secret.” I motion for him to move closer, which he does with wide eyes. “When you’re up there, you don’t have to actually sing. You can mouth the words and no one will know the difference.”

He blinks at me for a moment, then smiles, his loose front tooth wiggling where he pushes it with his tongue. “Really?”

I nod solemnly. “I used to do it all the time in school. No one ever caught me.”

“Thanks, Uncle Owen.”



He hugs me and I ruffle the top of his hair, making sure not to mess it up too much for fear Kristen will yell at me next.

When I look back over at the girls, Harper is braiding Jenny's hair while she talks to Kristen, the scene punching me square in the chest. There's something so... normal about it. Like Harper's a regular part of the family.

"Hi, Grandma," Jenny says, and I turn around, discovering my mother behind me. "Harper's making my hair look sophisticated."

"I can see that," Mom says, giving Jamie a hug.

Mom hugs me next, whispering in my ear, "I see Harper's sticking around."

"She leaves tomorrow," I whisper back. "Don't make her feel bad about it."

Mom mimes zipping her lips, but I don't fully believe her. "I can't wait to see you two sing up there," she says to the kids.

Jamie nods at her, then turns to me and winks. Well, his version of winking, at least, which is more like rapidly blinking one eye.

After Harper ties off Jenny's braid, Kristen ushers her kids over to the stage area where a number of other children are gathering.

"I didn't get to say hello to you," Mom says to Harper, enveloping her in a hug. "I'm so glad you could come today."

A smile creeps over Harper's face as she returns Mom's hug, and it reminds me that she said she's not close with her own family.

The two of them make small talk about the festival and I let their words wash over me, not paying attention to the content, but more the cadence of their voices, the easiness between them. I guess Harper got over any awkwardness created by their first meeting when Abby spilled the beans about our marriage.

As Kristen rejoins us, a voice over the loudspeaker announces Crescent Pass Elementary's first grade class to the stage, the first performance of what I assume will be many from the surrounding area schools.

The music starts up and the crowd collectively winces as the kids sing. Nails on a chalkboard doesn't quite cover it.

Harper holds her hands over her mouth, her gaze dancing with mirth. "Oh my God, they're terrible."

Yeah, they are. "Well, don't tell them that."

She makes a crossing motion over her heart, pressing her lips together tightly to keep in a laugh.

Next to me, Kristen sighs and rubs at her temple. "And I thought it was only Jenny who sang badly. Apparently, the whole class shares her talent."

"Wait, is that Mrs. Hamlin?" I peer over the crowd, trying to get a better look at the teacher conducting the kids.

"Yep."

"She was half-deaf when she was *our* teacher twenty years ago."

"Yeah, I know."

Mom smacks my arm lightly. "You be nice about Gertie. She's my friend."

"Yes, ma'am," Kristen and I mutter simultaneously.

Harper leans in, looping her arm around mine. "Ooh, you got in trouble."

"I'm going to get you in trouble next," I whisper in her ear. I sneak a hand down so no one can see and goose her butt, enjoying the little jump she makes.

Kristen eyes me speculatively. "What's up with you?" she asks, low enough for only me to hear.

"What are you talking about?"

"You seem... happy."

I nearly laugh aloud at the confusion in her voice, then remember I shouldn't do that while the first graders are singing. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"No, no. Just... different." She eyes me again, her gaze shifting to Harper next. "Did you two..."

She waggles her finger between us and thank God Harper's paying attention to the performance and not my sister.

"Not exactly." We didn't sleep together... just did other stuff. Not that it's any of Kristen's business. "Don't worry about it."

She purses her lips but turns back toward the makeshift stage.

Guess I should tone down how I act with Harper in public. Like she said, I'm the one who has to live with the consequences after she leaves.

But she'd seemed happy when I held her hand earlier. And when I'd kissed her in the parking lot. That's more important than dealing with some town gossip. It's not like I go into town all that often, anyway.

When the performance is blessedly over, Kristen retrieves her kids, the twins reacting wildly differently to their five minutes of fame. Jenny is inordinately pleased with herself and all the attention she gets from well-wishers in the crowd, while Jamie slinks away and gives me a subtle thumbs up. He must have mouthed everything, then. Good for him.

"Will you come with us on the rides?" Jenny asks Harper, bouncing up and down in place. "They're so much fun. Last year we did the tilt-a-whirl and magic maze and spinning teacups and now I'm finally tall enough to ride the dragon coaster by myself."

Harper smiles broadly at her. "Of course I will." She loops her arm through mine. "You ready?"

I nod, not knowing what the day will bring us, but for the first time in a long while... I'm excited to find out.

# CHAPTER 18



HARPER

“Come on, come on.” Jenny tugs at my hand, propelling me forward. “My favorite ride is this way.”

I plaster a smile on my face, more exhausted than I have any right to be. But Owen’s niece could easily double as a drill sergeant, leading us through a never ending list of activities that, while fun, also have me ready for a break.

The highlights included a petting zoo where I nearly got my finger bitten off by a rogue goat, a dunk tank target I couldn’t hit for the life of me, and some kind of ride that zipped us around so violently, it’s a wonder I don’t have whiplash.

“Ta da.” Jenny holds her hands out wide in front of the fifty-foot tall Ferris Wheel.

Oh, hell, no.

“I think me and Harper will sit this one out,” Owen says before I can come up with an excuse as to why me and something that high up won’t end well.

“But Uncle Owen...”

He tugs at her braid playfully. “You’ve put us through the paces today, kid. Let us take a minute to breathe.”

“But you get to sit on the ride,” Jenny explains, as if he doesn’t know. “You can rest then.”

“Let them do their own thing for a bit,” Kristen says, ushering her away. “Little Miss Taskmaster.”

Jamie and Cheryl follow them toward the Ferris Wheel’s line and I find a nearby bench to take a load off. “Girl knows how to plan an itinerary.”

Owen smiles as he sits next to me. “She’s always been like that.”

“When’s the last time you had a day this jam-packed with fun?”

“Fun? That’s relative, isn’t it?”

“Okay, fun for you.”

He strokes his beard, as if he’s seriously contemplating it.  
“About five years ago.”

What happened five years ago? Oh, duh.

I push his shoulder. “Be serious.”

“I am. I married the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

My heart pounds in my chest and I duck my head down, not wanting him to see the blush spreading over my cheeks like wildfire. Since yesterday, he keeps saying the sweetest, most unexpected things.

My fingers twist together in my lap, needing to say something in return. “You know, I was kind of bummed you never texted me.”

“You were?”

I nod, finding a loose string on the hem of my shirt to tug.  
“That night was a lot of fun.”

“It was the best night of my life,” he says quietly.

I peek over at him, his expression serious. “Even the part where you got blackout drunk?”

He smiles. “Okay, maybe not that.”

I should leave the topic alone. Let it rest already. But instead I ask him, “What did you like most?”

He studies his hands, no longer looking at me. “Just... everything with you.”

I reach over and intertwine my fingers with his, squeezing, and he gives me a squeeze back.

“You were this breath of fresh air,” he continues softly. “So full of life. I couldn’t get enough of you.”

He said that last night, too.

“To be fair, we were drunk off our asses,” I remind him, trying to keep it light. “You’re remembering it with beer

goggles on.”

He shakes his head. “Even before we started drinking, I knew there was something different about you.”

“Different?”

His thumb sweeps over my palm, my belly dipping low at the contact. It seems like every touch he gives causes a reaction within me. “That... connection I mentioned. I was in a funk for a long time after that trip. You were the one who got away.”

I swallow hard, hating the ache in his voice. “Why didn’t you try to find me on social media or something?”

“I thought you didn’t feel the same way. You’d given me a fake number.”

How different would things have turned out if I hadn’t had butterfingers typing my number into his contacts? “If I could do that night over, I’d make sure to get that last digit right.” Wait, that’s silly. “Actually, I wouldn’t have married you to begin with. Then we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“No, I’m glad you did.”

I look at him, my brows raised.

“I wouldn’t have seen you again, otherwise,” he explains.

Tears prick my eyes and I turn away, untangling my hand from his hold. How much longer can I take him saying these things that keep breaking my heart?

He lays a hand on my shoulder. “I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“No, you didn’t.” I wipe at my cheeks, hating how I’ve teared up twice now in the last twenty-four hours. “Maybe, um, we could get some cotton candy?”

The pink and white cart off in the distance is the first thing my gaze lands on, and I seize the distraction, needing something else to focus on.

“I’ll get it.”

He stands, looking down at me for a moment, but I don't meet his gaze. Like I need him to see my puffy eyes even better.

He sticks his hands in his pockets and moves away, getting in line at the food cart, and I use the opportunity to calm down, taking deep breaths until the threat of tears has passed. Until I feel more like myself.

Until a nagging urge has me wanting to rush over and tell him I'm glad we got married, too. That coming here has turned out to be nothing like I expected. That I'll remember this week for the rest of my life, even if we end up erasing anything between us with this annulment.

But I obviously won't act on that urge. No good will come of it.

\* \* \*

ALL RIGHT, there's no way I can delay this any longer.

My hand hovers over the bathroom doorknob, knowing I need to face the inevitable. I've brushed my teeth. Flossed. Washed my face. Cut and filed my nails. Squeezed out the gunk in the pores of my nose. Plucked my eyebrows with a pair of tweezers I found in the back of a drawer. Reorganized all Owen's stuff underneath the sink cabinet.

There's nothing left to do. He has to wonder what I've been up to for the last twenty minutes in here. If the bathroom had a window, he might even suspect I made a run for it.

Unfortunately, it doesn't have a window.

Opening the door as slowly as I can so it doesn't creak, I spot Owen before he realizes I'm there, seated on the edge of the bed, his elbows resting on his knees. I can't see his face from this angle, but everything about him screams *dejected*. The tightness in his shoulders. His head hanging down. And all because of me.

After he'd returned with a mountain of cotton candy for me at the festival, it was obvious it was the beginning of the



end. The way I kept my hands either full or in my pockets so I couldn't reach for his hand. The way I kept distance between us so I wouldn't be tempted to sneak him kisses like I'd done throughout the morning.

He'd known what I was doing, but said nothing. What was there to say, anyway?

His head lifts, eyes widening the slightest bit as he spots me, and his gaze does a slow sweep of me from head to toe, the same as he did that first day he spotted me using his borrowed clothes as pajamas.

And it heats my blood just the same.

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes for a moment so I don't scream aloud. I hate everything about this. "You can have the bed tonight. I'll take the couch."

"Harper—"

"I'm serious. I've been nothing but a burden to you all week, coming in here and messing up your schedule and your life and—"

He moves quicker than I thought he could with how big he is, enveloping me in his arms. "You've never been a burden. You're a blessing."

I don't let the tears that threaten fall. No more tears.

I step back, crossing my arms over my chest. If I stay in his arms any longer, who knows what I might do?

"Let's get the elephant out of the room, okay?" I say, digging my nails into my biceps. "After last night, if we sleep in that bed together, we're going to have sex."

His nostrils flare but he stays silent.

"All we need to do is separate ourselves. You take your bedroom, I'll take the couch."

His lips compress tightly for a moment before he releases them. "You act like it would be the end of the world."

"What?"

“If we had sex.”

“We’re getting an annulment,” I force myself to say. It’s as much a reminder for me as it is for him. “Consummating the marriage might invalidate it or something.”

His cheekbones redden but his expression doesn’t otherwise change, his gaze steady. “I don’t think that’s a thing anymore, but I don’t have protection here, anyway. No other girls, remember?”

He takes a single step forward and I resist the urge to back up. It’s not like he’s going to pounce on me.

Although the look in his eyes suggests he might.

“But we don’t have to sleep together for me to make you feel good.”

My knees sway and I grip the wall behind me for balance. How does he make his voice that low? That sexy? “Owen...”

He ignores my warning, not that the breathy way I said it created the intended effect. He probably took it as encouragement.

“I know I said I’d take one night with you if it was all you could give me, but...” His gaze sweeps over me again, a physical caress I want more of. “I’m so goddamned desperate for you.”

My breath hitches, my feet moving forward without my brain telling them to do so.

No, no. Stop. “I’m leaving tomorrow,” I whisper, reminding him. Reminding me.

“So this is our last chance.” He moves closer, closer, until he’s directly in front of me, and I breathe him in, the woodsy spice relaxing me just as much as it excites me.

“You liked my fingers here, right?” He brushes the back of his knuckles over the area in question, a barely there pass that shouldn’t have me gasping as loudly as I do.

I nod, unable to help answering him. I shouldn’t be encouraging this. Tomorrow there’s a very real chance I’ll

regret ever staying in this conversation and not immediately leaving to go sleep on the couch. It'll make it that much harder to forget him.

His lips move to my ear, whispering silkily, "Let me go down on you. Just to make you feel good. I only want to make you feel good."

My belly dips down low, low, low, until it's somewhere around my toes, a puddle on the floor I have no chance of recovering.

Damn him. Why couldn't he leave this alone? Why'd he have to turn me on like that? To imagine his dark head between my thighs, lapping at me, telling me how good I taste. The rising pleasure growing, growing—

Wow, did it get hot in here?

I tremble, his body close but not touching, waiting for me to answer. The ball is in my court. I could tell him no and he'd back away immediately. I know he would.

I don't say anything, standing at that precipice, not wanting to be the one who makes the decision. Wanting him to go ahead and tear my clothes off and throw me on the bed. That way, it wouldn't be my fault. I could blame him.

But he won't do that. He's going to make me say it. To act on it.

I look up at him, those beautiful gray eyes clear and true, not clouded with lust like I expected.

No one has ever looked at me like that, with longing all over their face. As if I were someone to be... worshipped. That's the only way I can describe it.

And what tips me over the edge.

# CHAPTER 19



## OWEN

She stares up at me for what seems like forever, her deep brown eyes luminous in the moonlight coming in from the window.

I can't tell what she's thinking, if she's considering my proposition, if I offended her, if she's about to bolt through the open bedroom door and leave for Chicago right now.

But then she's reaching up to pull my head down for a hot kiss, her perfect mouth against mine far too briefly before she pulls away.

"I want you, Owen." The same as I said to her last night. "For whatever time we have left, I want you."

Lust burns in the pit of my stomach. Does she have any idea what she does to me?

I grip her by the waist and peel off her top, throwing my too-big shirt in the corner. That's much better.

Backing her against the wall, I bend to suck on her neck, then lower to her breast, shaping the soft weight with one hand as I press my lips to the tip and nip her gently.

Her hands move to my hair, holding me in place as she tells me to do that again.

I shift to her other breast and repeat the action, then soothe away the pain with gentle licks, sucking on her, kissing her, paying reverence to her body in the way I've been dreaming about for so long. I didn't have the chance to use my mouth on her last night, and I make up for it now, exploring every inch of her with my hands and lips and tongue, wanting, no needing, to learn all her dips and hollows, her curves and the flat expanse of her stomach.

I strip the boxers off her and flirt with the elastic band of her panties, enjoying the way her breath hitches, the way she softly moans as I rub her over the thin fabric.

Her head thunks against the wall, neck arched as she pants heavily. “How do you get me so hot so quick?” she murmurs. “How can it be this good already?”

“It’s you and me,” I tell her, kneeling down further so I’m at eye level with her pussy. “I knew it would be combustible between us.”

She inhales sharply as I press my mouth to the front of her underwear, sucking gently. “How do you know what I want before I even know it?”

“Because we’re finally in sync.”

“We’ve only known each other a week.”

I shake my head, bringing my hands to her ass and squeezing. “It’s been years. I’ve been waiting for you for five years.”

Shit. I didn’t mean to say that. That was a confession that should’ve been left unsaid.

I hook my thumbs in the sides of her panties and pull down, uncovering her enough to give her a slow lick along her seam, distracting her from thinking too hard about my words.

She mumbles my name, thrusting her hips forward so I have more access, and I delve in again, awestruck at her taste, her smell, at the way she writhes in pleasure at my ministrations. I’m already addicted to this, to her.

I slip her panties completely off, running a hand down the length of her leg and back up, pressing my palms against her inner thighs, wanting more of her. It’s not enough from this angle, though.

Picking her up and tossing her on the bed, I savor the way her eyes go wide as I kneel between her thighs and resume my efforts, spreading her legs wider so she’s open for me, every bit of her on display. God, she’s so fucking sexy.

I dip my tongue inside her, loving how warm and wet she is, how she shifts underneath me, how she keeps murmuring things I’m not sure she even knows she’s saying.

*Do that again. Yeah, right there. I love that. I love your tongue. You get me so hot.*

Everything she says gets me hotter, too, to the point where I have to adjust myself in my pants, my dick desperate to be free. Tonight is for her, though. It's all for her.

I keep working her up, her movements growing more frantic, hips jerking, thighs twitching, heels digging into the mattress. I look up at her, her eyes shut, lips parted, hands clutching the pillow. She lets out a low moan and a rush of satisfaction passes through me as the tension releases from her and she comes for me, wave after wave washing over her.

She brings a hand down to sift her fingers through my hair, loosely holding my head in place to let me know she wants me to continue. That's not a problem at all.

I drink her down, enjoying the way her pussy contracts against my tongue, the way her hips tilt up, seeking more. I'll give her anything she wants.

When she finally shifts back, I join her at the top of the bed, bracing my weight on my elbows as I cover her with my body.

She takes a corner of the bedsheet and wipes it on my beard. "I'm all over you," she whispers, her cheeks flushed.

"I like you there," I reply, loving the way she smiles at me.

"That was amazing. You're amazing. I can't... I've never..." She sighs heavily. "How am I going to go back to Chicago knowing I'm missing that?"

She's still smiling as she says it, and I keep the pain that threatens at bay. There will be time enough for that later. Tonight, I have to get everything in I can. A lifetime's worth.

"I'm ready for round two whenever you are."

She cups my cheek gently. "You're so good to me." She leans in and kisses me softly. "But I want you next."

My dick twitches, straining to be let out.

“Last night, you said you’ve imagined my hand on you. Have you thought about my mouth, too?”

Oh, Christ.

My head jerks up and down, too tongue-tied to verbally answer.

Her hands move to my waist, pushing up my shirt, and I sit up, stripping it off.

“How in the world did we do all that already and you haven’t even undressed?”

“I was otherwise occupied,” I tell her, relishing the way her gaze roams my torso, a loving caress I can somehow physically feel.

She bites her bottom lip enticingly. “Have I told you how sexy you are?”

Something warm and loose drops in my stomach. “No.” I’d definitely remember her saying that.

She sits up too, spreading her palms over my shoulders. “Tuesday morning, when you were on the phone with Larry, I came out to the living room and saw you shirtless.” Her hands move slowly over me, to my clavicle, then down to my pecs, toying with my nipples briefly, then further south. “Thought I’d died and gone to heaven.”

Pleasure heats my face. “And I saw you in my clothes. I liked it a little too much. Actually, I like you out of them even more.”

She laughs, her eyes sparkling with delight. “Mister Smooth Talker.”

“Only with you.” Somehow. Magically. I’m not sure how I’m forming sentences with her hands roaming all over me like this.

