

APERTURE

A vintage camera with a lens cap removed, resting on a red knitted blanket in a forest of autumn leaves. A single leaf is caught in the lens.

STEFFANIE BLAIS

Aperture

Steffanie Blais

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ASIN BOBW3G9QZY

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This book is dedicated to my family, who never stop believing in my dreams.

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Epigraph

Not all love stories come in a perfect, tidy package with a pristine bow on top. Some are born from places so black that only the love itself escapes the darkness unscathed.

This is our story.

Aperture

ap*er*ture

- a space through which light passes in an optical or photography instrument, especially the variable opening by which light enters a camera, controlling the depth of field and image sharpness.

Aperture Playlist

by Steffanie805 on Spotify.

Down with the Sickness - Disturbed

Paradise - Cold Play

Mr. Brightside - The Killers

Super Bass - Nicki Minaj

High Hopes - Panic! at the Disco

Still Into You - Paramore

Rip Tide - TWOPILOTS

Through Glass - Stone Sour

Willow - Taylor Swift

A Thousand Miles - Vanessa Carlton

I Feel Like I'm Drowning - Two Feet

Landslide - Fleetwood Mac

The Diary of Jane - Breaking Benjamin

I Wanna Dance with Somebody - Whitney Houston

Be Kind - Marshmello (with Halsey)

Low - Flo Rida, T-Pain

Hanging by a Moment - LifehouseNever

Say Never - The Fray

Irish Pub Song - The High Kings

Scars - Papa Roach

Bad At Love - Halsey

Let It Go - Idina Menzel

What's My Age Again - Blink-182

Stupify - Disturbed

Iris - The Goo Goo Dolls

Love Song - Tesla

One Thing - Finger Eleven

If I Die Young - The Band Perry

The Dance - Garth Brooks

Prologue

Her head lulls from side to side as she mumbles unintelligibly. Sweat glistens from her temples down to the nape of her neck and in between her cleavage. I have never seen anything so beautiful.

She is just starting to wake up.

This is the part I have been waiting for.

Soon she will realize she is strapped to a table, and I am in complete control. I roll up my sleeves and sit in the chair next to her. Fire burns in my veins, somehow hot and icy simultaneously.

She tries to focus on me, the blow to her head making her weary. Slowly, she regains consciousness. I can see the second her mind registers that it is me. She looks confused, not comprehending how she got here. Her pupils dilate and her breathing hastens. She opens her mouth to scream, but no noise comes out.

“Ssh, Beautiful, Loathsome Girl,” I whisper with my lips against her damp temple. “This is not your fault. Nothing you could have done would have saved you.”

She begins to struggle against her restraints. Tears are streaming down her face, her cheeks and neck blossoming with red mottling. I watch her pulse, transfixed, as it hammers in her neck. Its beat is the most beautiful song I have ever heard.

“You tried to run from me and you should not have done that,” I tisk. “You woke up something that has been hiding inside of me my entire life.” I pause and stare into her panicked eyes as I admit to her what I have always known. “I cannot ignore it anymore.”

She shuts her eyes hard, forcing the tears to spill out over her cheeks. I swipe my thumb across her cheek, catching one. I lift it to my lips and savor the saltiness on my tongue. I have never felt more powerful, more alive. The feeling is soothing to my tortured soul. It is an anesthetic to my constant

torture, hypnotizing and addicting. I could not stop now, even if I wanted to.

I lean down and place a kiss to the center of her forehead. I do not want to be gentle but I am forced to hold back. I am fighting everything in my nature, but this has to be done a certain way. Unfortunately, this is not how I have always imagined it, but it will do for now. The overall game is more important than this one kill. I understand the sacrifices I must make.

“No, no, no, no, no,” she says over and over. “I won’t tell anyone. I’ll do anything,” she pleads, her snot and panic creating a briny appetizer making me euphoric.

“I see we’ve passed the acceptance stage and moved on to bargaining,” I say passively, hiding my delight.

I listen to her beg for her life. She apologizes for rejecting me and promises she will never do it again. I cannot help but laugh. It is impossible for another human being to elicit compassion in me.

We were destined to tumble into this abyss, bound to one another from the beginning. I have never believed in fate. I know that a man chooses his future, but the events of this evening have me re-examining my thought process.

She starts to scream, and it slams me back into the moment. I can hear the blood rushing through my ears. The way she smells, looks, and sounds, I commit to memory.

Then, I wrap the red scarf around her neck.

Chapter 1

I stare at my phone calling to me from the bedside table. I always text my best friend, Gwen, after dates. It's a policy we have so that we know no one has been kidnapped or killed by a crazy person. It's a good system, considering most of my dating life consists of going out with men I've met online. As a photographer, I don't meet people at work.

Well, that's not exactly true.

I meet lovely newly engaged couples, pregnant couples, high school kids doing their senior portraits, and newborns placed in pumpkins and assorted wicker baskets. I haven't been lucky enough to book a photo shoot for hot, single firefighters holding puppies. I'm still holding out hope for that one.

My phone beeps again. I have to get this over with. Sighing, I pick up my phone and read the messages.

Gwen: How was the date?

Gwen: Wow! Not home yet? Good for you!

Gwen: OK, seriously, are you alive? It's not like you to forget to update me. I'm getting worried.

Gwen: You better be dead at this point.

I take a deep breath and start a conversation I never thought I'd be having. Ever.

Millie: I'm never dating again. I'm done. Seriously. I'm going to die alone with fourteen cats.

Gwen: I'm sure it wasn't that bad. You made it home in one piece.

Gwen: Thanks for telling me, by the way.

Millie: I'm so sorry, Gwennie. I came home and hid under my blankets. I think I was still in shock. It was so bad. I can't even tell you what this freak said to me.

Gwen: Well, now you can't NOT tell me.

Millie: It's so embarrassing.

Gwen: More embarrassing than when you drank too many tequila shots and fell off the party bus in Vegas?

Millie: You suck.

Gwen: Remind me again. Did that entire sidewalk of people see Barbara Bush, or am I remembering it wrong?

Millie: I hate you.

Gwen: No, you don't. You love me. Now tell me what happened so I can start making fun of you.

I start typing against my better judgment.

Millie: Things were going fine. We were eating chicken fettuccine and drinking wine, and he looked lovingly over at me across the table and said...

Oh my God, I can't believe I'm about to tell another living soul this story.

Gwen: WHAT DID HE SAY?

Millie: He said, and I quote, "I want to buy you \$20 worth of Taco Bell and then suck the farts out of your asshole!"

I toss the phone on my bed and cover my face with my hands in horror, waiting a full minute before opening one eye and staring at the phone on my bed like it's a bomb, about to detonate with the inevitable chirp that will alert me to a Gwen's laughing GIF. When another minute passes, I tentatively pick it up and begin typing.

Millie: Are you there?

Millie: This was the final straw, huh? Friendship over?

Finally, she responds.

Gwen: So, what did you order at Taco Bell?

I cackle as soon as I read it. Only Gwen.

Millie: I'm dying. You're a freak!

Millie: I actually excused myself to go to the bathroom and slipped out the door, which really pisses me off because dinner was good and I wasn't done eating.

Gwen: BAHHAHAHAHA! That's some ninja shit right there.

Millie: At least I can block him. He seemed so sweet and normal at first. I must be the worst judge of character in existence.

Gwen: Why? Because you didn't see Taco Bell Fart guy coming? No one sees that guy coming, sweetie.

Millie: Alright. I need to go take my 4th shower in the last 12 hours and delete all dating apps off my phone.

Gwen: OK, girl. Wash it off. Be positive. It can't get much worse, right?

Millie: Sadly, you're right. Talk soon. Love you.

Gwen: Love you 2.

I shake my head as I walk to the bathroom to get ready for my day. I have clients at 11 and I need to get moving.

I'm still shaking my head in disbelief at the night I had. People meet online every day, right? How can my luck be this bad?

I resolve then and there to stop trying so hard to make something happen in my love life. I vow to be happy with my friends and professional life to preserve my sanity. Period. With that goal in mind, I quickly get ready, grab my equipment, and head out the door.

Chapter 2

I love shoots on days like this. This family is a dream to photograph. Usually, I don't enjoy working with small children, but these two kids are making my ovaries cry. They are adorably well-mannered little humans. I have a feeling we're working on borrowed time, though. I saw big brother pull little sister's hair a second ago, and she retaliated by tossing a handful of dirt his way.

The beautiful day we had has turned into an even more gorgeous afternoon. It's almost sunset, and the air is warm but not too warm. There is essentially no wind. Wind is the worst when you're trying to do a photoshoot, unless maybe you're Beyonce. This lighting is perfect but we're going to lose it if "Uncle Theo" doesn't get here very soon. We've been waiting for this guy for 20 minutes. All I have to say is that he better be worth the wait.

Five minutes pass and I'm ready to tell the Carsons that we need to get going when the elusive Theo saunters up. He's carrying a pink bakery box so he's clearly forgiven, and as he gets closer, I resolve that he was, in fact, worth the wait.

He's conventionally attractive, dark and handsome with a beautiful smile and hazel eyes that are equal parts green, brown, and gold. He's clean-shaven, showing off his strong jaw and full lips. Theo is greeted by his sister with a giant hug and a handshake from his brother-in-law. The kids run over and jump on him and he covers their little faces with smooches. My ovaries are past crying. They are having a full-blown hissy fit.

Setting the kids down he walks up to me and introduces himself. "I'm sorry I'm late, but I brought cupcakes," he says softly. "I'm Theo."

"Hi, Theo. I'm glad you made it. I'm Millie." I smile. "Cupcakes are not necessary, but always appreciated." I take the box and set it down next to my stuff. "Let's get you guys set up while we still have this light."

“After you,” he says as he makes a sweeping motion with his arm.

I situate the family in front of the rocks on the beach. We shot in a field earlier that captured the beauty of our small coastal town and now we’ve moved on to the ocean.

The sun is situated just beyond a tall rock and it’s casting beautiful gray shadows around the family while the light surrounds them in halos. I ask Mr. Carson to stand on the left and hold his daughter while Mrs. Carson stands in the middle, holding her son. Theo is next to his sister on the right. They look so beautiful in their matching shades of blue and gray.

Since I’m looking through my camera, I can study Theo without looking like a creep. He is wearing dark blue denim jeans that fit tight through his impressive thighs. He’s not overly tall, maybe 5’10”, plenty tall for me, and it’s evident that he takes care of himself. His gray henley fits perfectly through the chest and biceps. The light gleaming down on him highlights the different brown tones of his hair, the golden tones in his hazel eyes, and his insanely long eyelashes. *Why do men always have the best eyelashes?*

I’m momentarily awed until he adjusts his eyes and looks at me directly through the camera and smirks knowingly. I realize he’s caught me peeping, but I recover quickly and start directing the whole family as my camera captures their beauty.

Once we are done with the shoot, and the kids are done with their patience, I explain how to order prints directly from my website.

Theo is playing with the kids in my peripheral vision, and I can’t help but think that someone like him would NEVER ask to smell my Taco Bell farts. *Theo is much too perfect for that.* I’m surprised when he walks over to me a moment later and offers to help me carry my things to the car.

We walk in silence, and as I load up my stuff, I can’t help but feel like he wants to ask me a question, but something is holding him back. He gives me a shy smile when I make eye

contact and looks at me through those long lashes. I can sense him warring with himself.

“Thank you for not being upset about my being behind schedule. I travel for work and barely made it back in time for this.”

His eyes light up when he smiles, giving me a warm feeling from the pit of my stomach to my toes. He has a small dimple on his right cheek because, of course, he does.

“No problem,” I reply, trying to act casual. “I’m glad you made it while we could still capture the best light.” I put the pink box on the driver’s seat of my car. “Plus, you brought dessert. I could never be mad after that.” I’m not great at flirting, but I try to give it my best shot and step a little closer to him.

Theo smiles again, puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels, effectively putting more space between us.

“Well, it was great to meet you, Millie,” he says, as if the chemistry between us isn’t as palpable to him as it is to me.

“Oh. Uh, you, too, Theo,” I reply.

Then he turns and walks to his car.

I can’t help but be disappointed in the outcome of the interaction, which is to say, there is no tangible development. He’s a handsome, seemingly normal man. I would like to see him again. Now the moment has passed, and I’ve let him walk away. I berate myself internally for not being more forward. Guys like him don’t come around often, at least not in Sierra Falls.

With that thought, I get in my car, grab the pink box, and tear into a cupcake to soften the sting of disappointment.



That was so unexpected, I think, as I help Sarah bring in groceries from the car. I was not feeling like myself today and did not want to be participating in this family photo shoot. I hate the façade that people put on for those kinds of things. Everyone dresses perfectly, and it takes hours to get one perfect snapshot in time. I am more interested in the outtakes of life. I like when people show you the real stuff: eyes rolling, kids crying, and honest human emotion. Real life is so messy, but I prefer it over the simulated perfection everyone portrays on social media, probably because I spend so much of my time masking who I am.

I just got home from a trip late last night, and it took me forever to drag my ass out of bed this morning and get ready. I was already running late, so I figured I would stop and grab something from the bakery to get my ass out of the doghouse with my sister. Then I saw Millie standing there, fiddling with her camera, and I forgot all about my plan.

I walked right up to her and gave her the box instead. Sarah did not seem too mad at me. She was probably excited to see me interact with a woman.

I interact with a lot of women, to be honest, but not in any natural, authentic way. I keep parts of myself hidden because I have learned it's better for everyone that way.

But Millie is different. She is captivating and wholesome. I found myself drawn to her. Her laughter and seraphic nature call to my sadness and darkness. I gave up a long time ago on finding any connection in this world with anyone besides my family, but I can't help but feel that meeting her is significant in some way. I should probably stay away from her, but I don't know if I can.