Her fingers flit over my abs and draw a line down my happy trail. “You know, I’m curious where this leads.” Her hand drifts further south, flirting with the waistband of my pants. “I didn’t get a good enough look last night.”



I fumble to take everything off, my movements no longer coordinated, too much of my brain focused on the very real possibility that her mouth will soon be on me.

Desire rushes through me seeing how she looks at me once I'm nude, her gaze slack with obvious lust, and when she makes eye contact with me again, there's no mistaking that she was telling the truth when she said she thought I was sexy.

She pushes at my shoulder lightly, guiding me down on the bed so I'm laying flat on my back, and she straddles me first, leaning down to thoroughly kiss me.

"I can taste me on your lips," she murmurs as she pulls away, looking like she really likes it.

Christ, she's going to have me coming before she even touches me.

She travels down my body, taking her time, making me sweat, and settles over my dick, the thing ready and at attention for her.

Wrapping her hand around the base, she slowly strokes me to the tip and back down, working me up, then her mouth joins in on the action, her tongue playing with the head of my cock.

I inhale sharply, the sight of her down there nearly too much to handle.

She looks up at me innocently and releases me long enough to say, "Do you like that?"

"You know damn well I do." My voice is more growl than anything else, but I'm unable to help it, especially as her mouth envelops me, taking me in all the way.

When the suction starts a moment later, I grip the bedsheets, twisting them, doing everything I can so I don't pump my hips into her face like a maniac.

She continues using her hand along with her lips and tongue to drive me wild, my control slipping the longer she goes on. I'm panting heavily, trying my damndest not to moan aloud, not to curse, not to tell I need her more than I need my next breath. She was made for me. There's no doubt about it.

No other woman has remotely had this kind of effect on me. And I know in my heart of hearts no one else will, either.

She's it for me. For always.

"Owen."

I look down, her pace slowed, lazily moving her hand up and down my shaft.

"What's wrong?"

My head cocks to the side, able to think clearer now that her mouth isn't on me. "Nothing."

"You looked like you were in pain."

I nearly chuckle. "I was trying not to come. Which you're making impossible, by the way."

A small smile flirts over her lips. "Isn't that the point, though?" She kisses the tip of me, then licks the same spot. "We have all night to do this again and again and again."

She licks me each time she says *again*, as if I'm her favorite piece of candy, and my hips surge upward briefly before I get myself back under control.

"Turnabout's fair play. You're next after this."

Her gaze gleams with mischief. "Oh, I'm counting on it."

Oh, fuck. She can't be this playful in bed. Can't get me so fucking hot, I can barely remember my name.

She returns to sucking me down in a sultry swallow, the action and her words triggering me, as if she pressed my internal *orgasm now* button.

It rushes through me, hot and violent, and I come hard in her mouth, loving the way she releases a soft *mmm* as she drinks me down. Her hands run over my hips and thighs, leaving shivers in their wake, and I bite my lip, keeping inside all the things that want to escape. How I wished she didn't have to go. That it could be like this every night. That it was incredibly stupid of me to not stop at the store and pick up some condoms, so the next round could be us together for real.

“Fuck,” I groan, another wave washing over me as I imagine sinking into her wet heat, her pussy drenched from me making her come with my mouth. Of her looking up at me with that playful smile as I pump in and out of her, the feel of her like nothing else. Of how it would be to come inside her, her pussy clenching me, making it that much hotter, that much stronger.

I move my arm over my eyes, breathing harshly in the quiet of the room, willing the mental image to fade. Tonight was more than I could have asked for. I shouldn't be wishing for more.

She shifts against my legs and I motion for her to come up and join me, enjoying the feel of her as she drapes herself half over my body. She idly draws circles on my chest with her finger, both of us silent, but it's a comfortable silence. The kind you have with someone you know. Someone you trust.

Someone you want in your life permanently.

“No sadness.”

I look over at her, startled by her sudden words.

She cups my face, her gaze serious. “I want to enjoy tonight with you. No thinking about tomorrow.”

I nod, rolling to my side to capture her mouth in a long kiss. “You're absolutely right.”

I kiss her again, my lips traveling to her neck and further down, taking my time at her chest, making her moan as I worship her breasts.

Her hands tug at my hair, her body restless under me. “More,” she murmurs. “I need more.”

Moving between her legs, I slip her thighs under my shoulders, ready to feast. I'll give her anything she wants.

Even if it costs me everything.

# CHAPTER 20



HARPER

The gentle warble of a songbird outside wakes me from a delicious dream of Owen eating me out, my exclamations of delight echoing off the walls, my hands white-knuckling the sheets.

Oh, wait. That wasn't a dream. That was last night.

I stretch out luxuriously against the soft sheets, replaying the more vivid scenes in my mind. Him handling my body with ease, nowhere off limits as he explored every inch of me with his hands and mouth. His head between my thighs, groaning in satisfaction as he tasted me. Him wrapping me in his embrace as we'd finally called it quits for the night, both of us happily exhausted. I'd ended up coming three times, the last one sneaking up on me as I'd given Owen another blow job, his obvious pleasure turning me on a little too much. Not that I'm complaining. Everything about us together was incredible.

Where is that man, anyway?

I get out of bed, the delectable aroma of fresh-brewed coffee and sizzling bacon drawing me over to the kitchen. Owen's broad back is visible at the stovetop, flipping bacon at the skillet, and I leave him alone for the moment, afraid he might burn himself if I startle him.

I grab a mug from the cabinet, but I don't get a chance to pour myself a cup of coffee before he's behind me, his hands wrapped around my waist, his lips traveling over my neck, leaving shivers in their wake.

"Morning, gorgeous."

His voice is low and rumbly, filling me with a remembered ache from last night.

"Good morning," I whisper back, turning to kiss him.

He's all lovey dovey, cupping the back of my head as he kisses me sweet and slow, the grin he gives me afterward making my heart jump.

He ushers me over to the table, telling me he'll bring me everything, and a moment later I have my mug of coffee prepared the way I like in front of me, then a plate of pancakes and bacon just after that.

"What's all this?" I ask, pleasantly surprised. Yeah, he's made breakfast here every morning, but never with this level of attentiveness, serving me as if I were a guest of honor.

His smile falters the tiniest bit. "I wanted your last day to be perfect."

I bite my lip, sorry I brought it up. "It is. Seriously. You're amazing."

He rubs at the back of his neck, almost shyly, then turns and gets his plate, joining me at the table.

We talk about everything but me leaving, the elephant in the room growing bigger and bigger as our plates gradually empty and our second cups of coffee grow cold.

I knew this would be hard. Painful, even. But this hole in the middle of my chest... I didn't think it'd be this bad.

"I, um, should probably pack," I finally say when the time gets uncomfortably close to when I should leave for the airport. Not that there's a whole lot to pack. I didn't bring any actual luggage, just my purse.

He nods, looking down at his plate.

God, I can't take this sadness. You'd think I'm leaving for my funeral.

Owen's phone rings and I use the opportunity to excuse myself, pausing by the doorway of the bedroom as he says Larry's name.

"Uh huh," Owen says. "No, she hasn't left yet."

I turn around. *Me?* I mouth, and join him again when he nods.

"You played golf with him?"

What is he talking about?

“He will?”

Should this be on speakerphone?

“On Tuesday? Yeah, let me ask her.” He brings the phone down and covers the mouthpiece with his hand. “Larry got a judge to agree to see us on Tuesday about the annulment.”

My jaw drops. “That quick?”

“I guess he knows the guy, and a space opened on his docket. Do you want to stay an extra couple of days so we can get this taken care of?”

My brain races, trying to figure out what to do. I’d need to fly back out here anyway for the court hearing at some point. It would make more sense to pay the rescheduling fee today rather than have to book a whole new flight later. “Yeah, I’ll stay.”

The moment I say the words, a lightness fills me. I don’t have to leave yet. I get two more days with Owen. Sure, Sandra will be pissed when I tell her, but I don’t care about that right now.

He grins widely and tells Larry we’ll be there, then hangs up.

I scuff my toe along the hardwood floor and look up at him coquettishly. “Guess you’re stuck with me for a little while longer.”

“Guess so.” He moves closer, mischief all over his face as he picks me up and carries me into the bedroom. “I can think of one way we can pass the time.”

Oh, I definitely can, too.

\* \* \*

OWEN FLICKS his blinker and turns onto the highway. “You didn’t have to come grocery shopping with me.”

“What am I going to do at your place? Twiddle my thumbs with Duke?”

His lips twitch. “I thought you were working on that website thing.”

I wave my hand in dismissal. “I’m finished with that.” Or as finished as I can be with no new pieces of his to sell. Although... “Could we stop at the gallery in Kirkwood? I’d like to take pictures of what you have in stock there.”

He shrugs. “Sure. Is there anything you need at the store?”

“Um, maybe some snacks for the plane on Tuesday. Oh, and could you get more chicken? I used up everything that was in the freezer the other day when I made dinner.”

“Yeah, no problem.” He fidgets in his seat, adjusting his grip on the steering wheel. “I was thinking, too.” He clears his throat. “Well, now that you’re staying longer, and after what we did last night... and this morning... Well, if we should, um...”

He worries at his bottom lip, staring out the windshield.

“Get some condoms?” I ask when it doesn’t seem like he’ll finish his sentence.

He nods, his cheekbones flushing the slightest shade of pink. Oh, he’s cute when he’s flustered. When we’re in the moment, he’s a totally different guy, all confidence and surety. But I love this shy, sensitive side to him, too.

“If that’s something you’re interested in,” he rushes to say. “It’s okay if you’re not. No pressure. I just want to be prepared.” He rubs at the back of his neck and peeks over at me. “I mean, I’d like to. But it’s fine if you’re not ready for that. Or don’t want to. You know, your decision.”

Okay, he’s even cuter when he rambles. It’s usually me who does that.

“Yeah, we should get some,” I tell him, putting him out of his misery.

He blows out a breath, smiling sheepishly, then reaches over to take my hand and kisses my knuckles softly.

My stomach dips pleasantly, and I’m a little surprised at myself. After all we’ve done, you wouldn’t think a simple



gesture like that would affect me, but it does. Everything with him does.

“I know you said you haven’t dated much,” I say, not sure how to word this next part. “But have you ever...”

Now it’s me not finishing my sentence.

He clears his throat, seeming to catch my drift. “Yeah, I have.”

I exhale roughly, unsure if I’m relieved or disappointed. Really, though. Like he’d be that good at the stuff we’ve already done without at least some practice?

“With someone in town?”

“No.”

I nod and squeeze his hand. For some reason, I really didn’t want it to be a girl in Crescent Pass.

“It was a one-time thing,” he explains. “Just... to see what it was like.”

“And?”

I clench my teeth, wishing I hadn’t asked that. Why am I torturing myself?

He brings my hand to his lips again, skimming them over my inner wrist. “It was nothing like it is with you so far. I didn’t feel anything for her.”

Warmth spreads through my chest, even knowing I shouldn’t love how special I am to him. That this thing between us can’t last. But it doesn’t stop my heart from melting all the same.

When we make our first stop at the gallery in Kirkwood, he holds the door open for me, hanging back as the sales clerk makes her way to us.

“Can I help you two?” the perky blonde asks, her gaze lingering over Owen.

Can’t exactly blame the woman. He has the same effect on me.

“Do you have any pieces of Owen Taylor’s?” She must not be his point of contact here if she didn’t recognize him enough to greet him by name. “I’m working on his website and wanted to take some pictures.”

“Yes, we have a clock of his. Let me show you.”

Hanging on one wall is a massive wood slice turned into a clock, the rings in the center and rough edge making it appear as if it was just lifted from the forest and placed in here.

“I didn’t know you made clocks, too,” I say to Owen. “Thought you were strictly a table guy.”

He chuckles. “Just something I was trying out.”

“Wait,” the sales clerk interrupts us. “You’re the artist? You’re Owen Taylor?”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself an artist,” he mumbles.

There he goes being humble again.

I leave him to listen to her rave about his pieces and how she always looks forward to when he has something new as I take pictures of the clock, marveling over how it somehow appears both polished and like raw wood.

“You know, I’m only here on weekends, so I’m never around when you drop off your work. But I’d love to visit your workshop sometime.” She twists a lock of hair around her index finger, working him hard. “To see how it’s made firsthand.”

Owen has a deer in headlights look. “Uh, I don’t usually let anyone in my workshop.”

God, he’s so clueless. She doesn’t actually want to see his art. She wants him.

“You’d make an exception for me, though. Right?” She sidles closer to him.

“Uh...”

He looks over at me, his gaze flashing with panic, and I compress my lips so I don’t laugh.

“All done,” I announce, holding up my phone. “The pictures will look great on your site.” I turn to the saleswoman next. “And sorry, but Owen’s already seeing someone.”

I take his hand, intertwining our fingers, and he grips me back tightly.

The girl gets the message loud and clear, giving me an apologetic smile, and retreats behind the counter.

“You want to browse for any art while we’re here?” I ask him.

“Hell, no,” he mutters. “Let’s go.”

I keep my grin to myself as he ushers us out the door and back into his truck.

“Is that a normal occurrence for you?” I ask as I buckle my seatbelt. “Getting hit on at art galleries?”

“Obviously not.” He backs out of the parking space and makes a right onto the street.

“You going to get her number once I’m gone?” I tease.

“You know I’m only interested in you.”

There’s no give in his voice, and what I meant as a lighthearted joke turns serious. “I was just teasing.”

“I know.” He gives a defeated sigh. “But after you leave... I’m not dating anyone else. I hope you know that.”

My mouth opens and shuts. “Never say never,” I eventually say, unsure how to respond. “You could meet someone else someday.”

I force the words out, as much as they hurt. It’s the truth. And even though I hate the idea of him with another woman, I don’t want him to live his life alone, still hung up on me.

“Harper...”

“Don’t say anything else about it. Please.” I can’t bear to hear him tell me again I was the one who got away. That he’ll be brokenhearted when I leave. That he truly believes there’s no one else for him. I can’t think about that stuff right now.

“If that’s what you want.”

There’s an awkward silence for a moment, then a call comes through the speakers of his truck, the words *Mom* on the center display.

“You should probably get that,” I murmur, wanting some kind of distraction.

He presses the green phone icon and barely gets a hello out before Cheryl is talking over him.

“How are you doing, honey?”

He rolls his eyes. “Fine.”

“Well, I want you to come over tonight for dinner. I’m making all your favorites. Roast beef and gravy, mashed potatoes, butternut squash casserole. Even a chocolate pie for dessert.”

“Mom—”

“I thought you might need some cheering up about Harper leaving. I know how much you l—”

“Mom,” he says louder, like he can’t get it out fast enough. “Harper’s in the car with me. You’re on speakerphone.”

“Oh, Harper.” The warmth in her voice has me smiling, despite myself. “Weren’t you flying home today?”

I clear my throat, half-wanting to ask her to repeat what Owen cut her off from saying. No, I shouldn’t. If I didn’t want to hear it from him, I shouldn’t from her, either. “I was. But we were able to get a hearing with a judge on Tuesday. So it made more sense for me to stay until then.”

“Oh. Well, that’s wonderful.”

She doesn’t sound like she means it. Then again, she kept trying to convince us not to be hasty about separating.

“I hope you’ll both come to dinner,” she continues. “I’d love to see you.”

At least that part sounds sincere.

I glance at Owen, raising my brows.

*Do you want to?* he mouths.

I nod. I can't let all her effort go to waste.

"Yeah, we'll come over," Owen tells her. "Is five-thirty good?"

She agrees and he makes his goodbyes before pressing the red phone icon on the center display.

"Sorry about that," he mutters.

"Why? I like your mom."

He takes his eyes off the road for a moment to squint at me. "Weren't you the one calling me from the library in a panic because she was there?"

A grin creeps over my lips, glad the awkwardness from a minute ago is gone. "That was before I got used to her. Now I know what to expect."

"Thank God for that. Because I still don't know what to expect from her and it's been twenty-seven years."

"You have to expect the unexpected. That way, you'll never be surprised."

He breathes out a sigh. "Well, I've definitely had my fill of that this week with you."

He looks over and smiles at me as he says it, taking my hand and kissing the back of it again.

I recline in my seat, that lightness floating through my belly once more. If I'm not careful, I'll get used to this kind of feeling. Start to crave it. To need it.

I'll worry about that later, though. For now, I have a family dinner to prepare for.

# CHAPTER 21



OWEN

“Do I look okay?”

I glance over at Harper as she smooths down the front of her shirt. “What do you mean?”

She’s in her original outfit, the one she showed up to my house in a week ago. My washing machine has been getting a workout rewashing it every other day, so she has something to wear other than my flannels and those leggings she bought.

“I mean, do I look good enough for Sunday dinner with your family? This isn’t that dressy.”

“They know you don’t have your normal wardrobe. Besides, it’s too late to change. We’re almost there.”

I make the last turn onto Spring Drive, spying the house I grew up in just ahead.

“Owen, I’m being serious.”

“You look beautiful. Why is that even in question?”

My answer seems to placate her. “I want to make a good impression.”

I frown. “But you’ve already met them. Several times. We spent hours with them yesterday.”

“Yeah, but this is a family dinner. It’s different.”

I park in the driveway behind Mom’s car, but don’t get out yet. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

She peeks over at me and wipes her palms on her jeans, blowing out a breath. “Sorry. I’m being stupid. I keep thinking about this time in college when I went to meet a boyfriend’s family. I was so nervous, I ended up spilling spaghetti all over myself. It was so embarrassing. That was the first and last time I’ve ever gone to a family dinner.”

I get stuck on the part where she said *boyfriend’s family*. Is that what she thinks of me as? A boyfriend? On the one hand,

I'm more than that. I'm her husband.

And on the other, in a couple of days I'll be nothing to her as she heads back to Chicago.

Maybe best not to dwell on that.

"Well, we're not having spaghetti, so you don't have to worry about that. And if anyone's going to spill something, it'll be Jenny because she can't keep still in her chair."

The wrinkle between her brows eases.

"And Mom and Kristen have both told me how much they like you," I continue, wanting her relaxed. "Hell, they'd probably replace me with you if they could."

She tries to hide her smile behind her hand, but doesn't fully cover it.

"Come on," I tell her, unbuckling my seatbelt.

She grabs the wine bottle she insisted on buying at the store as a hostess present and follows me inside, stopping almost as soon as we cross the threshold.

"Is this you?"

I turn to find her pointing at the array of school pictures my mom has kept hanging in the front hall for the last two decades.

"I forgot about the Hall of Shame," I mumble. I don't even notice it anymore when I come over.

"The what?"

I motion down the length of the hall at all the frames on the wall. "That's what me, Kristen, and Grayson always called it. We hated our pictures being up here but Mom would never take them down. She's even got Jamie and Jenny up here now, too."

Harper studies the photos, a small smile on her lips, and pauses at my fourth-grade picture. "You're so serious." She moves further down to my fifth and sixth-grade ones. "Did you stop smiling after the age of ten?"



“I hated pictures. And I thought if I didn’t smile, Mom wouldn’t hang them up anymore.”

“I see your brother took a different tactic.”

She points to Grayson’s fifth-grade picture where he crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out for every shot.

“He was insistent Mom wouldn’t buy them if he did that, but she doubled down and bought more copies.”

“That’s amazing. I’m sure with three kids, she had to find ways to outwit you all.”

“Between us and all the kids she’s taught, she’s a pro.”

She wanders slowly down the hall, stopping at my senior class portrait. Her hand reaches out to hover over the glass frame. “You look handsome in a suit. And no beard.”

I rub a hand over my beard. “You don’t like it?” I’d shave it off if she wanted me to.

“No, I do. I just meant you *also* look good without one.” She moves in closer, brushing her fingers lightly over my jaw. “But I definitely like it.”

Her hand moves up, her thumb stroking my lower lip, devilry flirting over her face.

Oh, no, no, no. She can’t touch and look at me like that here in my mother’s house.

She steps away after a moment and continues down the hall, the heady aroma of a slow-cooked roast greeting us as we enter the kitchen.

“Oh, I’m so glad you came,” Mom says, giving Harper a hug. “And this merlot looks fabulous. Owen, will you get the corkscrew out of the drawer there?”

What, no hug for me? Her actual child? I knew she’d replace me in a heartbeat.

I keep my smile to myself as I retrieve the corkscrew and open the bottle to let it breathe.

A moment later, the front door opens and two little hellions race in, immediately heading for the chocolate pie on the counter.

“Can we have dessert first, Grandma?” Jenny asks without preamble.

“Absolutely not,” Kristen shouts from the hallway.

“What does it matter what order we eat the food in?” Jenny says, stomping her foot in annoyance. “It’s all getting mixed up in our tummies, anyway.”

“Because I said so,” Kristen answers. She then pinches the bridge of her nose and mumbles, “I swore I’d never be one of those moms who says that.”

Mom hugs her around the shoulders. “It happens to the best of us.”

Kristen gives me a tired smile, the dark circles under her eyes she’s been sporting lately not any better.

“Where are the wine glasses?” Harper whispers to me. “Kristen needs a glass, stat.”

I motion to the cabinet over the toaster and usher the kids out to the backyard as Harper pours the merlot for my sister. Picking up the soccer ball sitting outside, I start a game between the two kids, who don’t seem to realize I’m distracting them.

Jenny shrieks—though I’m not sure if it’s in delight or annoyance—as Jamie steals the ball from her and kicks it out toward the tree line. She runs after him and I glance behind me through the kitchen window, where all three women are now sipping wine. Everyone appears at ease, chatting with each other, and my heart does this strange flip in my chest seeing Harper so easily belong, the same as yesterday at the festival. How is it that she said she doesn’t fit in with her own family when she already seems such a natural part of mine?

I rub at my breastbone, fantasizing for a moment that this is a regular Sunday night, me and Harper out to socialize with everyone before going back to our house. That we have all the time in the world to catch up with others, to listen to Mom’s

gossip about who was caught leaving her neighbor's home at four in the morning, for Kristen to report what's going on at The Chronicle, for Jenny and Jamie to tell us about the science project they're supposed to do in school this week. For us to mention how well the website Harper made is doing and how I have new orders coming in. All the normal things that make up a family, a life.

No ticking clock, no rush to soak in every detail about Harper for fear I'll miss something. It's one night in a long line of many to come, a lifetime together.

That's not what this is, though. I can't forget that.

\* \* \*

"YOU DID NOT," Harper exclaims, pushing at my shoulder.

"Oh, he totally did," Kristen says, refilling her wine glass. "We couldn't console him at all."

I cross my arms over my chest, half-annoyed, half-amused at the old childhood story. "I still maintain it was a reasonable thought process for a seven-year-old. An expiration date means something expires at the end. Thus, Mom was going to expire and we'd have to throw her out."

"It was her driver's license that was expiring, not her." Kristen cackles with laughter, the wine loosening her up in a way I haven't seen lately.

Mom pats my cheek, an affectionate expression on her face. "As much as I hated to see you upset, I was also glad you cared about the thought of me expiring."

I shrug, not liking all this attention on me, and glance over into the living room where Jamie and Jenny are playing Mario Kart. Would it be too obvious if I squeezed myself between them on the couch and dipped out of this conversation?

Harper reaches over and squeezes my hand under the table, a smile hovering over her lips, and changes the topic to something else, like she knew what I was thinking. I squeeze her hand back in thanks, enjoying the silent connection

between us, and trace my thumb over knuckles, lingering over the softness of her skin.

She falters in what she's saying, glancing at me, then continues. God, I love knowing that I affect her. That the attraction I felt for her from the beginning isn't one-sided. That tonight we'll be going back to my place and—

“You cheated,” Jamie exclaims from the couch.

“You can't cheat in this game, dummy,” Jenny replies slyly, her tone implying that whatever she did wasn't nice, at the very least.

“Don't call your brother a dummy,” Kristen says, getting up to break up the argument in the living room.

Mom sighs and stands too, grabbing her and Kristen's empty plates to take to the sink.

“Oh, I can help,” Harper says, scooting her chair back. “The dinner was wonderful.”

Mom shoos her away. “No, no. You're a guest. You shouldn't clean up.”

“Really, I—”

“You go out on the patio and spend time with Owen.” Mom motions us toward the sliding glass door. “I'll bring out the pie in a bit.”

“Come on.” I take Harper's hand and lead her out, knowing there's no sense in arguing with Mom about this.

“I just wanted to help,” she says, sitting on the outdoor wicker loveseat.

“Mom shows love by taking care of others. Feeding them, doing things for them. It means she likes you.”

“I like her, too,” she murmurs. “I like your whole family.”

“I was thinking earlier about how well you seem to fit in.”

Her mouth trembles for a moment and then she blurts out, “I wish they were my real family.”

My lips part, thoughts racing in my head, nearly too fast to catch.

*They could be. If you stay married to me. If you moved here and we were husband and wife for real. If we expanded the family and had kids of our own. A little girl with brunette ringlets and a boy with rich, brown eyes like his mama, both of them so beautiful it makes my heart—*

“Sorry, that was stupid to say.” She presses the heels of her palms to her eyes, her head shaking slightly.

I gently encircle her wrists and pull her hands away so I can see her face. “It’s not stupid. Not at all.”

She gives me an unsteady smile, then looks down at her lap.

“I wanted a family like yours when I was growing up,” she whispers.

I nod, hoping she’ll talk more. “What was it like at your house?”

It takes her a moment to answer. “Very... cold. My parents hardly talked to each other, let alone me, unless it was to tell me I was doing something wrong. They always wanted to do their own things.”

“Like what?” I murmur.

She picks at her nails, still avoiding my gaze. “Dad was always reading. Like, a book a day, even with working full-time. He had a paperback in his hand at dinner every night, like he couldn’t leave his fantasy world for a minute. I mean, I like reading, but I don’t ignore everything else in my life because of it.”

The click of her nails as she messes with them has me frowning. She’s never done that before.

“And Mom’s thing was puzzles,” she continues. “The entire downstairs closet was full of them and she’d rotate them out seasonally with the others stored in the attic, like you would with winter clothes. And you’d think that would be a hobby we could do together, right?”

I'm quiet, sensing she doesn't really want me to answer.

"Well, I wasn't allowed to touch any of the pieces. I might mess up the arrangement she had or get them dirty or drop them or something else that would annoy her."

I reach out and take one of her hands, worried she'll rip a nail off with how rough she's being with them. "What did you do, then?"

"Went over to friends' houses, mostly. There were a lot of kids on my block."

"You were a social butterfly even then?"

The smile she gives me this time isn't as unsteady.

"Back in Vegas, is that why you said you wanted a big family?" I ask her quietly. "To make something better for yourself?"

"I guess."

"You already have that, though."

She tilts her head questioningly.

"Isn't that what you've made for yourself in Chicago with your friends?"

Her lips press tightly together as she nods. "But it's not the same. Kelly's going to get pregnant right after getting married and we'll never see her again once she moves away. And then Elena will meet someone and move too because she's amazing and who wouldn't want to be with her? And then I'll be left all alone. With no one. Again."

A tear rolls down her cheek and she hurriedly wipes it away. "Sorry. This is so stupid. Nothing's actually happened. Nothing's even wrong. And you're the last person I should complain to."

I scoot closer and wrap my arm around her, something in me easing as she fits herself into my side, her head resting against my chest. "You can talk to me about whatever. Venting, whining, I don't care. I'll listen to you all day."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy Mom at the sliding glass door with two plates of pie. Her eyes widen as she spots us, and I make a cutting motion along my neck, indicating now's not the time to come out here.

She nods in understanding and turns away, and I press Harper tighter into my side.

"Just so you know," I tell her, "even after Tuesday, you'll still be a part of this family here. That's not changing, no matter what happens with us."

She looks up, her eyes filled with tears. "Owen..."

I know, I know. She doesn't want me to mention anything about her leaving. About the future. About the fact that she'll rip my heart out when she boards that plane back to Chicago.

"And you're not losing your family in Chicago, either. Elena's not going anywhere, and even if Kelly won't have as much time to hang out with you, she'll still love you the same. And if she has a kid, it'll be another member of your family. You'll be fun Aunt Harper."

Her tears don't dry up like I expected. Instead, they flow faster.

"I'm sorry, I thought that would help—"

"It did," she says. "Ignore this." She motions to her face. "You said exactly what I needed to hear."

"Then why are you crying?"

She makes a hiccupping noise. "Because I'm going to miss you so much," she whispers, as if the words are being ripped from her.

My chest aches with unspent emotion, but I hold it in, not wanting to add to her distress.

"I keep telling myself not to be sad about leaving," she continues, "but then here you are being so absolutely perfect and I can't help it."

My brows knit trying to follow her logic. "So I should be... less perfect?"

“No.” She lets out a chuckle, sniffing afterward. “You should stay exactly as you are. I wouldn’t change anything about you.”

The ache in my chest shifts to a warmth, and I let out a sigh. “I wouldn’t change anything about you, either.” Except maybe her insistence on returning to Chicago. In a perfect world, she’d stay here with me forever.

It’s not a perfect world, though. It’s our messy, flawed reality.

And I have to make the best of what I have.



## CHAPTER 22



HARPER

The ride home is silent, especially after I get a text from Kelly. She has a date in mind for her engagement party and wants to check that I'm free.

I respond that my calendar is clear and can't wait to celebrate with her, faking an enthusiasm I'm nowhere close to feeling. This push and pull of both wanting to stay and return home is wearing on me. Particularly because wanting to stay is winning.

"You all right?" Owen asks as we turn on Trail Marker Way, the canopy of trees overhead making the cab of the truck even darker.

"Yeah, fine. Kelly's throwing an engagement party next month and wanted to make sure I can attend."

"Bet that'll be fun."

I can't see his expression in the dark, but his voice is carefully neutral. Probably trying not to upset me again after I broke down like that earlier. What was I thinking, crying on my soon-to-be ex-mother-in-law's patio furniture? What's wrong with me?

I wish I could ask him if he'll go with me to the engagement party, but what purpose would that serve? It would only delay the inevitable. If we both have lives two-thousand miles apart, this won't work out.

So why did we buy those condoms at the store earlier? Why am I playing house with him, knowing it will end with only a head full of bittersweet memories? Why am I torturing myself like this?

I take a deep breath, already conscious of the answer. If I don't spend my time left with him the way I truly want to, I'll regret it forever. I think he might have been on to something when he said he won't date after I leave. Just like in that dream I'd had, I can't imagine anyone else will compare to him. Will

be as caring and sweet. Will rev me up as much as he does. Will look out for me and accept me for who I am, not minding all my flaws and insecurities. If anything, he seems to embrace them.

God, what am I going to do?

Owen shuts off the truck and I come to, realizing we're already at the house. I need to get out of my melodramatic thoughts. Larry gave us an extra two days together with this upcoming court hearing, and I have to take advantage of it while I can.

I unbuckle my seat belt and head inside, scratching Duke under the chin as he greets me at the door. Owen lets him out to do his business and I stand at the window, observing the two of them. Duke sniffs at a tree, carefully inspecting it while Owen stands to the side, hands in his pockets. There's something so familiar about watching them like this, so domestic. Something I wish I could do every night.

My phone buzzes in my purse and I pull it out, surprised at Kelly's name on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Okay, so I've been thinking," she says without preamble, launching halfway into a conversation she's only had with herself. "I honestly can't decide who should be my maid of honor. You and Elena are both like my sisters and I can't choose just one of you. So I want you both to be co-maids of honor. I already talked to Elena about it and she's on board."

It takes me a moment to mentally switch gears from feeling sorry for myself to being happy for my friend. "Yes, of course." I search for the right thing to say, pulling something out of thin air. "I'm honored that you'd want me to be part of your wedding party at all."

"Don't start with the fake modesty," she says, a teasing note in her voice.

I grin, suddenly homesick for her. "Hey, listen. I hope you know I am so happy for you. And if you and Mateo move out

to the suburbs, I totally understand. I can't wait to be fun Aunt Harper to your kids someday."

She laughs. "What are you going on about?"

"I don't know. I've just been thinking about the future a lot. How things will change and all."

"What's got you so introspective?"

"Being here, I guess. This whole experience."

There's a long pause. "You're still coming home, right?"

My weight shifts from foot to foot, suddenly antsy. "Why wouldn't I?"

It's not like I would uproot my life to stay with Owen. That would be... crazy.

"You keep delaying it. First it was a day, then a few, then a few more. You were supposed to be home today, and now you're saying Wednesday. That's a full week and a half for something that was initially an in and out trip."

Our court hearing on Tuesday isn't until the afternoon and I didn't want to risk not making a flight in time. It had nothing to do with wanting to spend one more night with Owen.

"I have to go to court. I told you that."

"What's he like? This guy you married?"

It sounds awful, but I haven't said much to her and Elena about what I've been doing here. What's happened between me and Owen seems... private. Once I share it, everyone will have an opinion on it, and I'm not ready for that yet. I can barely sort out my own feelings about it.

"He's fine," I say, wincing. If I tell her anything about him, I'm liable to ramble until I've spilled it all. "Everything's fine. I'll get the legal stuff sorted out soon."

"Okay..."

It doesn't sound like she believes me, and I don't blame her. I'm being super sketchy.

“I have to go,” I blurt out, spotting Owen and Duke headed back to the house. “I can talk more tomorrow, okay?”

“All right, tomorrow.”

She still sounds wary as I hang up, and I set my phone down on the coffee table before they come in, not wanting to be caught for some reason. Not that I was doing anything wrong...

I press my hand to my temple. Telling Kelly and Elena how much I like it here feels like a betrayal of them. But wanting to go back to Chicago is a betrayal to Owen. Either way, I can't win.

The door opens and Duke pads over to his dog bed in the corner of the living room, giving a tired *hmpff* as he plops down, and Owen locks up the house behind him.

I walk over and wrap my arms around his waist, laying my cheek against his chest. His arms slide around my back automatically, hugging me tight. It feels so right to be with him like this.

“What is it?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, wanting to stay in this bubble with him a little longer, to not face the real world and what's sure to come soon. I resolved before to enjoy my time with him and worry about the future later. I can do it again.

“I want you,” I tell him bluntly. “I've been looking forward to tonight all day.”

His body seems to melt into mine, pulling me tighter against him. “I have, too,” he says, voice rougher than usual.

He cups the back of my head, tilting my face toward his, and lays a gentle kiss on my lips. A shiver races down my spine as I look up at him, the love in his eyes something I'll never forget. There's no mistaking it for anything else, but I won't acknowledge it aloud, either. We both know how this will end.

I tug him backward to the bedroom, shutting the door behind us. There's anticipation all over his face as I seat him

on the edge of the bed and straddle him, kissing him hungrily.

“I love when you take charge,” he whispers between kisses. “You get me so hot.”

Oh, he likes it, does he? Let me give him more, then.

“Strip me,” I whisper in his ear, then nip at the lobe. “And make me come.”

He lets out a groan and whips my top off, so fast I’m afraid he might have ripped it, but I can’t care too much at the moment because he’s unhooking my bra next, those callused hands of his cupping my breasts, still sensitive from his attention on them this morning.

Leaning me backward, he supports me with one palm on my back as he takes a nipple in his mouth, lovingly sucking me, lapping at the hard bud with the flat of his tongue. He turns me on, my hands snaking through his hair, holding him in place, never wanting him to stop.

His free hand travels down my stomach and unbuttons my jeans, shifting me on his lap so that he can undo the zipper and reach inside, his touch heavenly as he strokes two fingers over my core.

“Yes,” I murmur, needing more.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispers against my breast. “I’ll do anything. Everything.”

His vow is followed by a strong suck, making me arch in his arms.

“I... I want...” I stumble over the words, the haze he puts over me making it hard to form a coherent sentence, especially as he finds my clit with his fingers, rubbing it softly. Just a little more pressure...

“More,” I say aloud, fumbling to bring my hand down, pressing against his fingers. “And suck me harder.”

He moans around my breast, following my request, and the hunger inside rises higher, his fingertips rough as they slip deep within me.

“Put your thumb on my clit while you fuck me with your fingers.”

He makes a desperate sound of need as he nods, his tongue frantic against my nipple. I’m glad to see I’m not the only one out of control, my hips twitching, riding his index and middle fingers.

I clutch at his shoulders, needing more leverage, more pressure, more anything, the desire spiraling higher and higher until—

I break, reaching the other side, and gasp loudly. “Owen, there, there. Right there.”

He doesn’t let me go, working me harder, his mouth at my breast sucking like I wanted, his thumb circling my clit over and over as his fingers pump in and out.

He carries me through the orgasm, my hips gradually slowing, my body loose and pliant, still supported by his arm behind me, holding me with ease.

I sit up and kiss him, lingering close. “You didn’t finish stripping me,” I whisper against his lips.

“I got sidetracked.” He kisses me again. “Let me make it up to you.”

He maneuvers me off of him, his hands slowly pulling my jeans down, uncovering my legs inch by inch. He kneels in front of me, picking up one foot, then the other to slide the denim fully off, my panties following soon after. His gaze travels over my lower half, lust all over his face.

“Are you a leg man?” I ask, thinking back to that morning when he’d first spotted me in his boxers.

“With you, I am.” His hand follows his gaze, skimming up my thigh and around to my ass, squeezing. “Every part of you turns me on.”

A flush steals over me at the quiet conviction in his voice, as if I affect him that strongly. As if I’m the end all, be all for him. I like the idea a little too much.

“Will you strip for me, too?”

He grabs his shirt by the back of the neck and pulls it up and over those broad shoulders, all that gorgeous, tan skin a sight to behold. “Anything you want.”

His jeans and boxers are next, the same blue and white checked pair I wore the other night and washed. A thrill runs through me at the thought of him wearing the same clothes I did. Is that what he felt like seeing me in them to begin with?

I lightly push at his shoulder, guiding him down on the bed, and walk over to the nightstand where we put the condoms earlier. Taking one out, I rip open the foil package.

“I want you inside me,” I tell him, placing a knee on the mattress next to him.