Chapter 3

After having spent all week editing photos, I decide I need to get out of the house. My sweats could definitely use a laundry break. The thing about being self-employed is that I have to actively force myself to be social or I actually will end up with fourteen cats. That is a sobering thought at 26 years old.

Gwen and I have made a plan to meet up for brunch and then go to a local farmers market.

I spot her immediately when I walk in. Gwen is impossible to miss. She's gorgeous- tall and curvy, with a mane of brown hair, deep, brown eyes, and full lips. She stands as I approach and wraps me in a big hug. Since I'm short my cheek always smashes against her large, soft chest and it's oddly comforting.

I've never told her this, but I think I could fall asleep enveloped in her buxom embrace. It must be a side effect of not having a mother in my life. I'm like a cat who weaned too early and now makes biscuits on every soft surface, but in this case, the soft surface is my best friend's boobs.

My parents died in an accident when I was too young to remember, and I was raised by my grandfather. Sadly, I lost him to cancer about two years ago.

He was the best, and his hugs were also pretty awesome, obviously not in a buxomy way. Now it's just me, Gwen, and my camera.

"Hey Mouse," she says as she kisses my cheek and shakes me out of my thoughts.

"Hi, Gwennie."

Gwen calls me Mouse because my name sounds like Minnie, and I'm small. She accidentally called me that once when we were drunk and thought it was hilarious. It stuck after that. I call her Gwennie because she lets me. It's been that way for eight years, ever since we became roommates in our first year of college.

I see she's already ordered our mimosas.

"How was your week?" she asks as I take my seat.

"Just the usual. Lots of editing." Then I remember my photo shoot with the Carson family.

"Wait? Did I tell you about the guy I met last week?" I query nonchalantly.

"No, what guy?!" Her eyes grow wide with surprise like I just told her I solved world hunger.

"He was the brother of the client who booked the shoot. She wanted him in some of the photos. I guess they will give some to their parents as a gift. He was incredibly handsome and SO cute with the kids," I feel color tinge my easily blushing cheeks.

"So... did he ask you out?" she asks as she takes a sip of her drink.

"No, and I thought he might. I guess I could've asked him, but it seemed unprofessional, you know?" I laugh. "I try not to hit on my clients."

"Probably a good policy, boring policy, but good policy," she offers.

Our conversation is light and easy, just like always. We eat too much food during brunch, banana pancakes for her and eggs benedict for me, and catch up on the past week.

Gwen is doing well modeling clothes and accessories and growing her social media. She's up to 147,000 followers on Instagram and getting quite a few paid promotions. I'm happy for her, and she's putting her marketing degree to use for herself instead of using an affiliate that would be taking most of the cut.

Both of us have made our careers a priority, and most days, I think that's good, but loneliness, like a cold draft, creeps in every once in a while. It would be nice to share my life with someone, and I'm sure she feels the same way, though we don't dwell on it.

After we pay the check, we link arms and head to the local farmers market. Sunday farmers markets in our small city are my favorite. They always have the best produce, live local bands, and beer and wine vendors.

We live in Sierra Falls, a city of about 30,000 people. We are located on the coast of California, about three hours north of Los Angeles. It's big enough to escape the suffocation of a really small town, but not so big that you lose yourself in a vast metropolis. This place suits me just fine.

Gwen stops before we get to my favorite produce stand.

"Mouse, I can't walk around anymore. I have a banana pancake baby." She lifts up her shirt and sticks out her belly. "Look at this thing. I look five months pregnant."

"You're ditching me?" I tease. "Not cool, Dude."

"I can totally stay," she replies, "but I may actually puke on you."

"Gross. Get out of here," I say as I pull her in for a hug. "Text me later. Love you."

"Love you, too. Muah!" She smacks her lips together in a kiss and turns and heads back the way we came.

I amble forward on my own until I make a stop at the strawberry stand so that I can buy my flat for the week and grab some avocados.

Next, I head to a table with assorted mini pies, cookies, loaves of bread, and cupcakes. I'm just about to pay for my order when I hear the deep timber of a male voice.

"She will take a snickerdoodle cupcake with marshmallow buttercream," he says.

I look up and into warm hazel eyes and a smile that could advertise teeth whitening strips.

"Hi, Millie," Theo says. He remembers my name. Again, a blush plays crimson on my cheeks giving away my attempts at cool detachment.

“Theo. Hi. It’s nice to see you again. How did you know I like Snickerdoodle cupcakes?”

“I saw you tear into one from the box I brought to the beach. You didn’t even make it out of the parking lot,” he laughs.

I hide my face in my hands and shake my head in shame. *Are my cheeks actually getting redder?*

“Well, that must’ve been very attractive.”

“It was adorable,” he teases, leaning in to bump my shoulder.

I see him try to hand the sales girl cash for my order, but I’m the fastest draw in the west with a debit card, so I beat him to it. He cocks an eyebrow at me and shrugs his shoulders in defeat.

“Come on. You can get the next one,” I tell him. He seems much more open and relaxed today than he did at the beach, walking closely next to me and flashing me his adorable, dimpled grin.

We arrive at the next vendor who is selling pickled jalapeños. She’s an older woman with a sweet face and a kind smile.

“I have two kinds,” she tells us. “I make them myself right here in town,” she says proudly. “The first is sweet and savory, and the second is spicy.”

Theo looks at me and pops the savory sample into his mouth with a wink.

“That’s fantastic,” he tells the woman. She smiles with excitement and explains her current two-for-one special. He decides to take one of each. While she’s wrapping up his purchase, we engage in small talk.

“So what do you do for a living, Theo?”

“Besides being the world’s best uncle, you mean?” He somehow manages to make a silly dad joke endearing. *Must be that dimple.*

“Obviously, besides that,” I tell him.

“I’m in sales. I work in the oil industry.”

“That’s really interesting. I’ve never met anyone who sells oil.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t sell oil; although, I get that people think that. I actually sell equipment and supplies for oil and gas drilling platforms.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“It’s not nearly as exciting as it sounds, and it keeps me away from home for periods of time. I keep thinking I need to change careers so I can be closer to my family.”

I’m surprised by his honesty and it makes me feel like opening up as well.

“I can see that,” I tell him. “I don’t have any family, but it would be hard for me to be away from my best friends and this place. It’s home.” He smiles at me thoughtfully and then we continue to the next booth.

We walk casually for a few more minutes before his cell phone alarm dings, and his eyebrows draw together as he looks at his phone.

“I have a work meeting to get to, but I’d love to spend more time with you. Can I give you my number to contact me if you want to?” He flashes that magnificent dimple.

Inside, my heart is doing jumping jacks, but I manage to tamp it down long enough to say,

”I’d like that.” I’m feeling courageous, so I add, “I was hoping you would have asked the day we met.”

I hand him my phone, and he enters his number.

“I wanted to,” he replies. “But you were working, and it just didn’t seem the right time.”

I nod in understanding since I had the same thought.

“I’m happy I ran into you today. I hope to hear from you soon,” he says with a smile. Leaning down, he wraps me

in a hug, and I can't help but notice how amazing he smells, spicy like cinnamon and rugged like the outdoors.

I close my eyes for a brief moment and just inhale his masculine scent. Too soon for my liking, he breaks the hug, smiles, turns, and walks off into the crowd.

I walk around aimlessly for several more minutes smelling candles, perusing the other fruit and vegetable vendors, and saying hello to people. Being a very friendly person by nature, I like to make connections within the community.

I'm still thinking about Theo, my head in the clouds when I bump into a large man who was definitely not there a second ago. He puts his hands on my shoulders to steady me and it takes me by surprise.

"I'm so sorry," I tell him, my voice flustered.

"It's no problem," the good-looking guy answers, sliding his gaze up and down my body. It doesn't seem like he's being sleazy or anything, but it doesn't produce the same type of warm feelings I got when Theo did it.

"My mind was completely elsewhere," I shift my eyes to avoid this stranger's gaze.

He nods, slowly releasing my shoulders. "Which way are you headed now?" he asks.

"Oh, um. I'm just on my way to meet my boyfriend." I have no idea what made me say that, but I decide to run with it, stepping back out of his reach. "Have a great evening, and sorry again about bumping into you."

With a smile, I turn around and begin to walk away.

"Be careful," he calls after me.

I glance over my shoulder at him, wondering why he would say that, but he just dips his chin, puts his hands in his pockets, and walks in the opposite direction. That was a little strange, but it is true that there is someone out there targeting women. A cold shiver runs down my spine at that thought so I turn my mind back to Theo and how bright his eyes got when

he popped that jalapeno into his mouth. It brings a smile to my face and with that thought, I walk back to my car.



Standing under the cover of a large tree, I watch her laugh as he says something that is probably fucking stupid, but he's good-looking and charming, so she eats up everything he says.

I wish I could go to her now, grab her, and pull her away, but it is not the right time, so I study her more closely.

She *is* beautiful. Blonde, pale skin, big blue eyes. She looks like actual, fucking sunlight. *Definitely my type.*

She's short, maybe 5'3", and would be easy enough to overpower. She would not stand a chance.

My hand twitches at my side, and my brain tells me to act now, but I know I need to wait. I tamp down my urges. I need to know what I am dealing with here.

I'm good at what I do because I'm thorough and patient, working my way into people's lives if the need arises. It's a skill I have had to perfect over time.

If I act too fast, it can ruin everything. This is too important to rush.

I make a few notes and tuck my notebook into the black satchel I'm carrying. I make a habit of taking it so that I can hide my camera and binoculars. Now that I have seen this interaction, I know I need to move soon.

I watch him walk away, and the little blonde strolls around for a few more minutes, browsing and speaking to several people, blowing off one guy before heading back toward the restaurant parking lot. Once she is out of sight, I disappear into the crowd unnoticed.

Chapter 4

“In what appears to be the third killing in the past year, the Sierra Falls Police Department has identified a third victim, 28-year-old Renee Ferguson, of Seaside. Ms. Ferguson was reported missing by her boss approximately three days ago when she failed to show up for her second shift in a row and could not be reached. She was discovered in her apartment. Sources tell us she was found naked with a scarf around her neck, the signature of what the media has dubbed the Sierra Falls Strangler. Officials with the Sierra Falls Police Department have refused to comment and the case is ongoing...”

“Sierra Falls Strangler. What a stupid fucking name. Turn that shit off,” Captain Altmeyer yells. His voice is hoarse from smoking cigarettes and chewing the ass of guys like me for too many years. He grabs his tie and yanks it to the side, loosening the knot and exhaling loudly.

“Can someone fucking explain to me how the media is getting information on this case?” He looks around the room, unimpressed. “You guys couldn’t find your own asses with a ten-man search party, you know that?” I almost laugh because for the most part, he’s right.

“At least,” he continues, “they don’t have the detail that all of the scarves are red. Let’s hope to Hell we can keep that one a secret.”

He scans the room again but this time his gaze lands on me and stays there. This is my third year as a detective with robbery/homicide, and I’ve been working this particular case for almost a year. I have a partner but he’s getting ready to retire and to be honest, he does not give a shit anymore. It’s just as well. I work better alone.

“Hudson, you’re supposed to be some kind of genius. What has that Ivy-league brain of yours figured out? Give me something. ANYTHING,” he emphasizes.

“Sir, it appears that the victim was killed in her home,” I start. “She was posed, like the other two victims. No forced

entry. The crime scene was immaculate. He left nothing behind.”

“So you’re telling me we have nothing?” His face is growing redder and redder by the second.

“Nothing definitive,” I admit, “but we have built a profile, which everyone has already been briefed on. We are looking for a white male aged 25-40. He is organized, and the killings appear to be mission-based since all the victims are young, attractive women, similar in appearance. There is no sign of sexual assault.” I pause to make sure I have the attention of the room. “We think he has ties to this town. He may even live here. He has a job, and he is highly intelligent. He has been able to talk his way inside these women’s homes, so he is socially capable.” I wish I could say more, but this is all I can offer now.

“Well, that’s not a whole Hell of a lot, is it?” Captain Altmeyer frowns, his eyebrows knit together in an angry unibrow.

“No, sir, it’s not,” I admit.

“Then, ladies and gentlemen, I suggest you get back to work,” with resignation, Captain Altmeyer smacks the folder in his hand on the corner of a nearby cabinet and walks away purposefully.

I go over to my desk and open the file again, looking over the crime scene photos of the latest victim. I know these photos forward and backward. The images are imprinted on my brain. I can’t share my true thoughts with anyone else. I’m closer to this case than anyone knows.

Chapter 5

It's Wednesday and seventy-two hours have passed since Theo gave me his number. That's the magic number, right? After seventy-two hours, you no longer seem too eager? Too desperate?

I decide to text him a little later since I don't know his schedule or if he's even awake yet. Thankfully, I have plenty to do over the next few hours to keep me busy. I need to clean my house and pick up some supplies for work at a local photography shop. Most people might complain about cleaning their home, but not me. I love it.

I inherited my little house from my grandfather and it's kind of my obsession. It's a little 2- bedroom, 1-bathroom craftsman-style cottage, with a small front yard, framed by a 3-foot white picket fence that I put in myself. I have two large trees on the property, as well as several small fruit trees. Not to brag, but my curb appeal is idyllic. The house is painted a charcoal color with white framing surrounding the windows and white trim. The door is a big, heavy oak door that takes all of my strength to open. My grandfather built it himself, and I will never replace it.

I'm currently using the second bedroom as a dark room.

Easily, my favorite part of my home is my bathroom, particularly the claw foot bathtub that I had installed last year. It's become my nighttime routine to take a bath before going to bed each evening. But, alas, there's no time for that right now.