He nods eagerly and I roll the condom on him, pausing to take my fill of his incredible body, his mountain man physique turning me on all over again. Muscular thighs, cut abs, heavy pecs, and those beautifully broad shoulders. My hands itch to touch him, and as I release his erection, I travel over each part of him my gaze focused on, ending with gripping his shoulders for balance as I straddle him once more, positioning myself directly over him.

I slide my seam along his cock, and he makes this strangled noise, grasping at the sheets under him.

“You’re teasing me.”

I grin and lean forward to give him a slow, delicious kiss. “I would never.”

Moving back, I grind against him, drawing it out, and enjoy the way he sweats under me. He’s not inside me yet, but so close, it’s only a matter of shifting my hips just right.

“I need you,” he says in a guttural voice, bringing a hand to my waist, trying to guide me to where he wants.

I lift away, whispering in his ear, “I thought you wanted me in charge.”

He groans and removes his hand, placing it on the headboard behind him, but the gleam in his eyes tells me he likes this game.



“And the other one.” I motion to his other hand, and he willingly complies, his triceps bunching and flexing as he grips the length of wood against the wall.

I reward him by gripping his cock and feeding him into me, slowly pressing down until he’s fully inside me.

“Oh, fuck,” he mutters under his breath, panting lightly.

My sentiments exactly. He fills me so completely, it’s like every part of me is consumed by him, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. My heart beats his name, *Owen, Owen, Owen* as I move up and down on him, slowly at first, adjusting to his size, then faster, my arousal coating him, gliding easily.

His eyes are a stormy gray as I look down at him, the passion in them nearly overwhelming. He’s not hiding anymore how he feels, and suddenly, I don’t want to, either. There’s no pretending we’re not completely into each other.

“Touch me,” I request, needing more of him. “I love your touch.”

His hands are off the headboard in a flash, one palm gently squeezing my breast, the other on my waist, pressing me further down on him.

I tilt my hips so my pubic bone grinds deeper against him, the change in angle sending a rush of lust through me, the faint beginnings of another orgasm building up. “God, you feel good,” I murmur, unable to keep it inside.

He pumps into me from below, his gaze roaming all over me, desire on his face. “You feel amazing. So fucking sexy. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

I bite my lip, words of love and forever floating around in my brain. I can’t say that, though. Letting him know I want him—yes. Letting him know I love him—no.

Because I can’t deny it to myself any longer. I’m head over heels for this guy.

I lean forward, my breasts brushing his chest, and kiss him roughly, silently showing him how much I liked his words.

He's on board with the change in position, cupping the back of my head to keep me close as he thrusts shallowly into me, his lips firm against mine. His woody scent fills my nose, along with a musk that's uniquely us, the combination turning me on more.

I release his mouth and lean back, picking up the pace, riding him hard, shifting to find the best angle, the best pressure, the best friction that will take me over the edge. Wanting him to come inside me, to feel his cock twitching in my pussy. I want every jerk, every pulse, for him to truly fill me up.

There's an expression that's somewhere between pleasure and pain on his face, and I know he's close. He just needs that extra push.

"Come for me," I whisper. "Let me feel you come."

He grunts as I bear down on him, squeezing my inner muscles, and his lips part, face relaxing as he moans long and low, his cock hard and hot inside me as he releases, setting me off, too. The orgasm rushes through me lightning fast, a sizzle running down my spine and through every limb, leaving me with a pleasant tingle I can't get enough of.

His hands settle on my hips, holding me in place as he shudders underneath me, such bliss on his face, it's nearly too much to take.

"Come here," he murmurs when he's finished, pulling me down to give me a leisurely kiss.

His body radiates heat, warming me as I lounge against his chest briefly, then move off him so he can clean up in the bathroom.

I check in with myself once I'm alone, that hazy tingle still floating around inside me, filling me with warmth. God, that was amazing. It's never been like that before. Never been that intense. That gripping. That consuming.

And even knowing I'll have to give him up in a couple of days, there's no regret, either. The incredible experience is one

more memory I'll stow away for later. One that will have to serve me for a lifetime.

Because there's no chance I'll ever be able to forget Owen.

# CHAPTER 23



OWEN

“*H*ow far until the hot spring?”

I glance over at Harper, her cheeks flushed, hairline damp with sweat. She stripped the flannel I let her borrow long ago and rolled up the sleeves of her shirt, but I didn't realize she was that overheated. I keep forgetting her endurance isn't the same as mine. Either that or I tired her out too much last night.

“Uh...” There's at least a half mile left. “How about we rest for a bit?”

She nods gratefully and sinks onto a stone outcropping, resting her palm on her chest. “This is the furthest we've ever hiked.”

I hand her my water bottle, not minding when she chugs a quarter of it in one go.

“But let me guess,” she continues. “The six-year-olds regularly run this no problem.”

I grin. She's not completely wrong. “I've never taken them out here. I'm not sure how many people even know about it.”

“So it's a secret hot spring?”

“You could say that.”

She fans at her face, her cheeks already less pink. “Is that why you didn't bring Duke? Afraid he'd give up the location to someone?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, that's why.” That and he doesn't care for hikes this long, either.

She sighs and rests her palms on the stone behind her, leaning back. “I can't believe how beautiful it is here.” She tilts her face up, the dappled sunlight coming through the trees overhead illuminating her. “I thought I'd be used to it by now, but it still takes my breath away.”

My gaze travels over, lingering over her creamy, porcelain skin, her lithe body, that tangible hum of chemistry that zings through me whenever she's near. "I know what you mean."

She looks at me, a smile spreading over her lips as she catches my meaning. "Normally, I'd think that's a line, but coming from you..." She shakes her head. "I like that you say what's on your mind."

I hold back my snort. If I really said what I was thinking, I'd be down on one knee begging her to stay in Crescent Pass with me. She doesn't want to hear that, though.

"So when will you have a piece ready to sell on the website?" she asks, changing topics. "I've got everything set up and just need to list something."

I rub the back of my neck, knowing I'm behind on my normal output rate. I don't usually have a week-long distraction like her. After she leaves, though... I have a feeling I'll be throwing myself into work, if only to have something else to focus on. "No later than a week," I tell her.

"And you remember the best angles to shoot photos of the pieces from, right?"

"Yes, yes." She went over all that with me already. Even typed up a process guideline for it, as if I'll ever reference it. "I'll send you the pictures when I'm finished."

She smiles. "Just want to make sure. Seriously, your site is going to be amazing. It's too bad you're not closer to Chicago or I could refer you a ton of business."

I swallow hard. The thought has crossed my mind before, but I entertain it one more time. *What if I moved to Chicago?*

In a cramped apartment surrounded by concrete, having to visit a park just to see greenery. Endless amounts of people, bumping into you on the sidewalks, talking so loud out in public you can barely hear yourself think. Nowhere to hike, to take a breath of fresh air, to let Duke run free, my family thousands of miles away...

But I'd have Harper. The woman I love.

I rub my temple, nearly forgetting what we were saying. “I’m not worried about attracting business.”

She lets out a defeated sigh as she stands, still smiling. “Of course you’re not. Okay, I’m ready to keep going.”

I take her hand, guiding her away from an exposed tree root she’s bound to trip over, and lead her in the right direction. There’s no trail in this part of the woods, everything undisturbed around us.

“What do you think tomorrow will be like?” she asks, gripping my fingers tighter for a moment as a squirrel scampers through the underbrush.

“I have no idea.” It’s not as if I have extensive experience with annulments.

“Have you ever been to the courthouse?”

“Once. I drove Grayson there so he could contest a speeding ticket.”

“That’s right. The mysterious brother who got away.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not mysterious. He’s just in Seattle.”

She makes a *hmm* noise. “And what made him want to move there?”

I shrug. “He talked about moving to a big city for as long as I can remember. He does something in finance there, not that I really understand it.”

“He doesn’t have a small-town heart like you, then.”

I peek over at her. “What do you mean?”

She gestures widely toward the surrounding forest. “You’re part of this place. The house you built. The art you make. It’s all an extension of this area. Of nature. Even the way you move through these woods. You know it like the back of your hand. You belong here.”

I look ahead, silent. Guess there goes my passing thought of moving to Chicago. She’s right. It would be too hard to leave Crescent Pass. It’s my whole life.

“Obviously Grayson didn’t inherit that gene if he left with no problem. Are you close with him? I can’t tell from what you’ve mentioned so far.”

I shake off the weird funk that’s settled over me and focus on her question. “Grayson and I... We’re not *not* close, if that makes sense. It’s one of those things where we can go months without speaking and it’s fine. And when we’re together again, we pick back up where we left off, like no time has passed.”

“Do you miss him?”

My lips twist to the side. “I guess. But he’s been gone long enough now that it’s normal he’s not here. I mean, he’s my brother and I’d do anything for him, but it’s okay that we don’t see each other all that often, either.”

“You’ve never visited him in Seattle?”

I grimace at the thought of going there and she laughs, looping her arm around mine as she hugs it to her.

“I guess that’s my answer.” She rests her head on my shoulder briefly as we continue on through the woods. “I’m glad you have your other family here, at least. They’ll make sure you get social interaction every so often.”

“You act like I’m a plant that needs to be watered,” I grumble.

She looks up at me, a sunny smile on her face. “That’s exactly what you are. And I need to make sure you’ll be taken care of before I leave.”

Pain lances through me before I push it down. “I was doing fine before you came.”

“I know,” she replies softly. “But I’ll worry about you.”

I focus on the way toward the hot spring instead of her words. Otherwise, that’s a hole I’ll never dig myself out of.

When we reach our destination, Harper walks ahead of me, inspecting the area.

“You weren’t kidding when you said it was bathtub-sized.”



“Probably the only reason it hasn’t been exploited by now.”

Moving closer to the edge, she bends down and sticks her hand in. “That’s perfect. So, you’re sure no one else comes out here?”

“I’ve never seen anyone, at least. There’s no trail out this way. What are—”

I cut myself off as she takes off her top and toes off her shoes. What is she doing?

“I figured we could soak our feet a while,” I say, unable to look away.

Her socks come off next, followed by her pants. “You think I hiked all the way out here just to wet my feet?”

I move closer, trying to shield her, not that anyone else is around. “Are you skinny dipping?” I whisper as she unhooks the back of her bra.

She grins at me. “Don’t be such a prude. It’s only us two.”

Her underwear is off next, and I barely have time to appreciate her nude body before she’s slipping under the surface, the cloudy water obscuring her form.

“You could join me, you know.”

Her sultry smile is all the push I need to strip off my own clothes and ease into the small spring, her expression delighted as I crowd her near the edge and slip my arms around her.

“Is this your first time skinny dipping?” she asks, her breasts brushing against my chest as she wraps her arms over my shoulders.

“Obviously. And I’m guessing you’re not new to it?”

She chuckles. “I had a bit of a wild streak in college. I swear I’m better now, though.”

The water swirls around us, not hot enough to steam, but pleasantly warm compared to the surrounding air temperature. “Am I included in that wild college streak?”

“Marrying you?”

I nod and she twists her lips.

“You were an outlier. Most of my crazy stuff was done with friends. Rarely with strangers.” She moves in closer, skimming her lips over the shell of my ear. “Especially tall, sexy ones that acted like perfect gentlemen.”

My dick perks up, liking the way she’s making goosebumps break out all over my body, and I bring my hands down, squeezing her ass. “Is that what you thought of me?”

“Mm-hmm. But now I know you’ve got a wild streak, too.”

“I do?”

She smiles and kisses me, nipping at my bottom lip. “No one who can go down on me like you can isn’t a little wild.”

I groan, wishing I’d put a condom in my wallet before leaving the house. Like I thought we’d be doing anything on a hike, though?

Maneuvering her around so her back is to my front, I slide my cock along her seam from behind, teasing us both. I’m careful not to enter her, holding her hips in place so she doesn’t make any sudden movements.

She groans, clearly liking what I’m doing, her back arching, the tips of her breasts poking out of the water. Damn, she’s sexy.

“I want to fuck you so bad,” I whisper in her ear, loving the hitch in her breath.

She’s panting as she looks over her shoulder at me. “You can, if you want.”

I stare blankly at her, not sure what she’s saying.

“I’m not ovulating,” she murmurs. “And you can pull out at the end.”

She rubs herself against me, her pussy gliding over the head of my cock, and I fight the urge to thrust forward. It’s tempting. So goddamned tempting. As good as it was last

night, how much better would it be to feel her bare, nothing between us?

My breaths grow harsher at the mental image. Pounding into her, sloshing water over the rim of the spring, my dick coated with her arousal. No, I shouldn't. There are other things at stake.

“What if you got pregnant? Even if it's a slim chance?” I can't help moving my lower half again, torturously slow against her, loving the pull between us, the lure of being this close to her.

Her head falls against my shoulder, her hips straining against my hold to move further back onto me. “We'd cross that bridge when we came to it.”

“Harper...” God, she can't lead me on like that. Can't offer herself on a platter and expect me not to take her.

“Just for a minute.” She pants heavily. “I need you inside me.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to think rationally. Yeah, we're both turned on, but is taking a risk like this worth it? If she actually got pregnant, would it change anything? Would she still return to Chicago?

I force myself to let go of her and move to the other end of the spring, though it only leaves about three feet between us.

She turns around after a few moments, sinking lower in the water so only her head is visible.

“If what we did today ended up as a baby nine months from now, would you move here?”

She's silent, glancing away toward the treeline. Guess that's a no.

And that means I can't take the chance.

“I couldn't be one of those dads who only sees their kid during summers and every other holiday,” I tell her. “They'd be my whole world, along with my wife. I wouldn't be able to live apart from them.”

She nods, still looking away, and tilts her head down. Something drips down her cheek, but I can't tell if it's water from the spring or a tear. "You'd make a wonderful father," she whispers. "You're so great with your niece and nephew." She wipes at her face, only making it wetter. "But you're right. I wasn't thinking clearly. And I've never suggested that to anyone else." She seems to compose herself and looks back at me. "Thank you for being responsible."

I nod, a part of me hating that she put me in this position of having to refuse her. "In a different life, I'd love to have a family with you."

"Owen." She swims toward me, laying light fingertips on my lips. "Let's enjoy this for what it is. I like being with you right here, right now."

She kisses me, my chest aching at her gentle rejection.

Wrapping one hand around the back of my neck, she moves the other to my still-erect cock, stroking it up and down. I know what she's trying to do. Touch me enough and I'll be distracted. I won't think about how this thing between us is ending tomorrow. Won't think about the Harper-shaped hole in my heart.

And damn her, it's working.

I kiss her back, angling our mouths so I can slip my tongue inside, my fingers doing the same in her pussy. I can't deny any chance to do this with her.

She makes a satisfied moan as I work her up, the two of us breathing heavily, our movements growing more frantic the longer we continue.

I palm her breast with my free hand, squeezing, then tweak her nipple, tugging it lightly. The action must have been the final thing she needed because she comes hard and hot in my arms, and I swallow her sounds of pleasure, kissing her thoroughly.

She grins up at me hazily when she's finished, passion in her gaze. "Sit on the edge here," she murmurs, indicating the stone rim right outside the spring.

I take a quick glance around to confirm we're still alone, and do as she says, the muscles in my legs tightening as she moves between my thighs and slips my cock between her lips. Oh, Christ, that's good.

The sight of her bobbing up and down as she sucks my dick is more than I can handle and it's not long before I'm coming in her mouth, her greedy pulls draining me dry, taking everything of me. There's no one else who could ever affect me like this.

I slide back in the small pool of water, kissing her languidly, and try to enjoy this time together for what it is, like she wanted. This brief interlude is all we can have.

Tomorrow will be here all too soon.

# CHAPTER 24



HARPER

The imposing brick building looms before us, appearing about twenty stories high, even though realistically it can't be over four. I grab onto the handrail, taking the steps up at a crawl as my stomach does a slow roll.

There's a gentle hand on my lower back and then Owen's there, his brows knit as he studies me.

"I'm fine," I say before he can ask, and pick up my pace.

He holds the door open for me and I murmur a quiet thanks before heading for the information desk in the center of the lobby. I give the woman our names and she looks up our courtroom, where the Honorable Mark Fleming presides.

"Do you think this judge will go easy on us?" I ask Owen as we find a bench outside the courtroom to wait at.

He shrugs. "No idea. Hopefully Larry put in a good word for us."

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans, my stomach still twisting inside. "If they golf together, they must be on good terms."

"I guess."

I glance at Owen, trying not to be obvious about it. His face is paler than usual, his arms crossed over that broad chest, his button-down shirt hiding his thick biceps and powerful shoulders. I'd clung to those shoulders last night, his big body covering me, pressing me into the mattress as he'd pumped steadily into me. The joining had been bittersweet, neither of us acknowledging what today would bring, but I don't think either of us would have stopped it for anything.

The courtroom doors open and a woman and child exit, the little boy crying. A moment later, a man walks through and the woman picks up the child and hurries off, glancing over her shoulder at him in worry.

I turn away, not wanting to witness anymore, and press a hand to my stomach, willing it to calm down.

“We can probably go in now,” Owen says. “It’s close to our time.”

I nod and follow him in, taking note of a few people sitting in the back row. I wonder what they’re here for.

Owen picks a spot in the middle and I sit next to him, my foot tapping against the floor as we wait for our case to be called.

In the judge’s seat is a man in his late fifties, his salt and pepper hair brushed back from his face, gaze sharp behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

The bailiff calls for the group in the rear next, a permanency review hearing for the legal custodianship of a girl who can’t be more than five years old, her brunette pigtails reminding me of Jenny.

I can barely hear what they’re talking about up at the judge’s bench, my mind going over the facts of our case, running through my spiel to make sure I don’t forget anything.

“Calloway versus Taylor,” the bailiff announces, making me jump in my seat.

Owen squeezes my hand before he stands and heads up front. I trail behind him, smoothing my shirt down, still wishing I had something more formal to wear. I had no way of knowing I should have brought more outfits.

The bailiff swears us in, asking us to state our names and affirm to tell the truth, which we both do. After that, we stand at a table in front of the judge’s bench, my armpits perspiring as the judge reviews a sheaf of papers.

“Where is our petitioner?” Judge Fleming asks, looking out over the courtroom.

“Here, your Honor,” I say. I’m pretty sure I’m the petitioner, at least.

“And you are asking me to sign a decree of annulment?”



“Yes, sir.”

“And what is your reasoning?”

“We were incapable of consenting to the marriage at the time.”

He looks back at his papers. “Considering your place of union was Las Vegas, I’m guessing you were drunk?”

My cheeks heat at the disapproval in his tone, but I stay professional. “We were highly intoxicated, yes.”

“According to your petition, this happened over five years ago. That’s an awful long time to wait to take care of this.”

“We didn’t realize we were legally married.”

His lips press together tightly as he nods. “And our respondent, Mr. Taylor. You didn’t know you were married to Ms. Calloway for the last five years?”

Owen shakes his head. “No, your Honor.”

“You must have had a hell of a lot to drink that night.”

Owen clears his throat as he shifts his weight between his feet. “I suppose so.”

“So, how did you figure it out?”

“Harper showed up at my door to tell me a week and a half ago.”

The judge’s head swivels back to me. “And how did you discover it?”

I relay the story of having brunch with my friends, of researching online, of calling Abby at the library, and my decision to fly out and tell Owen in person.

Judge Fleming regards me curiously. “So, let me get this straight. You knew this entire time you were married?”

The heat that had faded from my cheeks returns with a vengeance. “I wasn’t aware it was legal. I thought it was just for fun. There’s that marketing slogan—*What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*. You know the one?”

He makes a *hmm* sound that indicates he doesn't buy my answer, but I don't know what else to say. Yes, I realize now I'm an idiot. Lesson learned.

"And you left the next morning, neither of you the wiser that you were *legally* married?"

I nod.

"Have you had contact since your time in Vegas?"

"No. Not until I came to Crescent Pass last Sunday to tell him."

He nods to himself. "Good. And you've been staying in town for the past week and a half while you waited for this hearing?"

"Yes."

"In a hotel?"

I blow out a breath, hoping he doesn't take this the wrong way. "There was a popular fall festival going on when I arrived, so all the rooms at the local inn were taken. All the hotel rooms in the next town over, too. So I was forced to stay with Owen at his home."

"Forced, you say?" The judge's lips quirk in amusement and he turns to Owen. "Has she been in your guest bedroom, then?"

Owen's mouth opens and shuts a few times before he responds. "It's a one-bedroom cabin."

"Sharing a bed, then?"

Oh, God. "Owen slept on the couch," I blurt out. It's not a complete lie. He did sleep there the first few nights.

"So you have not engaged in sexual relations with each other during the marriage?"

I glance at Owen and away, heat also on his cheeks now, too.

"I-I thought that wasn't a factor," I stumble to say. "Consummating the marriage."

Judge Fleming's brows narrow. "I'm trying to gauge the full scope of your relationship."

"We didn't the night we were married," I tell him, hoping he leaves it at that.

He's a judge, though. Of course he picks up on the nuance of my wording. "Your response implies that you have since. After you realized you were married."

My jaw clenches, an irrational anger filling me. Owen said it wouldn't matter in court if we slept together. Didn't he say that? It seems so long ago that happened.

Really, though, I have no one to blame but myself. Owen asked if we should get condoms and I said yes. God, I'd even begged him to have unprotected sex with me yesterday at the hot spring like a lunatic.

"Yes, your Honor," Owen answers when I spend too much time inwardly berating myself and him.

"That implies to me a relationship stronger than two strangers drunkenly deciding to get married in Vegas. Unless you were mentally incapacitated this time, too?"

Owen shakes his head. "No, we were sober."

I look up at the ceiling and blow out a long breath. I know we're supposed to tell the truth, but goddamned.

"And does your family live in Crescent Pass also, Mr. Taylor?"

Owen nods.

"Have you introduced Ms. Calloway to them as your wife?"

Shit. He's going to spin this the wrong way, too.

"His family is very close," I explain before Owen can respond. "So I've met them a few times, yes. But they know we're not a real couple. That we're getting an annulment. I actually have statements here from his mother and sister that he had no knowledge of being married when he returned from his trip."

I pull a folder out of my purse but the judge gives me a staying hand. “I don’t need to see those.”

Wonderful.

“Now, if you are granted this annulment, do you plan to stay in contact with each other?”

My mouth opens but nothing comes out, not wanting to dig the hole any deeper with his leading questions.

“Harper has offered to work part-time for my business,” Owen says after a moment.

“It’s a remote position,” I rush to say. “There won’t be any physical contact. It’ll be completely professional.”

Judge Fleming takes off his glasses and rubs at the bridge of his nose. “Ms. Calloway, in my opinion, if you had truly wanted an annulment, you would have served Mr. Taylor with papers immediately and left town. You wouldn’t be staying at his house, engaging in sexual relations, meeting his family, and agreeing to work for him. That sounds like a girlfriend, at the very least.”

He meets each of our eyes, his face stern. “I could excuse the drunken behavior, but everything you’ve done since has been a conscious decision.”

Next to me, Owen hangs his head low, inhaling and exhaling steadily.

“Do you want this annulment, Ms. Calloway?”

I swallow hard, avoiding Owen’s gaze as he looks over at me. “Yes.”

The judge’s stare somehow grows more intense. “You don’t sound completely sure.”

“I do.” No, wait. That sounds like I’m getting married. “I mean, I’m sure.”

He nods and looks at Owen next. “And do you want this annulment, Mr. Taylor?”

Owen’s nostrils flare, the silence in the courtroom lengthening, and I have a horrible premonition he’s going to

say no. That all of this will have been for nothing.

“It’s what Harper wants, so yes.”

Oh, God. That’s a non-answer the judge is sure to pick up on.

“I didn’t ask what she wanted. I asked what you wanted. And may I remind you, you’re under oath.”

My hands grip the edge of the table in front of us, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. He better not say—

“No.”

My eyes squeeze shut for a moment, my heart dropping to the floor.

The judge blows out a breath of laughter. “Then my recommendation is a divorce. The State of Oregon will not grant your annulment.”

He bangs his gavel, dismissing us, and I walk on numb feet out of the courtroom, across the hallway toward the entrance, and down the front steps, barely aware of my surroundings.

“Harper...”

I stop in the middle of the parking lot and turn to him. “What?”

His expression is pleading. “I was under oath.”

“I know.”

Damn it, I know. And I can’t... I can’t fault him for telling the truth. Even if it ruined everything.

“I couldn’t lie to him. And I... I’ve never wanted this annulment. When you showed up, I thought it was a second chance. Being with you since has been the best ten days of my life. I don’t want to lose you again.” He rubs at the back of his neck, faltering for a moment. “I’ve fallen in love with you. I want to stay married.”

My jaw trembles, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes at the hope on his face, the plaintive yearning in his voice.

How can I crush him? This amazing, caring man I've fallen in love with, too.

But sometimes... love isn't enough. The distance between us is too great. A forest so thick with trees, I can't see a way through.

"You could stay here," he continues when I remain silent. "And live with me. I'd support you. If you're worried about money or a job, you don't have to be. Like Larry said, half my business is yours. And my house. I—"

"Owen." I cross my arms over my chest, willing myself not to reach for him. To soothe the hurt I'm causing him. My hands shake and I press them tightly against my ribcage, needing to appear firm. "I've been here for a little over a week. We barely know each other."

"We've known each other for five years."

I narrow my gaze. "A technicality. I can't uproot my whole life like this so suddenly."

He steps forward, cupping my jaw. The calluses on his fingers are rough against my skin, and I savor the moment, knowing it can't last. "This will work out. There's no one else I'd rather spend my life with."

I let myself linger for just a little longer, then move back, away from his touch. I have to apply logic and reason to this—not fall into his arms, desperately wanting to accept what he's offering. That's my heart talking, not my head. I'm not that impulsive girl anymore who got married on a whim.

"You know I care about you," I admit. It's all I'm willing to admit. Any more and he'd never let me go. "But it wouldn't be like this all the time. We're in this weird vacation-honeymoon phase right now. Having great sex that's muddling our heads. The endorphins or pheromones or whatever are tricking us. It's not everyday life."

"You think it'd be that different if you lived here?"

I throw my hands up. "I don't know. But I can't move here, anyway. I've built a whole life in Chicago over the past four years. I have ten months left on my apartment lease at

home. Best friends who are like family to me. A career that I'm great at, and you can't tell me they need marketing specialists in a town of eight hundred people." I shake my head, trying to convince him, to convince myself that there's no way what he's suggesting would work. "You have some idealized version of me in your head that you'd discover wasn't real within a month of me being here."

His jaw tightens. "I'm not in love with a Harper I've put on a pedestal. I'm in love with *you*. You think I don't know your faults? You're—"

I hold up a staying hand. "Please don't list them out loud. I'm familiar with them."

I can't bear to hear him say all the things I know are wrong with me. Klutzy. Unable to cook. Persistent to a fault. Probably bossy. And impulsive. Can't forget that one. It's what got us into this whole mess.

And the one thing I'm trying not to be now.

# CHAPTER 25





OWEN

I stare at Harper, her arms crossed over her chest again, hunched into herself, like all the fight's gone out of her.

"I know you're not perfect," I tell her, needing to say the right thing, to make her understand. To give me a chance. Give *us* a chance. Nothing has ever been so important. "But you're perfect for me."

She seems to retreat further, her head hung low, like she's not even listening to me.

Why is she being so resistant? Especially after everything we've shared.

"Harper."

I move closer when she won't look up, and it's not until I'm right up on her that I notice the tears trickling down her cheek.

Cursing softly under my breath, I gather her in my arms, a small part of me easing when she lays her head against my chest without resistance. But the larger part hates knowing that I'm the one to make her cry. I'm the one causing all this turmoil.

But how can I not fight for what I want? It's what I should have done five years ago.

I rub her back, avoiding eye contact with the woman walking our way in the parking lot, reminding me we're in a public place.

"Let's get in the truck," I murmur, leading Harper the last few feet to my vehicle.

She comes without complaint, looking out the window as I start the engine and reverse out of the space. She's silent as I turn onto the main thoroughfare, as I switch lanes to get on the interstate, as I take the ramp and merge into traffic.

“Please say something,” I whisper, for once unable to bear the silence. Wanting her normal chatter, her laughter, her incessant questions. Her poking, her prodding, anything that shows she’s still willing to talk to me. To be with me.

She brushes her palms down the front of her shirt, focusing on it instead of me. “I’m glad you said what you did. Glad you got it off your chest. Glad I got to hear it.” She sniffs, her nose sounding blocked up. “But ultimately, it’s not enough. Our lives are incompatible. We both knew that going in. This was never supposed to be anything more.”

It hurts to swallow, my throat thick with a painful emotion I don’t want to examine too closely.

“It turned into more, though. You can’t deny that.” I look over at her, curled against the passenger side door, and back to the road. “This could really be something. A forever kind of thing.”

She makes a whimpering sound and turns further toward the window, until I can’t see her face at all. “Why are you making this so difficult?” she whispers.

“Because I love you. Because I want you to stay. Because I can’t imagine my life without you.”

“Then why do *I* have to be the one to give everything up?” she explodes with. “*I’m* the one who has to sacrifice it all.”

My jaw clenches, my knuckles gripping the steering wheel tight. Why the hell did I get on the interstate knowing our conversation wasn’t finished? “You just told me yesterday that I belong in Crescent Pass. That it’s a part of me.”

“It is.” She rubs at her forehead, the anger that seemed to surge through her gone as quickly as it came. “You can’t leave and I wouldn’t want you to.”

“So if I can’t leave and you can’t stay, where does that leave us?”

I already know the answer. She’s been saying it this whole time.

She doesn’t repeat herself, though. There’s no need to.

“Is there anything I can do to change your mind?” I ask.

There’s an infinite pause, hope once again unfurling in my chest, spreading through me before it’s crushed with one decisive word.

“No.”

I nod, the tears sneaking up on me, filling my vision until it goes blurry. The road ahead is nothing more than dashes and squiggles, but I refuse to wipe my eyes, not wanting her to see what she’s brought me to.

I zone out, not letting myself think anything, feel anything. Wanting this terrible car ride to be over so I can be alone. Practice for when she leaves tomorrow, taking all the light out of my life.

There’s not a single word uttered for the next hour, only the occasional snuffle from the other side of the truck. Is it wrong that I’m glad she’s upset? Glad that her rejecting me means something to her? Apparently not enough, though.

“I booked a hotel,” Harper says when I take the exit that goes to Crescent Pass. “I couldn’t change my flight.”

“What?” Is that what she’s been doing over there on her phone the whole ride home? Trying to get away from me faster?

“I... I don’t think it’d be a good idea to stay with you tonight. It’s better to make...” She sniffs again. “To make a clean break.”

I don’t respond, instead pausing at the stop sign at the end of the exit ramp. I turn right, mentally counting down the last few miles until Trail Marker Way.

“I’ll pack my stuff as soon as we get back and leave. You won’t have to deal with me anymore.”

Deal with her? She’s acting like I’m her parents. Like I see her as a burden.

“And if you don’t want to go through with the website or me as your assistant,” she continues, “I understand.”

Seems like she got her voice back. If only she'd stop saying such awful things now.

"It's probably for the best, actually," she babbles. "Prolonged contact will only make it—"

She cuts herself off and I look over, noting the misery on her face as she squeezes her eyes shut tight, her nose red.

"Make it harder for me to get over you?"

Her mouth trembles as she nods.

"You don't have to worry about that."

She blinks, looking back at me questioningly, the first time she's met my eye in an hour.

"I couldn't get you out of my head after having just a taste of you five years ago. What makes you think I'd ever be able to get over you now after having the real thing?"

Her lips part, gaze searching mine, but I can't keep eye contact with her for long, needing to check on the empty road in front of us.

When I look back, she's turned toward the window again, already distancing herself from me.

What the fuck am I going to do?

\* \* \*

HARPER'S LEAVING IS an uneventful affair.

It's ten minutes at most, the sight of her zipping around my house forever etched in my mind.

Packing up the few things she brought with her and the souvenirs for her friends. Throwing away the extra clothes she bought at the general store. Setting the library books she checked out on the coffee table. Bending down and giving a big hug to Duke, her cheek pressed against his fur.

And then standing in front of me, her face distraught as she leans in to quickly embrace me, her body barely in contact

with mine before she's gone, through the front door, and down the porch steps. In her rental car, then backing up and turning, her brake lights glowing as she drives down the path that will take her to the main road.

The canopy of trees swallows her up and I spend I don't know how long in the open doorway, staring at that spot in my yard where her car disappeared, not sure if I want her to come back or to never see her again. She was right that working together on the online selling will probably be too hard. That every interaction with her will be a knife in my gut, reminding me that she's off in Chicago, living the life she wants to live. The one that doesn't include me.

I shouldn't be angry. Upset. Distressed. Whatever you want to call it. I knew this day was coming. Knew she was leaving. But it seemed I didn't truly believe it. Didn't think she'd actually go through with it. Put too much stock in my last minute Hail Mary, as if my confession of love would change her mind.

It didn't.

I close the front door and wander to the bedroom, picking up the pillow she slept on last night. I bring it to my face and inhale, that delicate floral scent of hers mixed with the smell of my shampoo making a desperate longing spread through me.

Ripping the pillowcase off the pillow, I gather the rest of the bedsheets and stick them in the washer, along with my clothes she used as pajamas. The sudden need to get rid of all traces of her consumes me, and I tear through the house, cleaning with a frantic energy that would concern me under normal circumstances.

Nothing about this is normal, though.

The crumbs in the kitchen from the toast she made this morning are swiped in the trash. The toothbrush she used, sitting so innocently next to mine in the ceramic holder, is dumped. Her hair that's all over the bathroom—on the counter, on the floor, on the fucking walls of the shower—is disposed of.

Every goddamned strand of it.

And just like that, she's gone. Removed from my house. My life.

But not my memories. Those are sure to linger for... well, forever.

I grab a beer from the fridge and turn on the TV, not noticing what's on or caring. Letting the flickering images on the screen absorb into my brain, distracting me. Or trying to, at least. There's no escaping the crushing loneliness that pervades me. The sense that nothing will ever be right again. Why couldn't Harper have given us a real chance?

I pull my phone out of my pocket and go to my contacts, my thumb hovering over her name. If I call and beg her to stay, will it make a difference? Or will it only make it worse when she rejects me yet again?

I press the green phone icon, but not under her name. The one above it. Grayson.

He answers two rings later, just as I'm about to hang up. Why did I call him, anyway?

"Hello?"

I'm silent, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"Owen?" There's concern in his tone now. "You there?"

I never call him. He probably thinks I'm in trouble. In jail. In a ditch on the side of the road. On my deathbed.

"Yeah, I'm here."

My voice is scratchy, unused over the past several hours, and I realize it's dark out. How long was I spaced out earlier?

"What's up? You okay?"

God, it's good to hear him. When was the last time I spoke to him? It might have been... the fourth of July. Mom FaceTimed him when we were all over at her house for the holiday. I'm a shitty brother for not reaching out more.

"Have you ever been in love?" I blurt out.

There's a long pause, no doubt because he's wondering what kind of drug I'm on. I can count on one hand the number of times I've called him since he moved away, and here I am asking about love?

"Can't say that I have," he finally responds.

"Ever been dumped?" I find myself asking next. That's what essentially happened, right? Even if Harper and I weren't a real couple in her mind, we were still together. Still married. And now soon to be divorced. What a shitshow that'll be.

The breath Grayson lets out has a tinge of laughter in it. "A few times. Never anything serious, though."

"Was it because of one of you? Or the circumstances you found yourself in?"

He clears his throat. "Some of both, I guess. What, uh, brings on this line of questioning? Mom didn't put you up to this, did she?"

"No." To be fair, it sounds like the kind of thing she'd do.

I scratch at the back of my neck, deciding to just tell him. "Did you know I got married?"

"What?" Pure disbelief comes over the line.

"Yeah. It was in Vegas five years ago."

"You've... been married for five years? I've seen you, though. For Christmases and Thanksgivings and probably some other holidays I'm forgetting at the moment. Where's your wife? How come I haven't met her? How come no one told me?"

I explain the situation, the minutes dragging on as everything pours out of me. How amazing Harper is. How hard I fell for her. How I'll never meet anyone like her again.

"Holy shit," he finally says. "You've gone off the deep end. You know, you missed your calling to be an emo kid."

I roll my eyes. Now I remember why I never call Grayson.

"What you need is to go out and get laid. Forget about this girl."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, mentally counting to five so I won't throttle him over the phone. "Have you heard anything I've said? I don't want anyone else. I want her."

"Then why are you complaining to me about it? If you want her, go get her."

Again, did he listen to anything I explained? "She doesn't want me, though."

Another pang slices through my chest at the reminder. Maybe I am an emo kid at heart.

"No, she doesn't want to move to Crescent Pass. There's a difference."

My heart beats faster. "What are you saying?"

"If she's that important, you have to move to Chicago."

That's what it comes down to, doesn't it? Can I do it? Leave everything I love, my whole life, to go be with her? Wasn't that what I was asking of her, though?

"But Mom will kill you for leaving," he adds.

"No, I don't think she would," I murmur, mulling it over. If anything, she'd probably help pack my bags if I told her I was going after Harper.

"Are you seriously considering it?"

"I... I don't know." Really, I don't. This would change everything.

But Harper also means everything.

There's a stretch of silence and then Grayson says, "Sorry I'm not good at serious conversations. Or emotional stuff, you know?"

"Not your fault." Only half my mind is on his words, the other half contemplating his suggestion.

"Whatever you decide, I'll support you."

I swallow my chuckle. What can he do from Seattle?

"With Mom, I mean. If she's anything like she was when I moved, you'll need it."



“Mom loves Harper, though. I think she’d be supportive.”

“She loves her?” There he goes again with the disbelief.

“Yeah, she told me.” As we’d left her house Sunday night after dinner, she’d whispered it in my ear as she hugged me goodbye.

“Sounds like you got the seal of approval, then.”

There’s an edge of bitterness in his tone, but I can’t deal with that now. I have a lot to think about.