I've got things to do and distractions to create. I light a candle, get out the pine-scented cleaner, and hit play on my "happy playlist."



"Thank you, Kathy," I say over my shoulder as I leave the photography shop a few hours later. "See you next week."

“Bye, Millie. Take care,” she calls. I try to shop locally whenever I can. I’m aware that if I used a large online conglomerate, I could probably save some money, but I’d rather spend my money within the community.

I step out onto the street, and I’m met with the strangest feeling. Chills break out over my skin, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. A cold shiver crawls up my spine, and I immediately feel the need to wrap my jacket tighter around my body.

I feel like someone is watching me.

I look to the left and the right, but there’s no one else on the street. It’s deserted except for a few parked cars, which are empty. The day has gotten away from me, and it’s late afternoon. Since it’s fall, it’s getting dark already. The forecast calls for rain later, and the gray clouds have entirely shut out the ability of the sun to touch me and warm the chill.

I’m thinking about how I need to get home and text Theo when I see a man walking in my direction. I could have sworn I didn’t see anyone a moment ago when I scanned the area. He’s wearing black jeans, a black hoodie and a baseball cap. I’m momentarily frozen as I watch him approach.

As he gets closer I can make out the light brown color of his hair underneath his cap. Once he’s in front of me his piercing blue eyes meet mine. He has an intensity about him that commands my attention. My initial thought is that he’s a beautiful man, in a very masculine way. It takes me a moment to realize that he’s saying something to me.

“I’m sorry, what?” I look up into his face. Now that he’s closer I can see his strong jawline covered with a perfect dusting of brown stubble. His lips are full and his eyebrows are pulled together over those ocean-blue eyes like he’s concerned about something.

“I asked you if you were OK?” he says.

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry,” I punctuate my answer with an awkward laugh. “I was just trying to remember where I parked my car.”

I'd have to be a complete idiot to forget where I parked. We both look around the nearly deserted street and see only a few cars. *Real smooth, Millie.*

He smiles and says, "Do you see it now?"

I press the key fob in my hand and my car, which is 100 yards away, beeps twice, taunting me as if to say, "I'm right here, Loser."

"Yep. It's right over there." I laugh. My idiocy can't recover at this point so I may as well steer into the skid.

I expect him to write me off as a ditzy blonde, but he surprises me when he says, "You were just in this store, right?"

I hold up my bag with the shop's logo and shake it lightly. "Yes, I was."

"So, do you know a thing or two about photography?" His face looks expectant.

"Or two," I tease. "I'm a photographer."

"Wow. This is such a cool coincidence. Would you be willing to help me pick out a camera? If you have a minute, I mean. I'm new to this and want to take it up as a hobby."

I look at the time on my phone and think I should get home and text Theo, but one look in the hopeful eyes of this handsome stranger has me changing my mind.

"Sure, I can help you out," I shrug. With that, I follow him back into the store.

Chapter 6

I'm meeting Gwen for coffee this morning at our favorite kitschy coffeehouse. I order our drinks and sit down in front of the window facing the street. The coffee shop is across the street from the photography store, and I find myself thinking about the gorgeous mystery man I met there last evening.

After I followed him in, I asked him a few questions about his interests and what kind of photography he wanted to do, and we ended up deciding on a Panasonic Lumix G85 Digital Camera. It should do everything he needs and won't break the bank for something he just wants to pursue as a hobby.

I watched with fascination as he approached his new hobby with enthusiasm. He radiated confidence and intelligence. I found myself unable to stop studying his face, wanting to know more about what makes a man like him tick.

I didn't even realize until after I left, I never gave him my name or got his. Instead, I wished him luck and left him at the register as he purchased his camera. Up until that point, we had been too busy talking about photography, a subject I can lose myself in for hours.

Now I find myself distracted, all my thoughts sifting down to the photo hobbyist and how he materialized from thin air.

Gwen bustles by me and takes her seat. "What's going on with you?" she asks. "You're daydreaming again."

I lean forward with my elbow on the table and place my chin on the palm of my hand and sigh. "Just thinking about meeting a sexy, mysterious stranger."

"Aren't we all?" she deadpans.

"I think I actually met one yesterday," I say with a rare coyness.

"What? Where? When? Why am I just hearing about this?"

“It was nothing. I almost literally ran into him outside of Kathy’s shop. He asked me to help him look at cameras.”

“So, let me get this straight. You have two guys on the hook, and I can’t meet anyone in this God-forsaken town?” Gwen pouts, but it’s exaggerated so I know she’s only bluffing her jealousy.

“I hardly have two ‘on the hook’.” I correct her, making air quotes. “I met one tall, handsome stranger, whose name I don’t even know, and I sent a text to Theo last night, which is still on delivered. I’d hardly label this situation as a success.”

“I like your odds, though,” she says as she lifts her coffee to do ‘*cheers*’ with me. I clink her cup with my own just as I feel that uncomfortable shiver run through me. My senses are on full alert just like last night.

I look around for the source of the uncomfortable feeling, completely honing in on my surroundings and tuning everything else out. I see a few couples having coffee and chatting and a few people waiting in line. There is nothing sinister about the scene. Then the tinkle of the bell over the door to the coffeehouse draws my attention.

“I can’t believe it,” I say. Gwen swings her head over my right shoulder to see what I’m talking about.

“Well, that’s new,” she says with a smile.

Standing not even six feet away is my photography shop guy. He is standing by the cashier with his hands in his pockets, looking gorgeous. He must feel me staring because he looks over and smiles, causing my heart rate to skyrocket. He orders his drink, which appears to be a black coffee, judging by the expediency with which he’s served, then he thanks the barista, grabs it, and walks over to us, a small smile playing on his lips.

“Hi, Millie,” he says.

“Um, hi,” I reply. I’m momentarily caught off guard. “Did I give you my name? I don’t remember that.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “The lady in the shop called you by name, and I remembered it.”

“Wow, quite a memory you’ve got there. I barely remember her name and we’ve been best friends for years.” I jerk my thumb toward Gwen. *Why am I so freaking awkward?* Gwen flips me off and fakes indignance.

“Hi. I’m Gwen.” She reaches out to shake his hand and it crosses my mind that she is touching him before I am. I don’t like it.

He shakes her hand and replies, “I’m Wyatt.”

“Hi Millie. I’m Wyatt.” He smiles warmly, reaching out to shake my hand. “It’s nice to meet you officially and thank you again for yesterday.”

He’s still holding my hand while my heart is doing jumping jacks in my chest, and I’m pretty sure sweat is forming on my upper lip, but I am unable to let go first.

His hand is big and warm, and I can’t help but wonder how nice it would feel roaming over my body. *Woah. Where did that come from?* He finally let’s go and takes a sip of his coffee and my brain begins to function correctly again.

“Do you want to join us?” I ask.

“Sure.” He shrugs, taking a seat next to me.

I attempt to take a sip of my coffee, but I’m feeling a little shaky, so I set it back down. Thankfully, Gwen starts the conversation.

“So, Wyatt, I hear you’re taking up photography.”

“I am,” he answers assuredly. “I’ve always been interested in it, so I decided to graduate from my phone to a real camera.”

“Well, Millie here is the best teacher,” she praises.

What is she doing?

“I don’t doubt that,” he says, smiling over at me. “She was very helpful last night.”

“If you want to learn more, I’m sure she’d be more than willing to give you some pointers.”

I’m going to kill her.

My face flames from embarrassment as Wyatt looks at me.

“I’d love that, Millie. Do you have some time in the next few days to get together?” he asks.

Gwen is the best friend I’ve ever had.

“Um, sure,” I reply. “How about we meet here tomorrow, around 3?”

“That sounds great,” he replies. Then adds, “I have to get going to work.”

He turns toward Gwen. “It was nice meeting you.” Then he moves his attention back over to me, while standing. “Millie, I’m looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“Me, too,” I say sincerely, as I smile up at him.

Once he leaves, I turn to Gwen with my mouth agape. “I cannot believe you did that?” I laugh.

“You were being all shy and well, *Millie*, about it. Someone had to take the bull by the horns. And by the bull, I mean Wyatt. And by the horns, I mean his di—”

“I know what you mean!” I cut her off.

“Seriously, Mouse, you need to climb that man like a tree.”

“Stop!” I laugh, waving my hand in the air. “Let’s change the subject, please.”

She smiles slyly but accommodates my request.

We talk for a few more minutes, but I honestly can’t focus on anything, except for seeing Wyatt tomorrow. Wyatt, who drinks black coffee, likes photography and makes my heart palpitate whenever I’m in his orbit.

Chapter 7

It took me thirty minutes to figure out what to wear to meet with Wyatt today. It's not exactly a date, but I'm hoping it could be next time, so I tried to pick something cute without overdoing it. I ended up settling on my cutest dark jeans, tan sweater, and brown leather boots. It's windy again today so I have my long blonde hair tied up in a messy bun. My camera bag sits on the chair beside me as I sit nervously, waiting for him to arrive. I ordered herbal tea, but I'm not even drinking it. I'm simply holding onto the cup for warmth while I shift my feet nervously under the table. Thankfully, I only have to wait a few minutes before he walks in.

He enters the coffeehouse, tall and beautiful, and my heart drops into my stomach. He's wearing a light blue sweater, black jeans, and expensive-looking black sneakers. The sleeves of his sweater are pushed up on his forearms, and I can just barely make out the bottom of a tattoo peeking out on his right arm. I somehow manage to stand on shaky legs as he approaches.

"Hi, Millie," he says and gives me a friendly hug. He smells so good. His cologne is both clean and musky, with notes of sandalwood and cardamom. If Autumn had a smell, it would be Wyatt.

"Hi!" I smile. "Did you want to get a coffee?"

"No, I'm good," he says.

"I was thinking we could walk around a bit and just observe things. It's a good place to start in seeing what interests you," I tell him getting to my feet.

"Sounds good, lead the way," he says, gesturing for me to walk ahead of him. I notice he's carrying his new camera in a black satchel. *I do like a prepared man.*

We start walking through what would be considered the center of our little city. Depending on what he finds interesting, there are quite a few subjects to photograph here. We pick a bench to sit on and quietly observe the area. We are

surrounded by older buildings, big trees, and various people milling around with children and dogs.

After a moment, he gets up and walks toward a large oak tree. I follow him curiously as he stands directly underneath it and looks up. It's a beautiful shot, with streaks of sunlight licking the large branches. It feels as if you are part of the old tree.

"Get your camera out," I direct. As he is doing that, I ask him if he's had a chance to

read up on how to use it.

"I did read a bit last night," he says, his forehead creasing in concentration. I love that he is taking this so seriously. I wonder for a moment if he approaches everything in his life with such ferocity.

"Well, this is all about what you like and what you find interesting. There's no one way to do it. You decide the depth, contrast, focus, and sharpness," I start. "I personally love a lot of light. It's the lens through which I choose to look at life in general," I tell him.

When he doesn't respond I look over at him and he's studying me, a small smile curving the sides of his lips.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says with a smile. "I just like to listen to you talk about this. I can tell how much you love it."



I listen to Millie talk about all things photography for over an hour. She is so excited to share her passion. She handles my new camera with her little hands with such a delicate yet commanding touch, lighting up as she tells me all about how she started taking pictures with a polaroid camera at age eight, and still enjoys using them sometimes. Millie primarily likes to photograph people and nature but will take pictures of anything she finds interesting.

When she stops to think about something, she sucks on her bottom lip, which is the cutest thing I have ever seen. I follow her around and listen to her direction, taking photos of things I think seem cool as I mirror her enthusiasm. This is definitely her element.

“I really do love this,” she says. “Since I started so young, my passion was able to grow over time. I’m so incredibly lucky to be able to make a living doing what speaks to my soul.”

“That is amazing. Most people never find one thing that does that,” I admit.

“For me,” she starts. “I think it was about missing my parents.”

I listen attentively, encouraging her to continue.

She walks around looking in all different directions, looking for any inspiration, as she talks. “My parents died in a car accident when I was three,” she confesses. “Since I don’t remember them, I was obsessed with looking at old photos of them and the three of us as a family.” She stops and sighs for a moment before continuing.

“As I got older, I wanted to continue to capture memories in any way I could.”

She stops abruptly and looks at me, blushing with embarrassment by making such an admission to a near stranger.

I knew about her parents, of course. I know almost everything there is to know about Millie. Still, hearing her talk about them tugs at my heartstrings unexpectedly, and I find myself drawing her into a tight hug. She steps right into my embrace and places her face against my chest. I inhale her scent and notice that she smells like vanilla and jasmine. It’s enticing, warm, and feminine. It makes me want to undress her and see if her whole body smells the same.

Before I can take that thought further, she steps back slightly and looks up at me. I’m debating kissing her, which is

crazy when she swings her hand up and takes a picture of my face.

“What was that?” I laugh.

“I’ve wanted to take a picture of your eyes since I first met you,” she replies. “Are they blue? Are they gray? It’s a mystery.”

“My mom says they change based on how I’m feeling,” I joke.

“Does she also tell you that you are the most handsome boy ever?” she teases.

“She actually does, thank you very much.”

She drops her head back and lets out a throaty laugh.

I need to put some physical distance between us before I do something stupid. It’s easy to lose my concentration around her. I need to focus on what Millie is to me.

“This has been awesome,” I tell her. “But I do need to get going.”

“Oh, of course,” she replies.

“Let me walk you back to the coffee shop,” I tell her.

“Sure,” she says quietly.

I can sense her disappointment. She’s better off with being disappointed now than hurt, or worse, later on. I realize that even though I have access to her number already, I need to ask her for it.

“Can I have your phone number?” I inquire, once we reach her car.