I make my goodbyes and thank him, then hang up. I don’t let myself stare off into space, though, bringing up my web browser instead. I discover hiking options about an hour outside of Chicago, dog parks for Duke, studios I could lease for work, galleries I could sell my stuff in. Any and everything I can think of, trying to plan this out, to give the idea a fair chance.

I lean back against the couch cushions after a while, my neck sore from being hunched over my phone, my mind racing, unable to keep up with the speed of my thoughts.

After I don’t know how long, I bring up my contacts again, bypassing Grayson and Harper and Kristen until I reach the M’s.

It only rings once before she picks up.

“Mom, I have a favor to ask. Can you watch Duke for a few days? And I need you to keep it a secret.”

# CHAPTER 26



HARPER

“Thank you for letting me stay here.” I pour a glass of wine for Kristen, then myself. She probably thinks I’m an alcoholic at this point with how much I keep pushing it on her. “And for not telling Owen.”

She takes the glass I offer her and sips the burgundy alcohol. “Where does he think you are?”

I sigh, taking my own sip, and savor the black cherry flavor. She seemed to like the merlot I brought over Sunday, so I figured it’d be a hit again. “A hotel. But the inn here in town was still full.” Sure, I could have tried to find a place in Kirkwood, even driven out to the airport and booked a room there... but I didn’t want to. A part of me wasn’t ready to leave Crescent Pass yet.

“It’s no problem. I’m just sorry all I have to offer is this lumpy, old couch. The twins have destroyed it with all their jumping.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” And it’s not like I’ll be sleeping much, anyway. Remembering the peek I’d taken at Owen’s face on the car ride home, the pain on it, the wetness on his cheeks...

I push the memory aside. I’m not thinking about that right now. It was better to remove myself from the situation and not make things more difficult than they needed to be. It was the logical choice. The responsible one. The one a mature adult would do.

The doorbell rings and Kristen looks at me with a frown, as if I know who’s on the other side of the door. It’s nine-fifteen and the kids are in bed. Who would be here?

“I didn’t invite anyone,” I insist. Oh, God. It’s not Owen, is it?

She sets her wine glass down and wipes her palms on the front of her jeans. “This is the thing I hate about not having a man in the house.”

I know exactly what she means. Thankfully, my third-floor apartment doesn't get many solicitors.

She spies through the peephole and breathes a sigh of relief before opening the door. "I thought you might be an axe murderer."

"I'm sharpening mine at home," Abby says, holding a dinosaur lunch box out in front of her. "Jamie forgot this at the library. I found it under a table."

"Thanks. I haven't got around to packing lunches yet."

She motions behind her toward me and a wash of guilt runs through me. "I'll help with that," I offer. "It's the least I can do after crashing here."

"No, you already made dinner and washed the dishes. That's more than enough."

I'd broken out my newfound skills of making pan-fried chicken and potatoes. It's my signature dish, apparently.

Abby glances between us. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No, not at all. In fact, have a glass. Please." I thrust my wine glass in her direction. "I mean, if that's okay with Kristen. And if you don't have plans."

Abby makes a soft snorting sound. "The only thing I was going to do was rewatch *The Office* for the tenth time."

"Come in," Kristen says, gesturing her inside.

I retrieve a fresh glass from the cupboard and hand the bottle to Abby, who measures out about half an inch.

"I've actually never tried wine," she says as she cautiously sniffs it.

I blink at her, unable to believe what I'm hearing. "How old are you?" I blurt out.

She glances down, her fair skin heating.

Crap. Why do I always do this with her? "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

“No, it’s fine. I’m twenty-eight.” She takes a small sip and scrunches her nose. “Yep, tastes awful. I don’t understand how anyone can like the taste of alcohol.”

“More for us, then,” Kristen says, taking the glass and downing the rest. “I forgot how much I like it until Harper offered me some the other night.”

Oh, no. I’m not turning her into an alcoholic, am I?

“So, what do you guys normally do when you hang out?” No alcohol would severely limit me, Elena, and Kelly’s options.

Kristen shrugs as the two of them exchange glances. “Um, watch Netflix? It’s hard to find a time when I don’t have two kids attached to my hip.”

Abby moves to the cupboard and gets a mug, then fills it at the fridge’s water dispenser. Seems she knows her way around here. “What do you and your friends do in Chicago?”

I swirl the wine in my glass, feeling fancy as I do it. I think it’s supposed to aerate it, but I’m not entirely sure. “You know, we go out to restaurants, plays, bars, dinner parties, museums, shopping, brunch every Saturday...”

I trail off when I realize they’re staring at me like I’ve got two heads.

Abby brings a hand to her mouth and giggles. “Wow, we are really lame.”

Kristen takes another long swallow of wine. “Yep.”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t comparing. Chicago’s totally different. And none of us have kids, so we have lots of free time and money...”

I’m not making things any better, am I?

Kristen smirks into her glass. “It’s all right. We already knew we were lame. I mean, come on. Single mother here who hasn’t dated in six years. How much lamer can you get?”

Abby waves a hand. “Hello? Librarian here who also hasn’t dated in just as long.”

“Why not?” I ask without thinking. As a widow with two young, rambunctious kids, I understand why Kristen hasn’t dipped her toe back in the dating pool. But why hasn’t Abby?

She blinks at me, seeming taken aback. There I go inserting my foot in my mouth.

Just as I’m about to apologize yet again, she blurts out, “I didn’t love my fiance and broke off our engagement.”

Kristen doesn’t react to the statement, so she must know about it already.

“Oh, wow,” I breathe, intensely intrigued. And it has nothing to do with the fact that I’m desperate to keep my mind otherwise occupied tonight. “That’s, um, well, there’s definitely a story behind that. Not that you have to share, of course.”

She shrugs, shaking her head. “I guess it doesn’t matter if I tell you. I’ll never see you again once you leave, right?”

A burst of grief flashes through me unexpectedly. I’ll never see these people again. This town. These mountains or forests. And most of all, Owen...

Nope. Gotta shut that down. There’ll be plenty of time to mourn him later when I’m alone and away from prying eyes.

“No, you won’t see me,” I say decisively. “I’m leaving first thing tomorrow.”

She nods. “I started dating Peter my last semester of senior year in college. I’d never even had a boyfriend before, so I had no idea what to expect, but it was... okay. Someone to watch TV with at night, that kind of thing. I guess he felt more strongly about it, though, because he proposed right after graduation. We’d only been dating four months. That’s really soon, right?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Under normal circumstances, I’d say yes, absolutely. You should date someone for at least a year, then move in together to see how compatible you are for another year before even considering marriage. But who am I to talk? I married a man after knowing

him for a few hours, then he begged me to move in and stay married to him after only another ten days together.

It seems Abby doesn't need an answer, though, as she continues on. "I didn't want to break up, so I said yes. But the more I thought about it, the more wrong it felt. I wasn't even planning to stay there. I was supposed to come back to Crescent Pass and take over at the library for Miss Genshaw while I worked on my master's online." She takes a deep breath, as if she's reliving the experience. "I told him a week later I wasn't ready to be engaged. That I wasn't even sure if I was in love with him. He took it pretty badly and..." Her fingers twist at the hem of her shirt. "And we broke up."

"So why haven't you dated since then?"

Guilt crosses over her face as her gaze darts to Kristen and away, so quick I almost miss it.

What was that about?

There's a quiet noise from the other end of the house, then the growing footsteps of a little girl in mermaid pajamas.

"Mommy, I can't sleep." Jenny rubs at her eyes with small fists. "I had a nightmare."

Kristen sets her glass down and joins her daughter. "I'll rub your back until you fall asleep." She turns to me and Abby. "She's usually out again within ten minutes."

We nod our understanding and the two of them disappear down the hallway that leads to the kids' bedrooms.

I look down at my half-empty glass and decide not to top it off. I have to wake up early to make my flight on time. "Does you not dating have something to do with Kristen?" I ask Abby, keeping my voice low, even though Kristen would need bionic ears to hear from that kind of distance.

"What?" Abby crosses her arms, her fingers gripping at her biceps. "No."

Wow, this girl can't lie worth a damn.

An idea pops in my head. "Are you in love with her?"

“Oh my God, no.”

Okay, her denial seems genuine.

“Why would you think that?”

I shrug. “A shot in the dark. But you made this guilty face in Kristen’s direction when I asked why you hadn’t dated.”

She lets out this half-laugh, half-groan. “You’re too perceptive, you know that?”

Am I now? Interesting.

She glances behind her, then leans in closer. “I probably shouldn’t say anything. But... maybe you can help me.”

I bite my lip, keeping in my demand for her to tell me whatever it is already. The suspense is killing me.

“I... I was in love with her brother for a long time.”

My stomach drops, my hands going clammy. “You were in love with Owen?”

How could this happen? Why was I not told? I thought Owen didn’t have any past paramours. And now I’m leaving him here, prime pickings for Abby to sweep in and mend his broken heart with her wholesome, girl-next-door looks and soft-spoken, kind nature. They’ll have two-point-five beautiful children together and he’ll build a white picket fence around his yard and—

Abby laughs at my question. “No, her older brother. Grayson.” She takes a sip of her water and smiles at me. “Although you looked like you were about ready to rip my eyes out.”

“No, I... Okay, yeah, I totally was.”

“Are you in love with Owen?” she asks curiously.

Even Kristen didn’t ask me that. “This stays locked in the vault?”

She nods seriously, and there’s something about her that seems trustworthy. Maybe it’s because she’s a librarian. Everyone trusts librarians.



“Yeah, I am.” I wave off my statement. “But enough about me. I’m guessing Kristen doesn’t know how you felt about Grayson?” Or is that feel, in the present tense?

She shifts her weight from foot to foot. “It was high school. Maybe intense crush is a better description than love.”

A crush? “So he didn’t love you back?”

She blows out a breath. “I don’t think he even knew I existed. Or, if he did, it was only as his little sister’s best friend.”

My heart aches for her, remembering that kind of one-sided pining as a teenager. “Have you seen him again as an adult?” Owen said he rarely visits, but maybe it’s only Owen who doesn’t see him often.

She shrugs a little too casually. “Occasionally. Last Christmas I stopped by to give Jenny and Jamie their presents and he was here.” Her finger circles around the rim of her glass. “We didn’t really speak, though. Just casual hi’s and bye’s.”

“You were still into him.” It’s not so much a question as a statement. Everything about her body language screams so.

She nods. “When I was with Peter... God, this is going to sound awful. But in my head, I always compared him to Grayson. I think that’s why I could never seriously love him. He wasn’t... enough. Couldn’t make me feel the same way.”

“And you’ve never met anyone since who does?”

She sets her glass down and shakes her head. “I’m so pathetic. Still caught up in a guy who’s never looked twice at me. Who doesn’t even live here.”

I move closer, hugging her with one arm over her shoulders. “You’re not pathetic.” Isn’t that eerily similar to what I’ve been thinking about Owen? That I’ll never find someone like him? Comparing each guy I meet to him, only to discover they don’t measure up? “I understand completely. A little too well, actually.”

“That’s how you feel about Owen?”

I nod, rubbing at the center of my chest, the sliver of hurt stuck in there already familiar.

“So, why are you leaving? If you love him?”

“Why don’t you move to Seattle?” I fire back without heat.

I let go of her, regretting my words as soon as they come out of my mouth. “Sorry, it’s not the same situation at all.”

She shrugs, picking up her water again. “I get it. Uprooting your life for a guy, taking a chance like that—it’s not as easy as rom-coms would make it seem, is it?”

A chuckle escapes me and out of the corner of my eye I spot Kristen returning, sans Jenny. She must have fallen asleep, then.

“What’d I miss?” Kristen asks, taking a swig from her wine glass.

God, this conversation got depressing. We need something to both lighten the mood and keep me sufficiently distracted from thinking about Owen.

My gaze lands on a deck of cards on the counter, clearly Jamie’s or Jenny’s since SpongeBob is on the front, and I grab it. “Who knows how to play poker?”

# CHAPTER 27



HARPER

I stifle another yawn as I push through the revolving door to get into my office building, mentally kicking myself for not going to bed earlier. I'd been having too much fun with Kristen and Abby, though. In a different life, maybe I could have become better friends with them...

I cut myself off from that line of thinking immediately. I made my decision. I can't give up everything because I met someone on what was essentially a vacation. I've known Owen for less than two weeks. It would be crazy. Ridiculous.

And why do I have to keep reminding myself of that so much?

After a quick pit stop home to change clothes and freshen up, I'm ready to spend a few hours at work catching up on emails and what's been going on in my accounts before starting fresh tomorrow. I swipe my keycard and take the elevator up to the fifth floor, smiling at a few of my coworkers. An older woman in the department stops to ask how I'm doing and that Sandra told her I had an emergency that involved the courts.

My teeth grit as I assure her everything is fine, and I silently berate Sandra for broadcasting my personal business. Shouldn't that have been confidential? I know Elena wouldn't have said anything and my boss was the only other person I communicated with last week. At least I didn't tell her I was getting an annulment.

Actually, now it's a divorce. My stomach does a slow roll at that thought, and I push it aside for the moment. Soon, I'll have to find a lawyer to get that process started, but that can wait for another day.

I stride across the workroom toward Sandra's office and rap twice on the open door. Sandra looks up from her computer screen, her brows knit in annoyance.

"Finally decided to show up?"

My teeth grind harder, but I leave a pleasant smile on my face. I need to acclimatize myself to her again. Ten days away has made me soft.

“I texted you this morning before my flight that I’d be in this afternoon. Figured a few hours catching up is better than nothing at all.”

She makes a vague *hmm* sound and turns back toward her screen.

Oh, so she’s giving me the silent treatment now because I had an emergency crop up? Because I couldn’t help with a presentation that wasn’t even mine?

Fine. Whatever. I’ll spend the rest of the day getting caught up and try to get back into her good graces tomorrow.

I lose myself in unread emails for the next hour, surprised at how junked up my inbox is after ten days, and finally feel semi-accomplished as I push away from my desk. That sense of life returning under control fades, though, as I spot Damien, the office fuckup who deleted the Clarke account from our shared drives. He’s not in his usual place. It looks like he’s made himself at home at Sophia’s old desk, the Marketing Coordinator who quit a few weeks ago. I’ve been waiting for them to send out a notice that they’ve posted her job online, more than ready to interview for it.

Keeping eyes on him, I make my way to Elena’s desk, prepared to grill her. I’m not asking Sandra about it after her attitude earlier.

“What’s Damien doing at Sophia’s desk?”

Elena turns to me, her face lighting up as she realizes it’s me. She stands and envelops me in a hug, the heels she’s wearing making her even taller. She hardly ever wears those. Or a suit as nice as that. What’s going on?

“Hi. Welcome. Good to see you.” She smiles at me. “That’s what people normally say when they greet each other, right?”

A blush touches my cheeks. “I’m sorry. It’s good to see you, too. But seriously, what’s Damien doing?”

She gives me a pitying look, one that has foreboding swirling around in my stomach.

“Don’t tell me he’s the new Marketing Coordinator?” I whisper, barely able to get the words out. I thought I’d be a shoo-in. I have the most experience out of all the Marketing Specialists here.

She nods and my stomach drops. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

She makes a quieting motion and leads me further away from the main floor. “What did you expect? He’s the vice president’s nephew.”

“Yeah, but—” I take a deep breath, and when that doesn’t calm me down any, I take another. “He messed up that whole Clarke account. Did anyone end up presenting to them?”

She shakes her head. “They postponed it to this Friday.”

If Sandra asks me to present, I swear to God...

“So, how did he get it? Did they interview anyone else for it?”

Her lips compress for a moment. “I asked the other Specialists and no one had an interview. Makes me think they had him in mind before Sophia even left.”

My arms cross over my chest, my fingers clutching at my upper arm, my foot tapping on the ground, and I force myself to stop, realizing I’m a living cliché of annoyance.

I study her again, none of the frustration I’m feeling echoed in her demeanor.

“You don’t seem too broken up about it.” She didn’t mention going for the promotion herself, but there’s no way she wants Damien in a senior position over her.

She gives an enigmatic shrug but doesn’t answer outright. Has she had enough time to come to terms with it?

“Why didn’t you tell me?” This is depressing as hell. Who knows when a Coordinator position will open up again?

She reaches out and squeezes my forearm. “You were dealing with your own problems and I didn’t want to stress you out more.”

I nod, accepting her answer. It probably would have ruined my time in Crescent Pass if I had known, to be honest.

“How’d it go by the way?” she asks. “Did you get your...”

She trails off and I glance around, as if someone is lurking behind the copier, waiting to eavesdrop.

“No.”

Her eyes widen. “So you’re still...”

I move in closer and lower my voice. “The judge denied it and we have to get a divorce.”

She blinks at me, too many times to be considered normal. “Why didn’t you call me?”

Now I’m the one to give an enigmatic shrug. “I don’t know. It’s embarrassing.” And a part of me didn’t want to share the wonderful and terrible things Owen had said. All they’d done was stab me in the heart more.

My hand moves to my stomach, pressing down the guilt that forms and that nagging feeling that I made the wrong choice. No, I didn’t. I couldn’t have. Even considering I might have will lead me down a path of never ending what-ifs and madness.

“Oh, shit. Is it four already?” There’s a panicked edge to her as she retrieves her purse out of her desk drawer and slings it over her shoulder. “I want to continue this, but I have to go.”

Go where? What’s she doing leaving this early? “What’s going on?”

“I told Sandra I have a doctor’s appointment.”

Told Sandra? Implying that what she’s actually doing is something else? Is this related to why she’s dressed nicer than normal? “What are you really doing?”

Her gaze holds mine for a moment, then shifts. “It’s nothing.”

“Elena...”

She lets out a long sigh. “I have an interview with Johnston and Radcliffe.”

I suck in a breath. Our rival marketing firm? “You’re leaving here?”

Her fingers fidget, twisting around the ring on her index finger. “It’s not definite. But it’s the second interview and the first one went pretty well.”

“When was the first one?”

Her lips twist to the side. “A week ago,” she admits. “I didn’t want to worry you when you were away before it was a done deal.”

My mouth opens, about to ask her how she could abandon me like this, but I close it just as quickly. This isn’t a personal attack on me. She’s doing what’s best for her.

“It’s a more senior position,” she continues, as if she has to explain herself to me. “More pay, better benefits. And away from you-know-who.”

Does she mean Sandra or Damien? And does it even matter?

“I... I hope you get it.” I hug her tightly, happiness for my friend and jealousy that I’m not interviewing myself warring within me. “You deserve it,” I tell her with complete sincerity. She really does.

The smile she gives me is filled with relief. “How about we meet up for drinks tonight? I’ll let you know how it went.”

I nod and cross my fingers for her, watching her exit out to the elevators, then sink into her desk chair, holding my head in my hands. This is not how I expected today to go. I was supposed to return to Chicago and be reminded why I love my job. My friends. My apartment. My city.

Instead, I’d sat next to a woman with a baby who had cried at the top of his lungs the whole train ride home from the airport, found out the promotion I wanted was filled by the least competent person here, and that Elena will be putting in



her two weeks soon. Why wouldn't Johnston and Radcliffe hire her? She's amazing.