Some of the light returns to her eyes. “Sure,” she says, quickly rattling it off while I add it to my phone.

“I hope to see you soon,” she says eagerly.

“You definitely will see me,” I assure her. And because I lack impulse control around this woman, I do what I’ve wanted to since I first saw her. I lean down and kiss her lips

gently. She places her hands on my chest as she goes up onto the tips of her toes to meet my lips.

The second our lips touch, I feel a spark that draws me in further. It takes every ounce of strength I have to pull away before it can get too heated. I am way over my head already. I have spent two hours with her and she is tearing away at my walls with ease.

“Thank you, again, for a great day,” I tell her genuinely as she opens her car door.

“Anytime,” she replies, smiling up at me shyly.

I watch until her car disappears around the corner before walking back to my own, and then I spend the whole drive back to my house trying to clear my head. I expected her to be a blip on the radar, but there is something about her. Everything in my body is telling me she is special.

She can be my path to redemption, but I cannot fuck it up. It is problematic that I am so insanely attracted to her. I felt it immediately when I first saw her. My skin gets hot when I am near her. I love the way her nose crinkles when she gets embarrassed and the way her face lights up when she is talking about something she likes. I love her laugh, her eyes, and her curves. It is all perfect. She’s perfect. *I absolutely cannot become attached to this woman. I have a job to do.* I cannot let her get close to me.

Regrettably, I can hold on to that self-control for precisely one hour before I text her and ask her for dinner the next evening, all the while telling myself I did it because she is important to what I am working on and nothing else. I am lying to myself, but it’s a convenient excuse that I am choosing to believe.

She accepts, and I spend the next twenty-four hours internally chastising myself for being so weak. I keep trying to find the will to call and cancel, but I just cannot seem to do it. I need to see her again.

Chapter 8

It was surprising to hear from Wyatt not long after we said goodbye. Apparently, he doesn't care about the seventy-two-hour rule. When you look like Wyatt and exude confidence from every pore in your body, why would you?

Even though I'm excited to see him tonight, I'm still saddened that I haven't heard from Theo. I sent him another hello text yesterday, but it's gone unanswered as well.

I still feel weird talking to two guys at the same time. I guess I'm not technically talking to two guys though, since Theo hasn't replied. He said he goes out of town for work from time to time, so maybe that's what's happening.

It's not something I can dwell on right now since I'm putting all of my efforts into trying to look cute for my dinner date. I choose to wear my favorite pair of jeans and a black cable knit sweater. It's flattering but comfortable. This restaurant is casual so I think it's a good choice.

When I arrive and park, I take a look around for my handsome date and see Wyatt sitting in a black Mustang a few parking spots over.

Gwen would love this. She always says that the type of car a man drives is directly correlated to his attractiveness level.

Wyatt spots me a moment later and gets out, then walks up to my car door and opens it as soon as I unlock it. I just saw him yesterday, but it still surprises me how attractive he is. He takes my breath away as soon as I look into his blue eyes.

After placing a peck on my cheek, he says, "You are beautiful." I immediately notice his choice of words. He doesn't say "you *look* beautiful." He says, "you *are* beautiful." His scent envelops me as he leans in. He smells heavenly, like body soap and rich, deep cologne. I could stand here and smell him for hours, but he gestures for us to head inside.

When we get into the restaurant, he places his hand on the small of my back to lead me to the table. It's warm and protective, and I love it.

I was at this same restaurant with the fart guy, and I actually shudder when we pass the table he and I sat at. Thankfully the hostess seats us in a comfortable booth.

"Everything OK?" Wyatt asks.

"Yes," I tell him. "This restaurant just brings back bad memories."

"We could've gone somewhere else," he says with an alarmed tone.

I laugh. "No, it's fine. I just had a bad online date here not too long ago."

The server comes by and asks for our drink order.

"I think I'll just have a glass of red wine," I tell her. Wyatt orders us a bottle of wine while we look over the menu. I'll eat anything except for the chicken alfredo fettuccine. I swear that date gave me PTSD. We order our meals, chicken parmesan for Wyatt and shrimp scampi for me.

"So, spill it," he says.

"Do you really want to hear this story?" I ask.

"More than anything," he replies. So, I tell him the entire story as he sits there, stunned. And then, he doubles over with laughter.

"I have had some bad dates," he says, still chuckling, "but not so bad that I had to leave in the middle of dinner."

"It was *so* bad. We sat at that table over there," I point toward the sinister spot.

"Maybe we should burn some sage or throw holy water on it," he suggests, taking a sip of his wine.

"Probably not the worst idea," I agree.

As I'm sitting, staring at his tongue peeking out to lick a drop of wine off his bottom lip, it suddenly hits me that I've

spent most of the date talking about myself.

“I just realized I don’t know what you do for a living,” I say. The easy going demeanor that he had assumed up until now vanishes, and I can see him revert back to his guarded intensity right before my eyes.

“I’m a detective,” he answers. A frown forms as he says it and his body appears to tense up. I can see his shoulders lifting to his ears.

“And that makes you angry and tense?” I joke sarcastically.

“No,” he chuckles, and I can see him relax a bit. “Some people just don’t like what I do for a living. I’m always hesitant to tell women what I do since it might scare them off.”

“Not much scares me,” I say casually as I sip my wine.

“Really?” he questions, as he leans forward. “I’m sure I could tell you some things that might scare you.” He looks me dead in the eye like he’s testing me.

“Maybe you could, but that’s probably not first date conversation,” I counter.

He sits back in his seat. “You’re right. It’s not.”

“So, what is Millie short for?”

“Milicent,” I offer shyly. I’ve always liked my name, but let’s be honest—it’s the name of an 89-year-old woman.

Wyatt smiles warmly. “I love that. What is your middle name?”

“I don’t wanna say,” I laugh, as I hide my face with my complimentary, warm sourdough roll.

Wyatt reaches across the table and moves the roll away from my face so he can look me in the eye.

“Tell me,” he pleads.

“No.”

“You know I am a cop. I have my ways.” He doesn’t even need to do that. One look at those eyes and wide smile,

and I'm singing like a bird.

"It's Willa, OK? My name is Milicent Willa Evans." I take a long sip of wine, looking anywhere but at his face.

"Yeah? That is amazing," he says, and I get the feeling he honestly likes it. "It suits you."

"How so?" I ask skeptically.

"It's beautiful and original. Milicent," he says, letting the name roll off his lips.

"While I appreciate that, Millie will do just fine."

"Got it," he says.

"What's your middle name?" I ask.

"Nothing nearly as authentic as that. My full name is Wyatt Noah Hudson."

How nice it must feel to share your full name and not cringe.

I shake my head in disbelief.

"What?" he questions.

"It's just a hot guy's name. Just like your hot guy car."

"My hot guy car?" He laughs. "What does that even mean?"

"Nothing. It suits you." I repeat his words, eliciting a smirk from those perfect lips.

"So, did you always want to be a cop?" I ask.

"I always had an interest in law enforcement," he answers. "My dad is a retired detective, so it seemed natural to follow in his footsteps."

"I bet he's very proud of you," I tell him.

He contemplates that statement for a moment. "He is, but he never wanted me to do this. It can be tough on people, mentally."

"That makes sense," I acknowledge.

I can't believe how easily the conversation is flowing. Our server comes by with our salads as we continue to get to know one another.

"Do you date a lot?" I ask him and inwardly wince because I don't want to know.

"No," he answers. "Not at all."

"Really?" I ask in disbelief.

"Really," he says.

"But, I mean, have you seen *you*?"

He chuckles, and it makes me feel giddy.

I hear giggles and see two little brunette heads bob by our booth.

"Hey, you two, slow down," a male voice calls after them. I know that voice. It's Theo. *What are the chances?* He walks by our booth toward me, and to my surprise, he stops in front of us. I smile apologetically, even though I'm doing nothing wrong by being with Wyatt.

"Hi, Millie," he says.

I grab my napkin and wipe my mouth. "Theo, how are you?"

"I'm good," he says. "Just got back into town, and the first order of business was a family dinner." He looks back and forth between Wyatt and me, clearly surprised.

"How nice," I reply. I'm feeling incredibly awkward, unaware that it's about to get worse.

"Wyatt," Theo says flatly, looking directly at my date. "It's been a long time. It's good to see you."

Wyatt stares up intensely at Theo and replies coldly, "Can't say the same."

I'm pretty sure my eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. The moment is ripe with tension.

Theo looks momentarily irritated but then quickly recovers and plays it cool.

“OK, well, it was great to see you, Millie. I was planning to text you back as soon as dinner was over to get together,” he says. “So, hopefully, I will see you soon,” he says as he smiles and walks away.

My gaze swings back to Wyatt, and I notice he’s gripping his wine glass like he wants to break it in two. I wish Theo hadn’t mentioned us getting together. It’s changed the entire mood around us.

“I’m sorry about the interruption,” I say.

Wyatt softens and replies, “No apology necessary. Let’s talk about you some more.” He smiles and takes a sip of wine.

The tension in the room seems to be dissipating, which I’m thankful for, but I can’t help but wonder how those two know each other. There’s obviously a contentious past between them. Ultimately, I decide it’s none of my business unless Wyatt decides to share it with me. It’s just a very strange coincidence.

We finish our meals and make small talk about photography, college, and hobbies, but we never quite get back to our relaxed, easy conversation.

At the end of the evening, Wyatt walks me to my car, and we exchange the obligatory post-date thank yous, hug and peck on the cheek rather platonically, and go our separate ways.

I drive away, feeling frustrated. It’s as if Theo’s mere presence completely eclipsed our connection.

Chapter 9

Gwen: Then what happened?

Millie: Nothing. We talked some more about photography and college. He went to Princeton.

Gwen: Well, hello, smarty pants.

Millie: Right?

Gwen: Did you get inside his smarty pants?

Millie: No, you giant pervert. We finished dinner, he walked me to my car, hugged me, and made sure I was driving away before he drove away himself.

Gwen: HOT!

Millie: Things seemed different after we ran into Theo. You don't think that's weird?

Gwen: I mean, kind of. But hot dudes know each other. It's like a club.

Gwen: The first rule of hot guy club is that you don't talk about hot guy club.

Millie: They really didn't seem to like each other.

Gwen: So what? You're not trying to set them up on a date. You're getting to know both of them.

Millie: Yeah, I guess. I guess my life definitely isn't dull at the moment.

Gwen: Have you heard from him today?

Millie: Nope

Gwen: It's not a big deal. You just went out last night.

Millie: That's true.

Millie: Ok, I have to get going. I am shooting empty nesters today.

Gwen: ?????

Millie: Their three kids are finally out of the house, so they are taking celebratory photos.

Gwen: That's fucking fantastic!

Millie: It really is! Talk later. X.

I'm envious as I work with this couple at the pier. They are having the best time, posing like a newly engaged couple, making funny faces, and acting silly and carefree. They have been married for over twenty-five years, and their youngest child just left for college. I'm fascinated as they tell me all about the traveling they plan to do now that it's just the two of them. It sounds perfect.

"So, what's your secret to a long and happy marriage?" I ask as they smile at one another.

"Well, I would say that you have to remember that communication is the backbone of your relationship and happiness," Mr. Stewart responds. "Nothing else works in your life if you and your spouse don't communicate and make each other a priority. You will have hard times," he says seriously. "It's inevitable. You need to remember you are working toward the same goals."

He squeezes his wife's hand and she smiles at him lovingly.

"It's easy when you're new in the relationship," Mrs. Stewart adds. "It's all sex and rainbows for a while, but that pace and those feel-good hormones can't be sustained. The trajectory of a new relationship just isn't realistic. Eventually, you have to build the relationship on respect and the ability to laugh at life. Life is hard. Raising kids is hard. Laughing with your spouse in those moments is the only thing you sometimes have."

I'm awed by these two, smiling from ear to ear, listening intently. What a fantastic couple. It warms my heart and renews my faith in love to see a couple so in love and invested after so many years. I make a mental note of everything they tell me. I can only hope to find a love like this someday. I want that with my whole heart.

After our session, I watch them walk away, holding hands like a couple of teenagers. I'm still smiling to myself when my phone chirps.

Theo: Can I take you out tonight? Maybe something other than Italian food?

I smile as I look down at my phone. He did take several days to text me, but he also said he was out of town, so I'm not allowing myself to get caught up on that.

I think about Wyatt briefly, before deciding there is nothing wrong with seeing Theo. I'm not committed to anyone; they are both attractive, exciting men.

Millie: Yes. What do you have in mind?

Theo: It's a surprise. How about I pick you up at 6:00?

Millie: Sounds fantastic!

I text over my address, my excitement growing.

Theo: See You Soon

Millie: ♥

Theo arrives right on time. I answer the door to his beautiful smile and bright bronze and green-colored eyes. I somehow forgot how good-looking he is. He is wearing a black beanie covering his perfect dark hair, and this time, a few days of beard growth shadows his jaw. He looks like every good girl's bad-boy fantasy.

"Umm, hi," I stumble. "Please come in," I tell him as I step aside.

"Thank you," he replies, walking into the living area. He looks around, taking in the small space. "Wow, this place is great," he exclaims.

"Awe, thank you. My grandfather helped build it."

"That's awesome," he offers.

"So, I wasn't sure what to wear since you said it's a surprise." I motion to my jeans and sweater. "Is this going to

be OK?”

“It’s great,” he says. “But you may want to grab a jacket.”

“I’m intrigued,” I say as I grab my jacket from the front hall closet.

I punch in the alarm code and turn around to face Theo. “All set.”

Theo smiles and follows me out, where we climb into his Bronco. It’s an older model, 1970’s, and it smells like him—warm cinnamon and the forest after rain. I have to smile because this car is hot, just like he is. Gwen was right, again.

We pull up to the parking lot at the local state beach, and I turn to face Theo. “I hope we aren’t surfing,” I joke. “I might die.”

“No,” he says with a chuckle. “No death on the menu for tonight.”

We get out of the car as he heads around to the back. “Unless the picnic I planned kills you,” he jokes. After grabbing a picnic basket and a blanket from the back, he gestures for me to walk in front of him. “After you.” He smiles.

“I haven’t been on a picnic in years!” I exclaim as we walk down to the beach. I come to the beach often for photo shoots, but I don’t get a chance to sit and enjoy it often anymore. I can’t focus on the hypnotic sounds of the waves and the way the salt air feels against my face. I make a mental note to spend more leisure time at the beach in the future.

We pick a spot by the pier I was at earlier to block some of the wind. It’s a beautiful evening, but we only have about an hour until sunset. Theo lays the blanket out and starts to unpack the basket while I take a seat. I pull my legs up to my chest and rest my chin on my knees, watching him.

Theo stops what he is doing and smiles at me.

“What?” I ask.

“I am just so happy to be here with you,” he says, those dimples appearing on his cheeks.

I bite my lower lip as my heart starts beating faster in my chest.

“What would you like to drink?” he asks. “I brought wine, soda, and water.”

“Wine would be great,” I respond. He grabs a bottle of wine and proceeds to open it while I lay out the charcuterie board he has brought.

“This looks amazing, Theo,” I say sincerely.

We sit next to one another, the heat from his body keeping me warm, and dig into our dinner.

“So, do you mostly do family photography?” he asks.

“No, I do many of those, but also birth announcements, engagement photos, and stuff like that.”

“Where did you go to college,” he asks.

“State, just right up the road,” I tell him. “I wanted to be close to home.”

“I can understand that,” he says with a nod. “Did you like it?”

“I loved it,” I admit. “I met my best friend there, and some of my favorite memories are from that time.”

“I bet your family is glad you’re back,” he says.

“I have no family left. Well, except for my friends. My parents died when I was little.” I’m used to telling people about it when the subject of family comes up, but I pause for a moment, wondering if I’ve overshared.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, the pain evident in his expression.

“It’s OK.” I shrug. “There’s a lot of people who have worse situations. I’m good.”

Even though I obviously would have loved to have known my parents and have more time with them, I’ve never

allowed myself to wallow in self-pity.

“What about your family?” I ask.

“Well, you know my sister, Sarah, and her husband, Jeff. I’m really close to them and the kids. Emmett and Ellie are my world these days when I’m not working. My parents live about an hour away. We all get along, for the most part,” he smirks.

“That’s amazing,” I say.

“Do you want to have children of your own someday?” I ask, probably a little too boldly.

“I do,” he answers honestly. “I didn’t realize it until my sister had them. It’s cool though, you know? You get to make up for the stuff you didn’t get when you were a kid.”

I nod in agreement because I feel the same way.

“Where did you go to college?” I ask.

“I went to Princeton.”

“Really?” I know it’s none of my business, but my curiosity gets the best of me.

“Is that how you know Wyatt?”

He exhales and leans back on his hands as if he’s been waiting for that question. “He didn’t tell you?”

“No, we didn’t talk about you at all, but I did get the feeling that you two aren’t exactly best friends,” I concede.

“Was it the suffocating, palpable tension that gave it away?” he asks with a laugh.

“It was pretty hard to miss,” I offer.

Theo thinks for a minute and then starts talking. “We *were* best friends. We met in college. He was my roommate, and we were pretty much inseparable.”

“What happened?” I ask, hoping I’m not pushing my boundaries too far.

“I had a girlfriend. We were all close. We would hang out together all the time.” He stops talking, and I can tell this

is difficult for him. I wait to see if he's going to continue.

"I was a quantitative economics major. He was a political science major, like her. He met her first and introduced me. Maybe he liked her first. I don't know. But she and I hit it off right away. We started dating, and things were going great, but it wasn't long before I started to think he had feelings for her. I confronted him, and he denied it. We fought. He must have gone to see her right after that. I don't know what he said, but she was furious. She accused me of being jealous and controlling."

"She broke up with you." I finish for him.

"She did. I was heartbroken. Then shortly afterward, she went missing. No one knows what happened to her. She was never found." Theo is looking out over the tumultuous waves as he speaks quietly. He is as far away as the horizon.

"Oh my God," I exhale. "Theo, that's horrible. I'm so sorry."

He lays back on the blanket and I fall next to him, both of us laying on our backs, staring up at the stars. He reaches out and grabs my hand, rubbing his thumb over my own, in thought. His touch gives me butterflies. He is here, present with me. His touch feels like the past is now far away.

"It was a long time ago," he finally says. "I prefer to think she was pissed and confused and just took off. She didn't really love college. I'm sure she just started over somewhere new."

I squeeze his hand and turn my head to look at him. "I'm sure you're right." I smile tightly.

He places his hand on my cheek and looks into my eyes. The twinkle that is normally there is replaced by sadness. Sharing something so personal makes me feel connected to him, and I have a desire to convey that. I slowly reach up and place my palm on his cheek. His stubbled cheek tickles my palm as he leans further into it.

"God, you're sweet," he tells me. Then, he very slowly leans in and touches his nose to mine.

“You look sweet.” He rubs his nose across mine. I inhale sharply as my heart skips a beat in anticipation.

“You smell sweet,” he whispers.

Then he leans in further and gently touches his lips to mine. “You taste sweet.”

His affirmative words and the heat of his mouth on my lips make me quiver. I grab the beanie and drag it off his head, tugging at the hair on the nape of his neck to draw him closer as he kisses me again, more aggressively. He lays his upper body across mine as his tongue slips into my mouth, and I meet it with my own. I can hear the soft lapping of the waves in the background as we kiss, our mouths working together in synchronicity with the tide, dipping in and then pulling back slowly. The intimacy of our conversation continues to fuel my desire to be close to him. We kiss for several minutes, savoring each other. As incredible as it feels, I need to slow this down a little.

As if he senses my hesitation, he slows down and gently kisses my lips one last time as I smile against them.

“I should probably get you home,” he rasps breathlessly.

“I think that’s a good idea,” I reply. “This, tonight, has been amazing.”

“Hopefully, it’s the first of many,” he says with a genuine smile.

Chapter 10

“Mommy? Mommy, where are you?” My stomach grumbled as I made my way through the apartment. I had only eaten some cereal today while I was watching cartoons. We didn’t have any milk, so I just ate it out of the box. Mommy said she would go and get milk if I watched TV quietly.

I watched all of my favorites, but she was not back yet. I set my blanket down and slid the rickety kitchen chair over to the cupboard to look for more food. I saw a box of crackers, so I quickly grabbed them and put two into my mouth. They tasted kind of weird. They were soft but did not taste bad, so I ate some more. The door opened, and I heard Mommy’s laugh.

Jumping down from the chair, I started running over to her, yelling, “Mommy!”

“Look at you,” she said. “What have you gotten into?” She wiped the crumbs from the side of my face and the front of my pajamas, not sounding mad that I got into the crackers. She was giggly. I was happy she was not mad at me for eating without permission. She set the small bag on the table. I opened it and looked inside and found milk and a small package of cookies.

“Are these for me?” I asked hopefully.

“Yes, Sweet Boy,” she says. “Those are for you.”

She poured me a glass of milk and told me to take my cookies and milk and watch more TV. I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up, it was dark, except for the light from the television. It was really cold as well. I was not allowed to touch the heat switch thingy, so I rubbed my eyes and grabbed my blanket as I stood.

“Mommy? Mama? I’m cold. Where are you?”

I looked in the bathroom but she was not there, so I went to the bedroom we share. I hoped she was asleep so I could get in bed and cuddle up to her for warmth. That was my favorite. When I turned on the light, I did not notice her at first, but then I saw her sitting on the floor, leaning against the

wall by the side of the bed. She was wearing a big jacket and the left sleeve was pushed up her arm. Her favorite red scarf was tied around her arm where the jacket was pushed up. There was a needle stuck in her arm, dangling to the side.

“Mommy!” I screamed, running over to her. She did not look like Mommy, though. Her skin was blue and she stared ahead, not moving, not blinking. I could see dried tears on her cheeks and some vomit on the side of her mouth.

‘She must be really sick,’ I reassured myself trying not to panic. I did not know what else to do so I grabbed the scarf and took it off her arm. The needle fell to the stained, battered carpet, landing in dejected silence.

“Mommy! Mama! Wake up!” I touched her cold cheek, but she did not move.

Laying her scarf carefully across her legs, I climbed into her lap and curled up, placing my head against the soft, worn fabric. I don’t know how long I laid there, crying and rocking back and forth, waiting to hear her sweet voice, and hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

I shoot up in bed in a cold sweat. I can feel my heartbeat in my temples and I’m hyperventilating. I throw the covers off of my body and pull my t-shirt over my head as I stand. I’m hot and cold at the same time. It has been a long time since I felt panic. My body feels like a live wire, and I cannot stop my mind from racing as I pace back and forth. I try to breathe, to use some of the visualization shit I learned when I was little. I was on edge before, but that dream always makes me feel like a stick of fucking dynamite.

My therapist would say it’s my subconscious “working out my trauma.” I think that’s bullshit. It’s a memory of how my junkie mother left me. I idolized her. It didn’t matter to me that she couldn’t keep a job or cried for days at a time. It didn’t matter that I was hungry sometimes or alone for hours. I fucking loved her so much, and the only thing she loved was drugs. I hardly ever think about her anymore. I have more control than this. These memories are because of Millie. She is making me feel again.

Chapter 11

I woke up feeling good about my date last night. Theo is just so unexpected. It's rare to meet a man who is kind, thoughtful, funny, AND sexy. And those kisses. I felt them everywhere. He's honestly everything I want in a man, yet I can't stop thinking about Wyatt. He's a mystery I want to unravel.

I could feel him holding himself back the last time we were together. It could be because of his job like he said, or I've misread the signs, and he's not interested in me romantically. I'm not exactly sure how to proceed here.

My dating history isn't all that spectacular. My longest relationship has been ten months, over two years ago. I can't even be sure I was in love. I honestly don't think I was. I've always been focused on myself. Dating has come second to everything else. I'm really feeling ready to have someone in my life and suddenly without trying I've met two interesting guys in the same week. They always say it happens when you least expect it. I definitely wasn't expecting this.

I'm busy thinking about Theo's hazel eyes, sweet smile, and Wyatt's intense blue eyes and mysterious demeanor when I realize I need to start getting ready for my two-hour volunteer shift at the local animal shelter. I have a love/hate relationship with my volunteer work. I'm happy to help, and I love being around the dogs and cats, but it's heartbreaking every time I have to leave. I'd love to take all the animals home with me, but with my small space and yard, it wouldn't be fair. Still, even though it can be difficult, it's important to me, and I wouldn't give it up for anything.

When I arrive at the shelter and head for the office, I'm greeted by beautiful brown eyes that make me stop in my tracks. Sitting on the floor next to Barb, the office manager, is a dog I've never seen. He looks like a shepherd mix, with short tan hair, a long, black muzzle, and big, sharp ears. He gets up tentatively and moves over to me. He's bigger than I expected, coming up to my mid-thigh. I reach out my hand for

him to sniff. He deems me worthy and puts his head down for scratches.

“Well, who are you?” I say in a voice two octaves higher than usual.

“Aren’t you just the best boy?” I croon. Barb, the office manager, has been watching our meet cute and laughs softly.

“Hi, Millie. How are you?” she asks.

“Doing good, Barb,” I reply, scratching behind my new friend’s ears.

“That’s Milo,” she begins. “His owner recently died, and no family could take him, so they relinquished him to us.”

My heart drops. I hate these kinds of stories.

“He’s not doing great in the kennel. It’s stressful for him. He wouldn’t eat. He was pacing or laying on the floor, whale-eyed with his ears tucked, so he’s been hanging out in the office with us during the day. I’m trying to find a foster home until he can be permanently adopted.”

I know from spending time here that older dogs don’t often get adopted quickly, especially bigger dogs. We have some excellent foster adopters, so hopefully, he can get out of the shelter soon.

Once I’ve helped clean the kennels and the cat room and helped the dogs get some exercise, I head back to the office to say goodbye to Barb. As soon as I walk in, Milo runs right up and stands at my side. He’s such a sweet boy. I look at her expectantly, but she shakes her head.

“No one has been able to help so far,” she tells me.

I never foster the animals, but I cannot stand the thought of this sweet boy being so stressed out.

“I’ll take him tonight,” I say, before I can even think about the logistics of the decision.

“Really?” Barb exclaims. “That would be amazing, Millie. I will send you home with some food for him.”

Next thing I know, I'm sitting on my couch with a 65-pound dog in my lap. I stopped on the way home and grabbed a cheeseburger for dinner and we are currently sharing my dinner and watching Gordon Ramsay yell at people on TV. It's a pretty perfect night with Milo's head resting in my lap while I pet him. He's fairly easygoing and even lets me play with his velvety, soft ears. For a somewhat intimidating-looking dog, he's kind of a big softy.

Suddenly, with no warning, he moves his head off my lap, and those satin ears snap to attention. As he looks at the front door, a low growl starts deep in his chest. I grab the remote and hit the mute button to see if I can hear what has him on edge. I can't hear anything for several seconds, so I try to pet Milo to calm him down. He is on full alert now, jumping off the couch, running to the front door, and growling at the vacant space between us and the door.

"Sshh, Milo, it's OK, Boy. It's nothing," I say more calmly than I feel.