Returning to my desk, I lose myself in working on an upcoming advertising campaign I'm now behind on, but my heart's not in it. My mind keeps replaying the last time I saw Owen before leaving his house, his face grim, body unyielding. Like a wall of ice had descended over him, closing him off.

I push the memory aside, only for another to muscle its way in. Owen telling me in the parking lot of the courthouse that he wanted to stay married, that he'd support me, that he loved me. The earnest hope across his features, the pleading in his voice. I'd burst all of his dreams with my final no.

The wetness on my cheeks surprises me for a moment before I wipe the tears away. Oh, God. I can't cry at work. Let me at least do it on the train ride home.

I gather myself together and make it another twenty minutes before I quietly slip away from my desk, ready to put this day behind me. Why did I even come here?

The sway of the train carries me back to my apartment, my eyes squeezed shut for most of the ride, willing the rising sense of wrongness to recede. *I love my life here. I love my life here.* Like I told Owen, living in Crescent Pass wouldn't be the same as my brief ten-day stint was. That was like a vacation. Vacation is never the same as reality.

Today was an anomaly. Things will be better tomorrow.

Except... will they? Damien's promotion and Elena's imminent departure from the company are both permanent changes. So is Kelly moving out to the suburbs.

And so is the empty apartment I'm going home to.

No cozy, gorgeous house out in the middle of what looks like an enchanted forest. No protective German shepherd to greet me at the door. No burly, lumberjack man with soulful gray eyes cooking me dinner in the kitchen. Turning to me with a sinful smile and giving me a toe-curling kiss. Leading

me to the bedroom, where he makes my heart pound harder than—

I whimper aloud, then clear my throat hastily, glancing around me. But it's not like anyone on the train cares what you do. Everyone is minding their own business, reading or on their phones, not interacting with each other. Not like in Crescent Pass, where the people are warm and inviting, welcoming you into their lives even though they hardly know you. Feeling as if you're part of something bigger. A community. A family. Owen's family.

Pressing the heels of my palms to my eyes, I tell myself to stop thinking about things that only make me sad. That's not my life. And it never will be.

*But why not?*

Because I'd be giving up everything to go there.

*And what exactly is so special about your life here in Chicago? Today proved that things have changed. What you fought so hard to return home to isn't the same at all.*

I nearly miss my stop arguing with myself, each step once I leave the station dragging me down further. There's a physical ache in the center of my chest that no amount of rubbing will make disappear. If Owen was here, he'd wrap me up in a bear hug so tight, all my problems would melt away.

But that's the thing. He's not here. And he never will be.

I pushed him away, hard enough to leave us both bruised and battered. I left him when neither of us wanted it. I thought it made sense, that it was the most logical course of action, but after being back here...

I don't want to be here.

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk, one of those crazy people on the street you pretend not to notice, as the revelation strikes me. I need to get to him. To tell him I'm sorry. That it was a mistake to leave. To beg his forgiveness, praying he'll take me back.

I thought I belonged here, but imagining the long stretch of days before me, working under people I don't like, my friends moving on in their own lives... What am I clinging to here? Why am I so afraid to make a life somewhere else with the man that I love?

My steps speed up, the decision buoying my spirits, eager to get home and figure out how best to approach this. What to say, how to tell him, when—

I freeze once again as I turn the corner toward my apartment building, everything clicking into place as I spy the mountain of a man on the front steps.

*My man.*

Owen.

# CHAPTER 28



OWEN

I wipe my sweaty palms on my thighs for the third time in as many minutes, the anxiety within me rising. What if this was a huge mistake? What if she takes one look at me and tells me to go home? That I came all this distance for nothing.

That she doesn't love me the way I love her.

No, no. That's not going to happen.

Probably.

I mean, she never actually said out loud she loves me, but... there has to be something there. It couldn't have all been one-sided. And I have to believe that my compromise to move here will turn things right. That she'll take me up on my offer and we'll finally make a life together. When it comes down to it, she's the only thing that matters.

There's a tingle along the back of my neck, as if someone's watching me, but it's not unpleasant. It's a warm kind of feeling, a loving caress I'd almost call physical if anyone was around me.

I look up, searching, my pulse pounding, though there's no reason for it to. Is she here?

What was a forest between us, blocking our view, keeping us apart, suddenly clears. There's a path through the dense foliage, my vision zeroing in on Harper across the way. I stand, taking in the wide smile on her face, the soft curls brushing the tops of her shoulders as she runs toward me, closer, closer, until she's in my arms, everything in my world settling.

She's murmuring something about mistakes and forgiveness, but I can barely hear her over the rush of my heartbeat in my ears, the feel of her against me. I'm never letting her go again, no matter what.

She leans back and kisses me, hesitantly at first, as if she's unsure how things stand between us, but I quickly deepen it, needing to show her I'm fully on board and invested in this relationship. I want this woman forever.

Her hands sift through my hair, nails lightly scraping against my scalp, and a wash of shivers races down the nape of my neck. Oh, shit. She can't get me turned on out on the street like this.

I reluctantly break away from her, watching as her gaze roams my face, studying me.

“What is it?”

“I can't believe you're here.” She loops her arm through the crook of my elbow. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm moving to Chicago to be with you.”

She steps back, her hand over her mouth, eyes wide. Did I say the wrong thing?

Her head shakes, that amazing, floating sensation in my stomach hardening until it's a heavy weight. Why is she shaking her head? I thought she was happy to see me.

“You can't move to Chicago,” she says, tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

I reach out for the handrail to the right, my balance unsteady. Fuck. Will she at least give me a chance to make my case?

“I don't want to be somewhere you're not. You're everything to me.”

“No, no. It's not that.” She reaches for me, pressing her palms to my chest. “I want to move to Crescent Pass. I want everything you said at the courthouse. To live with you as your wife.”

My knees go weak again, but this time for the opposite reason. “Are you sure?” I swallow hard against the sudden thickness in my throat. “Don't say it if you don't mean it.” I couldn't bear it if she got my hopes up and changed her mind in a week.

Her palms slide up to my shoulders. “I’m sure. More than I’ve ever been in my life. You are the one impulsive thing I’ll never regret.”

The conviction in her gaze has me falling over the edge, relief gutting me. I was so close to losing her.

“I was looking at my life here with rose-colored glasses,” she murmurs. “But the things I thought were important... They don’t mean much without you. I’m so sorry for what I said yesterday—”

“You don’t have to apologize. It was a no-win situation and everything you said was true.”

She pushes at my shoulder playfully. “Why won’t you let me grovel?”

I grin down at her, lightness filling me. “Because I love you too much.”

An answering smile flirts over her lips. “I love you, too.”

My heart kick-starts in my chest, those words I’ve wanted to hear from her for so long sweeter than I imagined they’d be. I keep the groan that wants to escape in check as my insides flood with longing. I need her. Now. “Can we go upstairs?”

She bites her bottom lip and nods, then unlocks the front door and leads me to an elevator at the back of the hallway. As we get in and the doors close behind us, I crowd her into the corner, trailing kisses along the soft skin of her neck, inhaling that floral scent that drives me wild.

She sighs in a dreamy way and tilts to give me more access, her hand on the nape of my neck, pulling me closer. “I missed this. Missed you.”

I don’t remind her it’s only been a day since we’ve seen each other. It’s the same for me.

The elevator dings and I’m out of there in a flash, half-carrying her, then realize I have no idea which apartment is hers. I only knew the building because our court paperwork had her address on it.

“Second door on the left,” she says, gesturing in that direction.

Once we’re inside, I press her against the door, unable to keep my lips off her, getting lost in her kiss, the slide of her tongue, the way my belly curls with need for her.

I should be asking about the logistics of her moving to Crescent Pass. What’s the timeline? Tomorrow? A month from now? Will she search for another job in town? Does she want to bring her furniture with her?

The thoughts exit as soon as they rush in, my mind putting them on the back burner. In this moment, all I can focus on is her and deepening this connection between us, until there’s no chance of ever separating.

Her hand grips my shoulder, using it for leverage as she hitches a leg over my hip, softly grinding against me, and as something bumps into my back, I remember the backpack I have on, completely forgotten in the wake of seeing her again.

I let it slide down my back, the essentials I’d deemed good enough to last me a few days abandoned on the floor. Oh, except for one thing.

“I brought condoms,” I mumble against her lips, kissing her with abandon.

“Good. Let’s use one now.”

I stifle a laugh, glad she’s as into this as me. “Orgasm number two will be with me inside you. The first one will be with my mouth.”

She whimpers, her head thudding against the door as I travel down her body, taking in her feminine silk shirt and skirt, a far cry from the flannels and leggings she sported in Crescent Pass.

The skirt’s too fitted for me to easily lift, so I draw down the zipper along the side and pull, my mouth watering at the scrap of lace she’s wearing underneath. “Oh, shit. This is sexy underwear.” Definitely not what they sold at the general store in town.



She nods, her breathing noticeably heavier. “I’ve got a whole drawer full here for you to strip off me.”

Okay, and now my breathing is heavier, too.

I press the pad of my thumb against her sex, enjoying the soft groan she releases, and rub slow circles over the lace.

“Are you having fun down there?” she asks, her hips pushing forward impatiently.

“I’m having the time of my life.” This close, I can smell the musk of her arousal. It’s incredible.

Her hips stop in their quest to get closer to my mouth. “Did you just make a *Dirty Dancing* joke?”

My lips compress tightly for a moment. “I honestly didn’t. Maybe it was subconscious.”

My hand skims up her leg to the barely there waistband of her panties, so thin it would hardly be anything to snap off. I can’t wait to see this drawer of lingerie she has.

I draw the lace down, slowly, slowly, teasing both of us, her thighs squirming as I bare her pussy, the sight of it like a homecoming. God, I’ve missed her.

I nuzzle her gently, taking my time, and give long, drawn-out licks, enjoying the way she sighs in satisfaction, the way she gently tugs at my hair, the way her hips roll against my face.

“Like that,” she murmurs, shifting so she’s more open to me. “Your tongue is amazing.”

Pride suffuses me, but I don’t stop to congratulate myself. I’m on a never ending quest to make her come.

Adding a finger, then another, I pick up my pace, sucking her, flicking her clit until she cries out. The gentle tug on my hair turns into a rough grab and I love it, savoring how much I turn her on, how out of control she gets. I want her like this every night for the rest of our lives.

I look up, making eye contact with her, and she rocks against me, her face flushed, brows knit. A sound of need

escapes her throat, and I give her what she wants, bringing one of her feet up to my shoulder, opening her up so I can truly feast on her.

It's not long before she's calling out my name, her whole body shuddering as she comes against my mouth, the taste of her like heaven. I lick her clean, keeping at it until her trembling subsides and I have to fully support her with how weak her knees are.

"Mmm, that was good," she says, pulling me up so she can kiss my lips. "I love you so much."

A rush of warmth runs through me at her words. "Say that again."

Her arms slip over my shoulders, drawing me to her. "I love you."

The back of my neck tingles, my body flooded with endorphins.

I pick her up, barely noticing the rest of her apartment as I carry her through a doorway that can only be her bedroom. There'll be time for a tour later.

The duvet on the queen-sized bed is soft and dotted with tiny pink flowers, and I lay her down on it carefully before stripping off my shirt. She leans up on her elbows, her gaze hungry as she watches me undress. I don't think I'll ever get over the way she looks at me. I still can't believe she's mine. Fully mine.

"We're consummating our marriage for real tonight," I tell her, toeing off one shoe, then the next. "As husband and wife."

She nods, taking my words as seriously as I meant them.

"And I'm buying you a ring. Any sized diamond you want."

She tilts her head, amusement on her lips. "Actually, I had something else in mind."

## CHAPTER 29



OWEN

*M*y brows rise as I strip off my jeans and boxers.

“Could you make me a ring? You know, out of wood? Something handmade from you...” She bites at her bottom lip as she gazes into my eyes. “It would mean a lot to me.”

“Yes. Absolutely.” The idea is right as soon as she says it, my mind already coming up with a snaking vine design to carve into it. Wait, I can think about that later. For now, I have a warm and willing Harper in front of me.

I lean forward and remove her top that I never got around to taking off earlier, then unhook her bra next. Oh, I’ve missed this, too.

Palming one breast, I greedily suck at the other, the low noise of pleasure she makes spurring me on. Her nipple hardens against my tongue and I lap at the bud, wanting to wring every kind of sound I can out of her tonight.

“Will you...” She pants, nails gripping at my shoulders. “Will you get a condom?”

I nod, giving one last suck, and retreat to the other room to find my bag and retrieve one.

When I return, she’s lounging against the pillows at the top of the bed, an erotic vision come to life with her lips plump from my kisses, her skin flushed with exertion, her legs splayed open like that, giving me a perfect view of that pretty pussy.

And she’s all mine. Forever.

I roll on the condom and cover her with my body, sliding in inch by inch until all I know is her. I pause for a moment, resting my forehead against hers, wondering if it’ll be like this every time. This sense of rightness. Of fulfillment. Of never wanting to be anywhere other than between her thighs.

“I love you,” she whispers, rolling her hips into mine.

I kiss her roughly as I give her an answering pump with my hips. “I love you, too.”

She gives back as good as she gets when I pick up the pace, and soon we’re moving too much to keep our lips locked any longer. Her head falls against the pillows, a content smile on her face as she looks up at me, those beautiful brown eyes of hers shining with passion. Her hands glide all over me, from the nape of my neck to my shoulders, down my sides, and to my ass where she squeezes, guiding me into a steady rhythm. Everywhere she touches is like a brand, marking me as hers, laying her claim on me. I’d never understood wanting to belong to a person until I met her.

“You’re mine,” she murmurs, somehow picking up on my train of thought.

I nod unsteadily, wanting with my whole being for that to be true.

“And I’m yours. You don’t have to worry about me changing my mind. I could never give you up.”

A tension I wasn’t fully aware of eases at her assurance, my breaths harsh in the quiet of the room. “If I lost you again...”

“I know.” Her hand soothes over the back of my neck, our pace slowing as she holds me close, her breasts pressed to my chest. She croons words of love in my ear, filling my heart until I fear it’ll burst, and maneuvers us so she’s kissing me, her tongue sliding divinely against mine. We stay that way for long minutes, the urgency gradually growing, and I break away, pumping into her, responding to every shift her body makes, every request that luscious mouth utters, until she’s gasping, her legs locked around my hips, hands braced against the headboard behind her.

“Owen, I’m—” She moans, her back bowing, pushing me further into her. “Oh, God, I’m—”

The keening cry she releases, along with the accompanying loosening of her body as she comes, has my

ego on cloud nine. There's nothing I want more than to make my girl happy.

And knowing she's reached her peak, something within me unlocks, too. I pour into her, groaning madly, my hips pistoning as the orgasm overtakes me.

I drop to the side afterward, careful not to crush her, and pull her tightly into me, not wanting this closeness to end yet.

She strokes a hand over my beard, a smile playing over her lips. "Every time I'm with you, it catches me off guard how good it is."

"I told you. We're combustible."

Her smile grows. "We really are. I can't wait to get back home and move in with you for real."

My chest glows with warmth. "You're already thinking of it as home?"

She nods. "Because you're there. Anywhere you are is home."

My hand smooths along her bare back, so incredibly soft against the callused pads of my fingertips. "I feel the same way."

"I can't believe you were willing to move to Chicago."

"You're the love of my life. I couldn't let you go that easily."

She gives a blissful sigh, her body settling in further to me. "And you couldn't call and tell me that?"

I give her a sheepish grin. "I thought you might like the grand, romantic gesture."

She laughs, a note of surprise in her voice. "What?"

"From all the rom-coms you like. In that movie we watched, she leaves and he goes after her. I wanted you to know I was serious."

She stares at me for a beat, her gaze searching mine. "You would be a rom-com hero for me?"

I wouldn't label it like that, but I don't deny it as she leans in and lays a light kiss on my lips. "I love you."

I deepen the kiss, rolling over so she's under me as I brace my weight on my elbows, but all too soon, she tightens with tension as a buzzing sounds from the living room.

We both sit up, confusion on her face. "Who's buzzing my intercom?" she asks, as if I know.

The answer must appear to her because her eyes widen and she scrambles off the bed, reaching for her bra.

"Oh my God, Elena wanted to go out for drinks tonight. I totally forgot."

Her friend is here? Catching me buck naked in bed probably isn't the best first impression, then.

I toss Harper her shirt and search for my own, finding it on the far side of the room. Wait, boxers should go on first. Oh, shit. And I still have a condom on.

I grab my clothes and head into the bathroom, distantly hearing Harper answer her intercom. From what it sounds like, her friend Kelly is out there, too.

Great. A two-for-one special.

I find the right room and flick on the light, distracted for a second by the hundreds of skin and hair care products on the counter. Seriously, I think they're multiplying by the minute. Is this what I have to look forward to when she moves in?

You know what? Anything she wants. She can bring a truckload of the stuff if it means she's actually there with me.

I'm still turning my shirt right-side out when Harper answers the door, and I'm assuming she's fully dressed when there are no shocked exclamations of nudity. The bathroom door muffles very little as I listen to her greet her friends, and then a high-pitched voice says, "There's something different about you."

"Yeah, you didn't look like that at work," a louder voice says next.

I get my shirt on and pick up one of the many hairbrushes on the counter, giving my hair a quick comb. Harper had run her hands through it so much, it was standing on end.

“What do you mean?” Harper gives a nervous chuckle.

“You look... Okay, this is going to sound weird, but... radiant.”

Radiant? That’s good, right?

“She does, doesn’t she?” the second voice says. “Great marketing word.”

“Is it because you got your annulment?” the first voice asks.

She didn’t tell them yet?

“She has to get a divorce now.”

“Guys,” Harper interrupts, and I wish I was out there to wrap an arm over her shoulders in comfort. At what point should I reveal that I’m hiding in the bathroom? “I’m actually not getting a divorce.”

There’s a moment of dead silence. “What?” the two voices say in unison.

“I want you to meet my husband. Owen.”

Guess that’s my cue, then.

Two shocked faces greet me as I open the door, one a petite blonde and the other a taller brunette.

The brunette looks back at Harper. “Oh. That’s why you look radiant.”

I stand by Harper as she introduces me to the blonde, Kelly, and the brunette, Elena.

Kelly tightly grips the purse strap on her shoulder, glancing between me and Harper. “Oh, I knew something was up. You were being so evasive on the phone the other day.” She sighs and gives Harper a helpless look. “You’re happy?”

Harper can’t help her grin, like the sun’s shining on her face as she looks up at me and wraps an arm around my waist.



“I’m radiant.”

\* \* \*

HARPER AND I take Elena and Kelly out to some fancy restaurant I can barely pronounce the name of, and I force myself to talk more than I normally would, trying to win their approval. I see why Harper is such good friends with them, the three women playing off each other, laughing throughout the night. They ask tons of questions we don’t have all the answers to yet, wanting to reassure themselves of Harper’s future happiness with me in Crescent Pass, but if there’s anything that seals the deal, it’s my offer to pay the enormous bar bill they rack up with their numerous cocktails. Hey, I’ll take what I can get. After all, I’m stealing the most amazing girl in the world away from them.

The following few days are spent in a whirlwind as Harper quits her job, finds someone to sublet her apartment, and decides which belongings she wants to keep or sell. My job is to either haul stuff out or pack it up, and I do it without complaint, seeing how much it hurts her to get rid of some of her possessions.

“We can bring anything you want,” I say as she tells me with sad eyes she should sell her chaise longue. “I’m not particularly attached to any of my furniture.”

She gives me an exasperated look. “But you made it. Like, with your bare hands. How can you not be attached?”

I shrug. “I make furniture every day. If I really missed it, I’d just remake it later.”

“Yeah, I’ll just remake a couch,” she mutters under her breath. “A whole table. No biggie.” She shakes her head. “No, your place is upscale rustic. I can’t even pass this off as cabin chic.” She gestures to the furniture, as if I understand what she’s talking about.

“How about we buy new stuff, then?” I ask. “Together. Or you design something, and I’ll make it.”

She pauses. “You’d make new furniture that I design?”

Oh, that caught her interest. “Of course.”

She bites at her bottom lip, wavering, but I don’t know why she’s even hesitating.

“It would take you so much time and effort,” she finally says when I ask her what’s holding her back. “That’s time you could spend making actual furniture to sell. You know, your job.”

She needs to get out of that marketing profit mindset. “Think of it as a wedding present for my beloved bride, then.”

She smiles, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Beloved, huh?”

I nod, leaning down to taste her lips.

“Would you ever want to have a real wedding one day?” she asks.

“If you’d like.” Honestly, that private ceremony from five years ago seems like a better idea than the spectacle most weddings end up being, but whatever she wants.

“You’d publicly declare your love for me in front of all of Crescent Pass?”

I grit my teeth against the instinct to flinch, but based on her expression, she’s only teasing. “If that’s what makes you happy, then yes.”

She laughs and hugs my middle. “You know I wouldn’t make you do that. But I can maybe see us one day inviting our close friends and family over for a celebration at the house. You won’t even have to drive anywhere.”

I kiss her again. “Sounds perfect.”

It really does. With her by my side, everything is.

# EPILOGUE



## HARPER - SIX WEEKS LATER

I look over the dining room table, studying it for anything missing.

Dishes? Check.

Silverware? Check.

Napkins? Check.

Place cards?

Oh my God, the place cards are missing.

“Place cards,” I tell Owen, who’s pulling a sweet potato casserole out of the oven. “Where are the place cards?”

“Kristen has them,” he says easily, his calm demeanor bringing my anxiety levels back down. “Remember, Jenny wanted to decorate them more.”

“Right,” I murmur, suddenly recalling that conversation. “Duh.”

I move to one of the front windows and peek through the blinds, but there’s no sign of anyone out there. Not that it’s time. There’s still...

I glance at the clock on the wall. Dear God, there are less than five minutes left until everyone is coming over for Thanksgiving. Why did I think it was a good idea to host it this year?

“Stop worrying,” Owen says. Did I say that last part out loud? “It’s going to be fine. It’s just family.”

I chew on my thumbnail. “And Abby.”

“Who’s practically family with how much you’ve been hanging out with her.”

It’s true. I even started a weekly poker night with her and Kristen after the fun we had the first time. I still FaceTime with Elena and Kelly every Saturday for brunch, but I like having girls to hang out with here in person, too.

“You know I need friendships to thrive. And Grayson’s coming, but I haven’t met him yet.”

Cheryl had convinced him to make the four-hour drive down from Seattle for the holiday.

Owen slips off his oven mitts and holds his arms out to me, and I join him in the kitchen, melting into his embrace. I inhale deeply of his delicious evergreen scent, also taking in all the home-cooked smells that have my stomach rumbling. Next to the sweet potatoes are a green bean casserole and pan of stuffing. Admittedly, I had nothing to do with making those, but what I did make one hundred percent by myself is a pumpkin pie that I pray everyone likes.

“It’s going to be fine,” he repeats. “Today isn’t different than any other day.”

“It’s a *holiday*.” And a major one, at that. The only bigger one is Christmas. Oh, God. That’s only a month away.

“You went trick or treating with the twins last month. You weren’t nervous then.”

I wave off his words. “Halloween doesn’t count. That’s for kids.”

Duke gives a soft bark and pads over to the window to stick his nose against the glass as the screech of brakes sounds from outside. That’d be Kristen. She desperately needs to take her van to the mechanic.

Jenny and Jamie bust through the front door a minute later, and I brace myself for their onslaught of hugs, loving that I get to be fun Aunt Harper to them.

I squeeze them back tightly and listen to Jenny excitedly tell me how she made the place cards even better. What she shows me is a mess of glitter and sequins, the names on them barely recognizable anymore, but I profusely thank her anyway, not wanting to crush her artistic spirit.

Jamie rolls his eyes but wisely keeps his mouth shut, and heads over to the corner to pet Duke, where he’s laying on his dog bed again.

I set the place cards at each spot on the new dining table Owen made, big enough to seat eight, and specifically put Abby next to Grayson, hoping she doesn't hate me for it. Who knows what sparks may fly between them today?

Kristen appears a moment later with a store-bought pecan pie in her hand, those dark circles back under her eyes. She hugs me tightly, lingering longer than normal. Uh-oh.

"What is it?" I whisper so the kids won't hear.

She jerks her head toward the kitchen. I follow her and hand her a glass of merlot I already poured.

"Thank God," she whispers, taking a healthy swallow. "You're turning me into a lush, you know that?"

"You only drink when you hang out with me. That's not a lush." I'm a bad influence, for sure, though. "So, what's going on?"

She releases a heavy sigh. "The Chronicle cut my hours in half. Got rid of my health insurance, too, since I'm part-time now."

I inhale sharply, my heart aching for her. She's been on the knife's edge for months worried this would happen. And for them to do it right before the holidays? What scumbags.

"If you need help from me and Owen—"

"No, no," she assures me. "I'll figure something out."

Really? What else can a copy editor do in a town this small?

The front door opens again and Cheryl's there, directing another man who's holding a large pan wrapped in tin foil. That must be Grayson. The similarities in him and Owen's build and coloring are obvious.

"Turkey's here," Cheryl announces, guiding Grayson where to put it. I'd already felt bad enough taking hosting duties away from her. I couldn't take away the turkey, too.

"Don't tell Mom," Kristen whispers before slipping by me to greet her brother.

There's lots of laughter as Grayson pretends Jamie and Jenny couldn't possibly be his nephew and niece because of how tall they are, and after he's finished with them, Owen introduces us. There's an easy affability about him, and as he cracks a joke, making the whole room laugh, I can see why shy, teenage Abby would have had a crush on her best friend's likable older brother.

She arrives next, a bubbling tray of gooey mac and cheese in her hands that smells divine. I take it from her and give her the heads up of where she's sitting, but she only gives a brief head nod in response, her gaze darting toward Grayson and away.

I set all the dishes on the table and give people a few more minutes to mingle, but when Jamie complains that he's starving, I call everyone over and instruct them to find their place. Cheryl says grace and then there are the happy sounds of a house full of family eating together, spontaneous conversations abounding, people enjoying themselves. My heart nearly bursts with joy at the dinner's success, mentally comparing it to the soulless Thanksgivings spent at my childhood home, with minimal talking and absolutely no laughter.

"So, what are you doing now in Crescent Pass?" Grayson asks me, pulling me out of my reverie. "You were in marketing in Chicago, right? Has to be a big change coming here."

I nod. It definitely was, but I'm loving it so far. "I'm doing freelance work for a firm there remotely." Elena had vouched for me to her boss at her new company, who'd hired me as a contract worker to help out when big accounts come in and it's all hands on deck. It's the best of both worlds, getting to keep my marketing skills fresh while also having time to build Owen's online presence. So far, the SEO and advertising I've put in place for him have paid off tenfold, with us selling five pieces in as many weeks. And with the prices Owen charges, it's been a very nice payday.

As dinner winds down, I tap my knife softly against my wine glass, the clinking catching everyone's attention. "I have

an announcement I'd like to make.”

Cheryl swivels toward us so fast, she nearly upsets her chair. There's an unholy gleam in her eye and I suddenly regret my choice of words. She doesn't think...

“Harper's not pregnant,” Owen says, dashing all of his mom's hopes and dreams. Yes, we've talked about children, but only in the abstract. There's no rush, and I get my fill spending time with Jenny and Jamie.

Grayson and Kristen bust out laughing as Abby skillfully hides her smile behind her napkin. Only the twins seem confused as they gaze around the table at the adults.

I clear my throat and avoid Cheryl's eye as I continue on with my statement. “Owen and I are having a wedding here in the spring. And we'd love for you all to have a role in it.”

A wedding announcement rather than a baby one seems to appease Cheryl, but even more excited than her is Jenny, who bounces up and down in her seat.

“You mean I get to be in the wedding?” she asks, her face split wide in a grin.

“Yes, you'll be the flower girl.”

She looks at her mom across the table and mouths *flower girl* to her excitedly.

“And Jamie, you can be the ring bearer.”

Jamie nods gravely, as if he's already taking his given duties seriously.

“Kristen and Abby, I'd love for you to be my bridesmaids.”

They both accept with smiles, as does Grayson when Owen asks him to be his best man.

“And Cheryl.” I pause for a moment, waiting for her to look at me. “We'd love it if you would give a special reading during the ceremony. You were the one who believed in us most since the beginning. Who pushed for us to be together. And for that, I'm forever grateful.”



She grabs her napkin and dabs at her eyes, then stands and rounds the table, pulling me into a hug. She sniffles loudly as I return her embrace, and I glance over her shoulder at Owen, who's smiling broadly.

*I love you*, he mouths.

I mouth it back, a sense of peace stealing over me. This is the family I've always wanted. The life I've always wanted. I've never been so happy, so fulfilled.

And it's all thanks to my mountain of a man.

My Owen.

## MORE CRESCENT PASS

Want more Owen and Harper? Get a free sweet and sexy bonus epilogue when you sign up for Allie's newsletter at [alliewinters.com/extras](https://alliewinters.com/extras).

Stay tuned for Kristen's book coming in 2023!

## OTHER BOOKS BY ALLIE WINTERS:

The Bishop Brothers series is a contemporary romance trilogy featuring three sexy billionaire brothers who find love in Manhattan.

### Resisting the Billionaire (Bishop Brothers #1)

- Gabriel – When I'm forced to make a deal with my father to marry the woman of his choosing for a business deal, I never expected to find someone I connect with. Someone who doesn't fawn all over me because I'm the heir to a billion dollar fortune. Someone who sees the real me. And someone I can't get enough of in turn.

There's only one problem—I can't have her. She's the wedding planner.

- Mackenzie - It's the chance of a lifetime—plan the wedding of a billionaire's son that'll put my event planning business on the map and get me out of debt. A no brainer, right?

Except the bride wants nothing to do with this arranged marriage. And as the groom and I get closer, the professional lines between us keep blurring until there's something there neither of us can deny. With my business on the line and our chemistry off the charts, I'm torn whether I should keep resisting the one person I never expected to fall for.

### Marrying the Billionaire (Bishop Brothers #2)

- Serena - Marrying the man of your dreams after crushing on him for the last decade should be cause for celebration. So why am I crying alone in the honeymoon suite on my wedding night? Because there's just one problem—it's a fake marriage. Purely for appearances as part of a business deal between our fathers' companies.

But I can't sit idly by pretending this is only a platonic relationship, especially as sparks begin to fly between us. So what will I have to do to convince my stoic Prince Charming I want him for real? And what will I risk along the way?

- Archer - The plan is simple—act like a husband in love publicly after I foolishly got myself involved in this fake marriage, and behind closed doors keep things separate. But the longer we continue this charade attending events and staging selfies, the more I'm unsure what's fake and what's not, especially when things start to heat up in private.

As the successor to my father's billion dollar company, work has been my life. Focusing on my job has never been harder, though, when there's a temptress living in my guest bedroom. What are the chances this business deal of a marriage could turn into the real thing? The last person I ever expected to fall for is... my wife.

### Seducing the Billionaire (Bishop Brothers #3)

- Connor - It's all on me now. The billion-dollar company I just inherited from my late father. The public eye waiting for me to slip up. The pressure of keeping it all together.

At least there's one bright spot in my life—my new assistant, Emma. My dream woman come to life if I didn't know better.

It's too bad the paparazzi would have a field day if they discovered something going on between us. I can't afford for anything to jeopardize my new role as CEO of Bishop Industries.

Even if she is temptation personified.

- Emma - It was supposed to be a simple assignment. Become Connor Bishop's new assistant and convince him to buy my father's company, Montague Media. So how do I do that? By any means necessary, according to my dad—including seduction. Otherwise, I lose everything.

But no one told me how hard it would be to seduce a billionaire who insists on acting like a perfect gentleman, especially when real feelings begin to emerge. At what point do I stop the charade and tell him who I really am? Before or after I fall in love with him?

\* \* \*

Set in Penny Reid's Educated Romance World, these angsty new adult romances explore human development in the heart and mind.

### Under Pressure (Lessons Learned #1)

Mia knows stress. She's dealt with it her whole life. So when she gets an opportunity to run a psychology study to help her get into grad school, it should be no problem dealing with the prickly guy she suddenly finds herself paired with.

The one she had a secret crush on last year. The one who refuses to let anyone close. The one she's discovering by the day may have a softer side than he lets anyone else see...

Tyler knows stress. He's grappled with it for as long as he can remember. And just because he has to share credit with this girl on his new psychology study doesn't mean he has to be friends with her. Except she somehow keeps worming her way into his life. In school. In the boxing gym.

In his bed.

But everyone knows it's safer to keep to yourself. You can't hurt anyone that way. Even if it means giving up the best thing that's ever happened to him.

As things heat up in the Stress Lab, will this match be able to work together without disruption, or will this growing attraction between them eventually... combust?

### Not Fooling Anyone (Lessons Learned #2)

The deal is simple—pretend to be Ethan's girlfriend for a psych study and we each get a nice payday. Despite him being a dumb jock who willingly gets punched for fun at my dad's boxing gym, I can handle it. I've mastered the art of keeping others at a distance. Especially after... Well, never mind that.

Except, I didn't count on him not understanding the definition of boundaries. Suddenly, we're having to fake being in love all over campus to keep up the ruse. And when he tries to slip under the barriers I've worked so hard to create? Yeah, that's not happening. Even if it turns out he's surprisingly understanding... and funny... and charming... and smarter than I ever would have given him credit for. Not to mention that muscled body from all that boxing...

No, that's irrelevant. I may have misjudged him, but that doesn't mean I'm interested. He has no idea what kind of baggage I'm carrying. A relationship is the last thing on my mind.

Even if I'm not fooling anyone.

\* \* \*

Check out the Suncoast University series – Four steamy new adult romances that will have you swooning.

[Let Go \(Suncoast University #1\).](#)

- Charlotte - Putting yourself out there? Getting close to others? No, thanks, I'll pass. It's safer to keep to yourself. I've learned that lesson the hard way. So when I accidentally tell the muscled hunk I've been secretly drooling over all semester how I really feel about him, it's not like I meant for him to take an interest in me. I don't want a boyfriend. Not even when it turns out he's so much more than just brawn.

My goal for so long has been simple—get into grad school. And when I get a dream TA position at the beginning of the new semester that will help me achieve just that, I'll have to forget about him now that he's my student. Easy, right?

- Luke - I can't get her out of my head—the shy, sexy brunette that's trying so hard to keep me at a distance. I can be patient, though. Anything to break through that reserve and get under her shields. But just when I thought I've succeeded, she's off-limits. Say hello to my new TA. Even though I'm hot for teacher, there's no way she would risk this opportunity. Right?

[Watch Me \(Suncoast University #2\).](#)

- Samantha - I need a place to stay ASAP when my living arrangements fall through before college starts. And I shouldn't have any trouble resisting my new roommate... despite how much I find myself connecting with him.

- Levi - I have absolutely no interest in the beautiful blonde living in the room next door. She's not my type. Not even when it turns out she's nothing like I expected. She's only here for the summer, so it shouldn't be a big deal to act on this attraction before she leaves. It doesn't have to mean anything, right?

[No One Else \(Suncoast University #3\).](#)

- Evan - I messed up. I admitted to the girl of my dreams I'm in love with her, only to have her run away. Why don't they ever warn you things like that happen?

Now that we're paired up for a class project, I have to figure out a way to keep things from being weird between us. I can't lose her again.

- Natalie - We shared a kiss the night after I broke up with my boyfriend of three years. A heart-stopping, panty-melting kiss I still dream about. But I wasn't ready then for anything more.

Now that I am, he's unavailable. What will it take to get us both on the same page - and stay there?

[First and Only \(Suncoast University #4\).](#)

- Jake - When my dreams of going pro are crushed by a career-ending knee injury, I have to figure out how to use brains over brawn for the first time to graduate college. Enter Eden, my new Biology tutor. Except she doesn't want to be paid in the usual way. She wants me to give her relationship tutoring to attract a guy she likes. But this shy, awkward brainiac is turning out to be so much more than I expected. In the words of a scientist, will this equal exchange turn out to be more than the sum of its parts?

- Eden - Hot guys don't fall for nerds like me. It's just a fact of life—one I've come to accept like gravity or thermodynamics. So even though others think Jake's interested in me, I know it's just this tutoring deal we have going on. I show him the electron transport system and he shows me how to kiss. Simple as that. There's no sense in getting my hopes up, even as I realize this ex-jock and I fit together in a way I never thought possible. Rarely does an equal exchange turn out to be more than the sum of its parts. Even when I desperately want it to.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my husband, my sounding board and #1 fan. Your faith in me means more than you'll ever know.

Thank you to my beta reader and editor for your insightful suggestions, though you couldn't sway me to make Duke a golden retriever.

Thank you to the bloggers, reviewers, bookstagrammers, and anyone spreading the word about this book. Your time and efforts are invaluable. If you enjoyed the book (or even if you didn't!) please consider writing a review. I love to hear your thoughts.

And a huge thank you to my readers for traveling with me to Crescent Pass for the start of this new series. Owen and Harper's story has been bouncing around in my head for the last two years and I'm so excited to finally share it with everyone. Each of the Taylor family siblings will find love, with Kristen's story coming next, followed by Grayson and Abby.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allie is the author of the Lessons Learned series, the Bishop Brothers series, and the Suncoast University series. She lives in sunny Florida with her husband, daughter, and two cats. A librarian by day, she spends her nights writing happily ever afters. She enjoys reading, playing video games, and all things Disney.

Follow for all the latest book info and news:

Website: [alliewinters.com](http://alliewinters.com)

Newsletter and bonus epilogues: [alliewinters.com/extras](http://alliewinters.com/extras)

Instagram: [instagram.com/alliewintersauthor](https://www.instagram.com/alliewintersauthor)

Facebook: [facebook.com/alliewintersauthor](https://www.facebook.com/alliewintersauthor)