His minor freakout has me a bit scared. I look at the alarm by the door and see it's still armed. Suddenly I hear what sounds like sticks crackling underfoot just outside the door. Milo goes crazy, barking and growling as he tries to jump up on the door. His hackles are raised like the hair on the back of my neck. Then I hear a car door slam and the screech of tires nearby. Within moments, Milo relaxes, trots back to the couch, jumps up, and lays down like nothing ever happened. He seems to have decided that whatever danger was looming is no longer a threat. Was it just a squirrel or another small animal? *What if someone was outside my house?* The thought makes me shiver. I can't decide if I'm overreacting or we both have a reason to be alarmed, but I slowly walk over and sit back down to snuggle with him, suddenly happy that I decided to bring a dog home today.

Chapter 12

I'm sweating as I barge through my front door. That fucking dog almost ruined everything. When did she get a dog? I have been watching her for over two weeks. I cannot believe I missed it. I had barely made it within a few feet of the window when I heard the dog go nuts. There is no way I could have explained myself to her if she had found me outside. I was not prepared for that. I'm smarter than this. I'm smarter than him. She's been spending time with him and it's making me crazy in a way I did not anticipate.

I pull my shirt over my head, drop to the ground, and start doing push-ups. I need to work some of this adrenaline out of my system. I get to 50, my muscles start fatiguing, and my breath is coming in faster and faster. I roll over onto my back and throw my arm over my eyes, concentrating on controlling my breathing.

I picture Millie, smiling and happy, standing in a meadow with the sun beaming down on her. She is wearing a yellow sundress, and she starts spinning in a big circle. She has her camera and is laughing while taking pictures of the wildflowers.

I walk up behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist. Her head rolls to the side, giving me access to her neck, where I plant kisses up and down. She turns in my arms to face me, and I know this smile is just for me. "I love you," she whispers, reaching up to kiss me.

I kiss her back softly at first, but then it turns deeper. I imagine my hands under her dress and lifting her, wrapping her thighs around my waist. Our lips are locked in a kiss as I slide my hands under her ass to hold her against me. She moans, rocking her hips into me, grinding on my hard dick. When I can't take it anymore, I lay her down on the blanket and kiss her again.

Then I flip her over and lift her pretty skirt over her ass. Within a second, I have her panties to the side, and I'm taking out my cock. I line up with her entrance and slam into

her hard with no warning. She moans loudly, accepting everything I'm giving her. She feels so good. A slap to her ass has her squealing and then moaning again loudly. "That's right, baby. Be as loud as you want. No one can hear you out here," I whisper in her ear.

Reaching around to her front, I begin rubbing her clit in a soft circular motion. Unable to hold back she starts moving her hips against me in the same motion and I know she is getting close. I use more pressure and right when she's about to come I pinch her clit and it sets her off. I can feel the rush of warm, wet juices slide down my cock as she squeezes me like a vice. Looking over her shoulder, she gifts me with a satisfied smile.

"I love you. You are so perfect" she says breathlessly as I continue to pound it into her. Hearing those words sends me over the edge and I come inside her, giving her every last ounce I have.

When my breath returns to normal, I realize my hand is on my now softening cock and there's cum all over my stomach. Jesus Christ. What is this woman doing to me? This situation is getting out of control. I grab my shirt from off the floor next to me and wipe off my stomach, then slowly get up to take a shower, trying to ignore the voice in my head warning me that something is going to go very wrong.

Chapter 13

“Any updates on the investigation, Wyatt?” Captain Altmeyer asks as he approaches my desk.

“No,” I tell him. “There is nothing new to report.”

“Well, we just had a young lady in here reporting her friend missing. The girl is 25 years old. She went missing a few nights ago, about 65 miles east of here.”

“What makes you think it is related to this case?” I ask.

“Didn’t say it was. But she’s the right age, and we have an active serial killer in the vicinity. Just something to think about,” Captain Altmeyer’s signature frown creases his face.

“Right.” I nod. “I’ll check in with missing persons. Hopefully, it’s nothing and she turns up.”

“Or she’s the next victim and he finally gives us a fucking clue,” he says flatly, as he walks away.

It sounds insensitive to someone who doesn’t do the job, but this is how we have to operate. We see so much shit that we have to be able to compartmentalize or we would go fucking crazy. Some days, I feel that way anyway. I think of the young woman, scared and bound, not knowing that this is how her life is going to end. My heart starts beating and my skin starts to itch. I cannot sit in the office anymore right now. I need some air. I grab my keys and head out the door. I am about to get into my car when I hear someone call my name.

“Wyatt!” I turn and see Millie walking toward me with a large dog strutting attentively next to her.

“Hey,” I say, feeling lighter the instant I see her.

“I didn’t know you had a dog.” He sniffs me curiously as I rub the fur around his neck.

“I’m just fostering,” she smiles. “I think he likes you.”

I look at her closely now and I’m just in awe of how effortlessly beautiful she is. She is wearing leggings and a sweatshirt, and her hair is in a messy bun, and yet she is still

the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I do my best to quickly ignore the thought.

“What are you two up to today?” I ask.

“Milo here is waiting to be adopted and hopefully today is the day. I thought I’d take him for a walk over to the shelter and see if anyone has shown interest.”

“Want some company?” I ask.

“I’d love some,” she smiles.

We walk silently for a moment before Millie speaks up.

“So, I kinda got freaked out a little bit last night,” she says.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Milo heard something outside and got really worked up. Then I went to the door and heard something outside. It was probably nothing, but with this whole Sierra Falls Strangler thing, I got a little scared. Is that stupid?”

“No. It’s not stupid. Do you have a security system?” I ask.

“I do, but it’s a bit older. I could probably use an upgrade,” her nose scrunches as she contemplates her quandary, and I have an overwhelmingly stupid desire to boop the tip of her pert, little, scrunched-up nose. *Who am I?*

“How about I come over after work and look at it?” I smartly reel in my booping desire.

“I’d love that. Thank you,” Millie looks both parts grateful and relieved, and a thrill runs through me because I am the reason.

We reach the shelter, and I feel more relaxed, knowing I’ll see Millie later tonight.

“OK. I’m at 1023 Grandpoint Lane. I’ll see you tonight?” she asks.

“About 7,” I reply. “See you soon, M&M.”

“M&M?” she questions.

“Millie and Milo,” I smile.

“Aww, got it.” She laughs.

I watch her walk away and cannot help but smile for a moment, until I remember who she is and how I came to know her. Maybe she could be mine in another life, but not in this one.

Chapter 14

I'm just about finished cooking some chicken and rice for me and Milo when his ears perk up and he runs over to the front door. Not even two seconds later, I hear a knock and Milo's tail begins wagging rapidly. I open the door to a tired, yet incredibly attractive Wyatt.

"Hi," I say cheerily. "Long day?"

"A bit," he replies. "But there is nowhere else I'd rather be."

My stomach does the dance of the sugar plum fairies and I step inside to allow him in.

"I love your place," he says, looking around. I've noticed that Wyatt is very observant. He always seems to be on alert somehow, looking around and having a constant understanding of his surroundings. It must be a cop thing.

"Thanks," I say. "My grandfather built it."

"He did a great job," Wyatt replies, while rubbing Milo behind the ears. Some guard dog he is, currently putty in Wyatt's hands. I have a feeling I would be the same way.

"I'm just about done making some chicken and rice. It's nothing fancy, but if you're hungry, you could eat with us."

"I'd love to, thanks. Do you mind if I take a look around first? Just to make sure your windows are secure?" Wyatt politely gestures toward the short hallway.

"Go right ahead," I tell him as I put some food in Milo's bowl.

My place is small so I'm able to watch from the dining area as Wyatt walks purposely through the house, checking all of the windows. He turns on the light in my dark room and looks around briefly and then goes to the next room and turns on the light to my bedroom. He stops briefly and then walks over to my bed and looks down at it for just a moment and then walks out. It was so quick I could have easily missed it,

but I can't help but wonder if he was thinking about us in bed together. The thought heats my entire body, and I have to turn around when he walks toward me to keep him from seeing me blush.

"Everything looks pretty good," he says as he approaches the sink to wash his hands. "I'll check the alarm before I leave."

I set the food on the table as he takes his seat, and we begin to eat.

"You should consider replacing one of your windows in the spare room," he says between mouthfuls. "It seems secure, but the seal is failing, and you're losing heat. I can fix it on a day off sometime."

"That would be amazing, Wyatt," I say. "You're a handy guy to have around," I flirt.

He looks up from his meal and smiles but doesn't say anything.

"How did you learn to do this kind of stuff?"

"My dad taught me a lot growing up," he replies. "He was always big on trying to fix something yourself before paying someone else to do it."

"Sounds smart," I reply.

"It is until you screw up and have to pay more than you would have if you just had called the professional in the first place." Wyatt chuckles, shaking his head. "One time he decided to put in a new toilet instead of calling a plumber. He fucked up all of the plumbing in the bathroom. My mom flushed the toilet in the middle of the night, and it started overflowing." He's full-on laughing now, recalling the memory.

I watch as his eyes crinkle at the sides, and the sound of his deep laugh along with the pure joy on his face has me craving to know him on a deeper level.

"She started screaming because the toilet water was cold and beyond gross and cursing my dad. I had never seen

her so pissed. She still gives him shit about it.” We are both laughing now and I’m savoring seeing this side of him.

“I would too! That’s hilarious,” I tell him. “Do they live around here?”

“No, they are in San Diego. That’s where I grew up.”

We eat for a moment in silence before I change the subject to something that has been on my mind a lot lately.

“Do you think people around here should be really worried about this killer?” I ask hoping he will say ‘no’ and ease my concern.

He looks up from his plate and meets my eyes. “Yes,” is all he says, but it speaks volumes.

“What should we be looking out for, in particular?” I ask.

Wyatt thinks for a moment and then starts. “Someone new who has infiltrated their way into your life. This guy is incredibly intelligent and he doesn’t just grab people off the street. He is charming. He forms a relationship with his victims.”

“How do you know that?” I ask.

“Because he hasn’t been caught yet.” As soon as he says it, I tremble with fear.

“So he embeds himself in people’s lives, but no one knows him? That sounds difficult to accomplish,” I don’t doubt him, but I also don’t want to believe him.

Wyatt swallows his bite of chicken and takes a drink of water before replying, “he chooses his victims carefully. They are mostly alone, with few family or friends”

A shiver runs through me as he speaks. He could be talking about me. Sure, I know people around town, but my entire family is gone, and other than Gwen, I don’t spend time with anyone regularly.

Looking to change the mood of the conversation, I make a lighthearted joke.

“The only person I’ve met recently who has come out of nowhere is you.” I smile. I could say the same thing about Theo, but I met him through his sister, so the situation isn’t quite the same.

“And you gave me your address and let me into your home without a second thought,” he replies flatly.

I sense judgment in his tone, and I don’t appreciate the insinuation.

“I’m not stupid, Wyatt,” I tell him, not giving him a chance to respond.

“First, you’re a police detective.” I hold one finger up.

I add another finger. “Secondly, we’ve gone out once already. Lastly, you’ve met my best friend.” Now three fingers are waving wildly in the air.

“If I disappear, they are coming straight to you, buddy.” I push my chair back and go to stand. Wyatt quickly stands and reaches out to grab my wrist. He can tell I’m angry, but he also seems slightly amused, which angers me more.

“Millie, wait. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you upset.” I drop my finger-wielding hand to the side.

“Well, you just told me I’m dumb enough to get myself killed.”

He shakes his head. “That is not at all what I meant. It’s just that this guy is brilliant. He has been doing this for years now. And you’re just so sweet and so trusting.”

“Those aren’t bad things,” I say softly, looking down in embarrassment.

Wyatt walks over and stands right in front of me. He puts his hand under my chin and tilts my head up until I look into his ocean-blue eyes. “It’s not bad, Millie,” he says sweetly. “I just don’t ever want to see anything bad happen to you.” He leans in and stares at my mouth, causing me to take a sharp breath, thinking he will kiss me, but instead, he pulls me into a tight hug.

Because of our height difference, my ear presses against his heart, and I close my eyes and listen to it beat. I take a deep breath, and, as always, he smells amazing, woody, earthy, and masculine. It's warm and comforting. His body is so strong, firmly wrapped around me. I could stand here forever, but Wyatt kisses the top of my head and breaks our hug, taking a step back.

"I'm going to check that alarm," he says. I sigh as he walks away. He's so confusing. He asked me to dinner. We have spent time together a few times now, but I can't tell if he's interested in me romantically or just sees me as some helpless girl who needs rescuing. I felt a fire between us, but he also passed up the opportunity to kiss me.

At least, Theo is making his intentions clear, I think to myself.

A few moments later, he comes over to the sink where I'm doing dishes.

"It's an older system but it seems to be working OK. You might want to change the code though, if you've been using it for a while."

"OK, I will," I tell him.

"Can I help with the dishes?"

"No, thanks. I'm almost done," I say more brightly than I feel.

He pauses for a moment, knowing as I do that any moment we could've had has now passed.

"OK, well, I'm going to get going. Thank you for dinner," he says politely.

I walk him to the door, and Milo follows, standing next to me and looking back and forth between us.

He turns to me, once again pulling me into a hug. I can't help how my body responds as I tightly wrap my arms around his waist. He pulls away slightly, kisses my cheek, and then reaches down to give Milo a pet on the head.

“See ya later, M&M,” he smiles and walks out the door.

Feeling defeated, I shut the door behind him and lean against it. Milo looks up at me expectantly.

“I know, boy. I like him, too, but I’m unsure if he feels the same about us.”

Chapter 15

I look at the woman tied up on the bed. She's still asleep. I should not have grabbed her. This shit with Millie has me all messed up and I am not feeling like myself. I was not expecting to become this involved, but I am captivated by the way things are unfolding. It is a complication I was not prepared for. Then there is him. I was not prepared for that either. I am smarter than he is—I always have been. But grabbing this girl was a bad idea. I want Millie and I cannot have her yet, so I went looking for a substitute.

I was impulsive and I am not an impulsive man. I am meticulous.

I pace back and forth across the small room raking my hands through my hair and cursing to myself. I did not do anywhere near my normal amount of research on her before I grabbed her. Getting into her life and getting her to trust me is part of the high. It makes it that much better when I get to see the look in her eyes once she realizes her fate. I love that moment when she sees her trust betrayed. It is almost as good as when the light leaves her eyes.

Usually, when I have a woman tied up in this room, I am excited for a different reason, knowing I get to extinguish her life in slow, exquisite torture.

Tonight, I am jumpy and anxious because this girl has already been reported missing. They are looking for her as she lies here unconscious.

With a heavy sigh, I look at her again. Blonde, short, pretty, young – exactly my type, but she is not Millie, and I do not want her. She has seen me now, though, so I cannot let her go.

Then it occurs to me: this is not my normal *modus operandi*. I deviated, so I do not need to act with my normal amount of restraint. I can do anything I want with this bitch. My dick gets hard as I think of how many ways I'm going to violate her.

Chapter 16

Millie: Hey! Want to get together for coffee today? I have stuff to tell you.

Gwen: I love stuff! Yes. 3 pm at our place?

Millie: See you then.

Gwen is already there when I arrive. She stands, and I hug her before sitting in my seat with my caramel latte.

“So,” she starts. “What’s been going on?”

“Ugh,” I reply. “I’m confused.”

“OK, lay it on me,” Gwen runs a manicured hand through her chocolate strands, which fall seamlessly back into perfectly coiffed layers around her lovely face.

“I’ve spent some time with both Theo and Wyatt, and I like them both,” I confess.

“Tell me the part that is an actual problem,” she says.

“It’s just weird, you know. I can’t find a decent guy to save my life, and then two show up in the same week. And they know each other well.” I tell her the story Theo told me about his girlfriend in college and how she disappeared.

“That is strange,” she observes, “but I think she probably just left as Theo said. She was probably looking for a reason to leave college.”

“That’s true,” I say, biting my lower lip while I mull that over. “But then Wyatt comes over and doesn’t make a move. I don’t even know if he likes me.”

“He likes you,” she says assuredly. “I could see it when I met him.”

“He’s just kind of mercurial and intense. I can’t always get a good read on him.”

“So he’s emotionally unavailable?” she jokes. “Why don’t you tag me in and sit this one out. He sounds like my type.”

I laugh and toss a sugar packet at her.

“Seriously though, Mouse, if you want to know how he’s feeling, just ask him. We are too damn old to play these games,” Gwen emphasizes her last point by tapping on her near-empty coffee mug.

“You’re right,” I admit. “I should do that.”

“What are you thinking about Theo?” she asks.

“I really like him. He’s sweet, thoughtful, and hot. Plus, he’s made his interest known,” I admit, but despite Wyatt’s cons, I am not sure I want to abandon all thoughts of Wyatt’s pros.

“So, I definitely think you need to talk to Wyatt. Then you will know if you should put all of your energy into making something work with Theo.”

I nod my head in agreement. “You’re so wise,” I tell her.

“Well, fucked up situations with dudes are my specialty,” she deadpans.

“OH! I almost forgot. I am fostering a dog and I’m thinking about keeping him.” I proceed to tell her about Milo and the weird situation with his barking the other night.

“It was probably just a small animal like a squirrel or raccoon. Raccoons are dicks.”

“They are dicks,” I agree. “This stuff going on with the Sierra Falls Strangler had me freaking out a little bit.”

“I think about it, too. I mean, the chances of being murdered have to be astronomically low, but still,” she visibly shudders.

“Yep, and Wyatt says he’s very smart and we, as single women, should all be on alert.”

“Noted. Now, let’s change the subject. This subject is gonna ruin my calorie fest,” Gwen hops off her stool and goes to the counter to order another coffee and cinnamon peach muffin. Gwen points to me and raises her eyebrows in a

nonverbal ask if I want another coffee and muffin. I nod accepting another round of carbs and caffeine.

We talk for another forty-five minutes about how her social media stuff is going and my work. At the end of our visit, I feel more relaxed and like that I have a plan moving forward.

I'm going to talk to Wyatt.

Chapter 17

“Uncle Theo!” The kids screech as they run at me full speed once I am inside the door.

“Hey, kiddos!” I beam. I love these tiny people. Being away from them is the most challenging part of what I do. Ellie reaches me first and runs into my arms. I pick her up and swing her around as she squeals happily. I kiss her cheek and then set her down.

Emmett looks up at me but doesn’t raise his arms for a hug. He is getting to that age where he wants to be treated less like a little kid, so I put my fist out for him to bump.

“Hey, Little Man. How’s it going?”

He bumps my fist and smiles. “It’s good, Uncle Theo.”

My sister walks in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a hand towel.

“How was Texas, Sweetie,” she asks as she kisses my cheek.

“Texas was Texas,” I reply. There is not really much to tell. My work is not very exciting and how I spend my extracurricular time with women is not exactly family-friendly conversation. I meet women, use them for the hour, or sometimes the night, and leave before they wake up. Sometimes I do not even tell them my real name. There is never any real connection.

I know deep down that I am fucked up, but no one else needs to be burdened with my issues. I can pay a therapist if I want to talk about it.

“Come get a cup of coffee,” Sarah says.

The kids settle on the couch with their phones and happily block out the rest of the world, and I take a spot at the counter while Sarah pours me a cup of coffee. She leans against the counter sipping her own coffee as she talks.

“So, what’s new, little brother?”

“Not much,” I tell her. “Just the usual. Work, gym—”

“You need to meet someone, Theo,” Sarah cuts me off.

And there it is. My sister is always on my case about “settling down.” It is not that I am opposed to it, but it just doesn’t fit my lifestyle. I’m not sure I am built for it. I like Millie a lot, and it still took me days to respond to her, because the concept of being involved with someone for more than an evening is completely out of my realm.

“You know I can take care of myself, Sis,” I say for the millionth time.

“I know,” she nods her head in agreement. “You’re just such an amazing person and you deserve someone wonderful.”

“I have several someones wonderful,” I say, as I gesture to her and the kids, now arguing over the game they are playing on their respective phones. I can tell she wants to say more, but knows it’s for the best if she just lets it go.

“Oh, I ordered some prints online from that photoshoot we did,” she says as she reaches over to the stack of mail and grabs a thick, white mailer. She withdraws several pictures and sets them in front of me. I start to go through the pile, smiling at each one. Millie has a great eye. Our family looks great, but not posed and unnatural.

“This one is my favorite,” she says as she slides it over to me. It’s a candid photo of the family before we started shooting. Sarah and Jeff are smiling down at the kids, who are looking at each other like they are about to have a fist fight.

I am smiling and looking directly into the camera. I remember this moment because I had caught Millie looking at me and made sure she knew it. She had gotten flustered afterward and started mumbling about “catching the light.”

She gets flustered quickly and blushes often. I like that about her. She is not contrived and fake, like the other women I tend to spend time with. Millie is a special person, and I know I should leave her alone because I’m not the guy for her, but I just cannot stop thinking about her.

It pisses me off that I saw her with Wyatt. I still don't know why he is even here; although, I have a suspicion. My sister's voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

"I think I'm definitely giving this one to mom and dad," she says. "You have your patented 'get out of jail free smile' going on," she says with a laugh.

My mom has always teased me about that. She says I can charm anyone with my smile. She's not wrong. I learned a long time ago that because I look like I do and smile as I do, people give me the benefit of the doubt. It is something I use to my advantage often.

"Hey, can I get a copy of this one, too?" I ask.

"Just take that one," she says. "I have to buy frames and stuff anyway. I'll order another one. I really liked Millie. I've recommended her to several people already."

I take a sip of my coffee and smile down at the picture Millie took. She really is an extraordinary photographer. She is an extraordinary *everything*.

"I like her, too," I say, against my better judgment.

Sarah smiles widely and starts to ask me a question but I hold my hand up.

"I will let you know when there's something to tell." That seems to appease my sister's curiosity for now.

Chapter 18

“OK, Big Guy,” I say to Milo as we walk down the street.
“Today is your day!”

We’ve been advertising on social media all week to find him a home. The thought makes me sad, but I understand that this is how fostering works.

I’m forced to speed-walk the whole way just to keep up with him until we get closer to the shelter, and then he comes to an abrupt halt. I can tell what he’s thinking. *Hell no, Lady. I’m not going back to that place.*

I crouch down so that we’re eye to eye and make a pact with him, right then and there.

“If no one adopts you today, Milo, you’re coming home with me. I promise. No more shelter, OK?” I stand up and start walking toward the door. As if he understands me, he falls in line with my step. He is no longer trotting excitedly, but he is not making me drag his heavy ass, either.

“Hi, Barb!” I exclaim as we enter the shelter.

Our shelter cat, Oreo, looks down from his perch on the counter at the peasant he envisions Milo to be and then lazily kicks his leg up and starts cleaning himself.

“Any interest in Milo?” I ask tentatively.

I can tell by the look on her face that the news isn’t good.

“No,” she says. “Lots of likes and comments online, but no one has committed to taking him.”

I look down at Milo, and he looks up at me expectantly. Oreo yawns, looks at all of us and then closes his eyes like none of us are worth his time or consciousness.

“Barb, I’m taking Milo,” I tell her. “I think he’s meant to be mine.”

“Really?” She gushes as she runs over to me and hugs me hard, causing me to make an “oompf” noise as the air gets

knocked out of my lungs.

“Definitely,” I answer, confident in my decision.

“Millie! I was so hoping you would say that!” she exclaims.

She goes to the counter and grabs the adoption paperwork. I pay the \$150 fee, which Barb tries to wave, but these shelters rely on money coming in, and I want to do my part.

Once we are done, I pat Milo on the head, and he happily walks out of the shelter. Next, we head to the local pet store to stock up on food, treats, and possibly a sweater. *Is Milo a sweater guy?* We are about to find out.

We’ve got a cart full of things for my new dog to eat, play with, and lay on when I hear my phone chirp.

Theo: Hi. Wanna get together later?

I smile to myself. I’d love to see Theo, but I was planning on trying to talk to Wyatt later. I think I owe it to all three of us to get my head straight about this.

Millie: Hi back! I can’t tonight but I’d love to see you tomorrow if you’re free?

I wait several minutes for a response as I check out at the pet store. I hope he’s not upset that I can’t see him tonight. I finally hear back almost an hour later when I’m home.

Theo: Tomorrow is good. I’ll text you in the morning.

Subtext is impossible to decipher through texting, but I can’t help but feel that he is disappointed or upset.

Millie: Can’t wait.

When nothing arrives from Theo for the next hour I decide it’s time to reach out to Wyatt.

He answers on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Wyatt. It’s Millie.” I can hear him chuckle over the line.

“I know. My phone said MILLIE when you called.”

“Oh, not just ‘RANDOM GIRL FROM THE PHOTO SHOP’?” I joke. “Do I at least have a peach emoji after my name?”

“I’m a gentleman,” he says. “But yes you do. Along with the cherry emoji and 5 stars.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I was wondering if you could come over tonight?”

His tone suddenly gets serious, “Is everything OK?”

“Yes, fine. I just...” The phrase ‘wanted to see you naked’ pops into my brain. *Damnit!*

“No more weird noises outside?” He cuts me off, and I sigh with relief that I didn’t say my thoughts out loud.

“No, not at all. I just wanted to talk a bit,” I regain my composure.

“OK. I’m just finishing up at the gym. Why don’t I pick you up, and we can go for a drive?” *I love that idea.* “That sounds awesome,” I say.

“See you in 30 minutes?” he asks.

“Sounds good.”

“Bye, Millie,”

“Bye.”

Wyatt arrives thirty minutes later in his black Mustang, AKA the Sex God car. As soon as I hear him pull up, I feel flurries in my chest and stomach. The man makes me nervous in the best possible way. It’s time to find out what he thinks about me.

Milo trots over to the door when he knocks but doesn’t bark. I open the door and try not to let my jaw drag on the ground. Wyatt is wearing gray sweats and a black hoodie. His

hair is wet like he just got out of the shower, and he has a baseball cap on backward.

My first thought is that he read my diary when he was here last and came across a non-existent entry entitled “Millie’s Wet Dream,” because he’s nailed it. I manage to pull it together long enough to take a step backward and invite him in. When he walks in, so does the most heavenly scent of body wash, shampoo, and Wyatt.

I can’t help but compare it to Theo. He smells great as well, but it’s spicier somehow. Wyatt smells masculine, musky, and warm. Where Theo is tequila, Wyatt is aged, smooth bourbon. He greets me with a friendly kiss on the cheek and then reaches down to pet Milo.

“Milo, my man. What’s up?”

My dog is as enamored as I am. His tail is wagging like a helicopter propeller getting ready to take off. We’re both nearly drooling; although in his case, it’s normal and less embarrassing.

“So, Milo lives here now. It’s official,” I tell him.

Wyatt’s eyebrows peak up in interest. “That’s great. For both of you.”

Milo trots over to his new bed, spins around several times, and plops down in the center of it with a thud.

“Well, looks like he’s comfortable guarding the house,” I joke. “Should we go?”

“Absolutely,” he says.

I follow him out to the car and he opens my door for me. It’s a gorgeous evening, clear and bright, thanks to a nearly full moon.

His car smells divine, just like he does. It’s immaculate. Wyatt likes control I think, and the thought makes me shiver.

He takes his seat and shifts into reverse. It’s so sexy to watch a man drive a manual transmission. The sleeves of his hoodie are pulled up, and I watch the muscles in his forearms

flex as he shifts gears. I can make out the bottom of a black tattoo on his corded arm. Wyatt gives good arm porn.

We sit in comfortable silence for several minutes until we get onto the stretch of road that rides parallel to the ocean, and then Wyatt finally talks.

“So,” he starts. “What did you want to talk about?”

I take a deep breath and say a silent prayer that I’m not about to make a giant fool out of myself.

“I like you,” I start, “and I feel like you like me.” I look over to judge his reaction before continuing. He’s listening and staring straight through the windshield, his jaw set and tense.

“But I can’t tell if we are on the same page.”

He’s quiet for a moment as he formulates his answer. The radio begins to play the familiar piano notes of Vanessa Carlton’s song “A Thousand Miles.” Without even realizing it, Wyatt starts to sing quietly under his breath. “Making my way downtown, walking fast, faces pass, and I’m homebound...”

I cannot help the burst of laughter that erupts from my mouth. It’s just so unexpected.

Wyatt gives off such an innate alpha energy, and here he is singing, and knowing the words, to such a quintessential pop song.

“What?” he asks, as he looks over and quirks a brow.

“Nothing. Please don’t let me stop you. After this we can play “Party in the USA” or “Call Me Maybe,” I quip.

“Both bangers,” he jokes, and just like that, the tension from my question is gone and I’m relaxed. He listens quietly for a moment longer and then answers. “You are right. I do like you.” He pauses.

“But?” I ask.

“But... it’s complicated,” he replies.

I nod my head, waiting for him to continue.

“I want to be with you, Millie, but the timing is wrong.” His irritation with the situation is evident, but my heart still drops into my stomach in disappointment at his admission.

Tentatively, I dig deeper. “Do you see the timing improving in the near future?”

“I hope so,” he tells me. “The problem is, it is not really in my control.”

“I’m not sure what that means,” I admit.

“I wish I could tell you more, but I can’t right now,” he says.

“Can I ask if this has to do with someone else?” I might as well be straightforward with him.

“It does. But not in the way you think.” He stops to consider his next words. “There is no other woman,” he tells me. “But there’s a situation in my life that needs to be resolved before we can be together.”

“And you have no idea how long this resolution might take?” I wish he would be straightforward with me.

His jaw tenses again and he narrows his eyes, looking out into the night.

“I don’t and I fucking hate it.” He takes several deep breaths. “I won’t ask you to wait for me and I won’t get in your way with someone else.”

“Even if that someone else is Theo?” I ask, my patience ebbing away.

His hands grip the wheel to the point where his knuckles turn white.

“You should stay away from Theo, Millie. He is not a good guy.”

“That’s funny,” I reply. “Theo says the same thing about you.” It’s petty because Theo hasn’t said anything negative, but he did allude to Wyatt being involved with his girlfriend.

“What *exactly* does he say about me?” he presses.

“That I should stay away from you,” I answer, hoping to push his buttons. It’s immature, but his aloofness is getting on my nerves.

Wyatt suddenly makes a sharp left, kicking up dirt as he peels into a parking lot, shifts into neutral, and stares intensely at me.

“Look, Millie, I can’t stop you from seeing Theo, but I am sure as Hell not giving you my blessing. You should know that I will be there, keeping an eye on things.”

“Keeping an eye on things?” I ask, a deep frown forming. “What kind of crazy stalker shit is that? Either you want me, or you don’t. You don’t get a choice after that.”

“I told you how I feel. I warned you about him. If you choose to see him, it’s my job to look out for you,” he speaks slowly, enunciating every word.

“Your job?” I question. “You assume that I’m so clueless that I need a police escort to help me pick a date for Saturday night?” My hands are flying around animatedly as my voice gets louder.

“That’s not what I am saying. Listen to the words I’m saying,” he yells.

We are both breathing heavy at this point, trying not to say things we can’t take back. Before I can make another smart-ass remark, Wyatt grabs my face with his hands on either side of my face and kisses me hard. He kisses me with the intensity of the argument we just had, transferring the energy of his words into the kiss.

It’s passionate. It’s intense. It’s *perfect*.

He bites my lower lip, causing me to open my mouth and he takes advantage of it by sliding his tongue inside. I meet his tongue with my own and moan in pleasure as they tangle together and our teeth clash and bite. It’s raw and emotional, and somehow, us.

Suddenly, he pulls away, hands still on my face and my hands gripping his forearms, and then places his forehead on mine, trying to slow his breathing.

“We’re so good together,” I say softly, tilting my head back to meet his intense eyes. His pupils are blown out, and I can see he’s as turned on as I am, thanks to the gray sweats he’s wearing.

“Fuck,” he says softly. “I know we are. It’s just not the right time.”

Embarrassed, I pull back and straighten in my seat, looking to the right, outside the window, so he can’t see the tears threatening to fall.

“It’s fine, Wyatt. Just take me home.”

We drive twenty minutes back to my house in silence as I stare out the window in the dark and count down the seconds until I can put some physical distance between us.

When we get there, I jump out of the car before it’s barely stopped and head straight for the door.

“Millie!” I hear him call from behind me. I don’t want to talk about this anymore tonight. There’s nothing else to be said. I put the key in the lock when I feel Wyatt’s body behind me. He steps up until he’s wholly pressed against me, the hard planes of his body against the soft curves of my own.

“Millie,” he says softly. “Stop.”

I release the key from the lock and lean back into him, no longer craving distance. He places one hand on my hip and the other on my jaw, tilting my neck to the right and placing a soft open mouth kiss where my shoulder meets my neck.

I shiver, and my skin prickles with goosebumps, both hands falling to my sides in surrender. I can feel him smile against my skin, his warm breath on my neck, before he pulls my hair to the side and places those same open-mouth kisses up and down my neck. The hand gripping my jaw moves down to my throat, squeezing with firm pressure as he sucks and bites at my sensitive flesh.

I moan, surprising myself. Then he moves his hand to my lips and pushes his index finger into my mouth. I begin sucking on it instinctively.

“Millie,” he whispers in my ear, as the hand on my hip starts moving up and down my waist. “Never think I don’t want you. You are all I think about.”

Then he spins me around and lifts me in one quick movement as I wrap my legs around him. It takes my breath away. Reaching behind me with one hand, he pushes the door open and walks us into the house.

We don’t speak at all as Wyatt kicks the door closed behind us. He walks us, still silent and looking directly into my eyes, into the bedroom, then sets me down on my feet and grabs the sides of my face.

“Forgive me,” he says so quietly, that I momentarily question if I even heard it. Then he’s kissing me. It’s slow, not like in the car. He takes his time, torturing me, kissing me softly before nipping and licking at my lower lip.

I open my mouth slightly and he swipes his tongue inside before pulling back and sucking on my lower lip again. He keeps kissing me languidly, tasting, relishing each sip of my mouth. I try to kiss him harder, but he just pulls back and smirks.

“Wyatt,” I plead.

“Sshh, Beautiful. I’ve got you,” he says slowly.

My hands are shaking with anticipation and my heart is beating out of my chest. I try to put my hands under his hoodie, but he stops me and holds them together behind my back with one of his hands. I huff in frustration causing him to smile again.

Using his other hand, he tilts my head to the side, then kisses my neck just as slowly as he was kissing my mouth. I’m just melting into the feel of it when suddenly he releases my hands, drops to his knees in front of me and lifts my sweater. Every inch of skin he exposes earns a kiss by his soft lips followed by a lick from his warm tongue.

I shove his baseball cap off, running my fingers through the beautiful light brown strands of his thick hair, tugging when he dips his tongue into my navel, pulling a moan from his throat.

He pushes my sweater up the rest of the way and lifts it over my head, still on his knees. Then, with deft fingers, he unbuttons my jeans, opening them just enough to place a kiss to each of my hip bones, and then reaches up and opens my bra through the front clasp, slowly sliding it off my shoulders. His blue eyes peer up at me as he licks his lips like he's about to savor a meal. It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Sliding his hand up my body, he stops when he reaches my breast and softly traces the outline of my areola with a featherlight touch. Both nipples respond by pebbling. He continues this circling motion with his fingers as he kisses my stomach before moving up and using his tongue to mimic the same action his fingers were just doing. Because of our height difference, he's still on his knees, licking around my nipple until finally taking it in his mouth and sucking on it, first one and then the other. I have never been so turned on in my life. I can smell my arousal through the jeans I'm still wearing.

With my head thrown back, I continue tugging at his hair as he worships my breasts. While continuing his ministrations, he grips my jeans and pulls them completely off. I help by shimmying out of them, smiling as I look down at him. He stands and lifts me again, laying me down gently on the bed. The ease with which he moves me around makes me even wetter with anticipation.

“Wyatt, take off your clothes,” I say breathlessly.

“You are not in control here, Millie,” he says, slowly shaking his head as he takes a step back and stares down at me, laying on the bed. I'm completely naked except for my black panties. I pout slightly and bite my lip. He must decide to placate me because he reaches behind his back and pulls his hoodie over his head. This is my first look at his body. It's about to become my favorite playground.

Wide, muscular shoulders sit above a defined chest, tapering down to a narrow waist. He's muscular, but not overly, built more like a swimmer. Only a small amount of hair is scattered across his chest, but he has that wonderful little path to paradise that starts just below his well defined abs and disappears inside his sweats. He has a black tattoo that spans across his right shoulder and down to his forearm. In the dim moonlight streaming in from my open curtains, I can only make out a compass in the center of his shoulder with intricate lines and circles emerging from each direction.

I try to sit up with the intention of getting a closer look and licking my way around his torso but he pushes me down easily. I try to look offended, but the control he is taking is so hot and he knows it. He grabs my knees and pulls them apart, kneeling between them. He kisses my ankle and works his way up my leg to my upper thigh, where he alternates kissing and sucking.

He moves over to the other side, repeating the motions. I am writhing with need beneath him. Finally, he places a kiss to my center, over my panties. Looking up he smiles when he feels the wetness through my underwear. I let him be smug. He's earned it.

With sure fingers, he pushes my panties aside and kisses me in the same place. He runs his nose up and down and groans like it's the best thing he's ever smelled. He hasn't even really touched me yet and I feel like I am ready to explode.

Finally, he kisses my clit softly, taking his time there, just like he has with everything else. He kisses and licks me softly and sweetly, until I begin to push against him, seeking friction. Understanding my need, he begins putting more pressure on my clit and slips his middle finger inside me. I cry out at the delicious feeling. He adds another finger and works me with both fingers as he sucks my clit harder.

I hold him in that place with my hands in his hair, listening to the sound of his fingers moving in and out with increased speed. My entire body tenses up.

“Look at me,” he says. I have never looked at a man when I’ve had an orgasm before. It’s so vulnerable, but I will do anything he says now. I watch him as he savors my body. He looks up at me as he hooks his fingers inside me and presses against my front wall while his tongue lashes at my clit with several hard flicks. I explode on his fingers and tongue. My body arches off the bed, and I convulse with pleasure. He continues his brutal assault, lighter now, as I ride out my orgasm. He doesn’t stop until he’s licked and savored every last ounce of my orgasm, and then he finally looks up, his lips and chin glistening with my juices.

He smiles at me as he runs his face along my inner thigh, wiping it away. Getting to his feet in a smooth movement, he slides his gray sweats down, kicks off his shoes and socks, and then drops them on the floor. I stare at his perfect, naked body as I crawl to the edge of the bed, and then he comes to stand in front of me. I want to kiss every inch of his body, but I can only focus on his hard dick. Knowing that getting me off turned him on this much is powerful and addictive. I grin wickedly up at him as I wipe the wetness he left behind on my thigh and then run my hand up and down his length, coating him with my arousal.

His pupils dilate as I place a kiss on the head of his cock and then slowly lick up and down. He drops his head back and allows me to take complete control now. I swirl my tongue around as I suck him from the base to the tip, concentrating on the sensitive underside with my tongue and bottom teeth. Pleasure rips a groan from his chest as he begins to pump his hips, but then he suddenly pulls back, releasing himself from my mouth.

“I don’t want to come in your mouth,” he rasps with heavy-lidded eyes. “I need to be inside you.” Then a realization crosses his face. “I don’t have a condom. Fuck.”

I can’t help but smile. “Wyatt, I’m on the pill. I haven’t been with anyone in over a year. I’m clean.”

“Yeah?” he asks, one hand pushing me back until I’m lying on my back, and he’s settled between my legs. “I’m clean, too, and it’s been longer than that for me.”

I don't even have time to process how someone like Wyatt has been abstinent by choice for over a year before he draws his hips back and then pushes forward into me. He doesn't even need to use his hand to guide his way inside me. We are both so ready.

Since it's been a while, it burns for a fraction of a second, but my body quickly settles into the exquisite fullness of him inside me. He leans down and starts kissing me as he slowly pumps in and out, his tongue mimicking what his hips are doing. I grind underneath him, savoring the feel of his body on mine. He is holding his weight off me, settling his elbows on either side of my head as he kisses me and drives his hips forward, in and out.

After a minute, he reaches down and puts his hands under my ass, tilting my hips up slightly so that he hits the bundle of nerves deep inside me. Between that feeling and the friction working my clit as I grind below him, I feel myself start to peak again. I grind harder, using his body to chase my high.

"Come for me, Millie," he whispers in my ear as I go off again. This orgasm is more intense as he continues to pump his hips faster now.

"I can feel you squeezing my cock," he says. "That's it, Baby. You are such a good girl."

Once my orgasm subsides, he flips us over while still inside of me, holding my hips in place while he drives into me from below. My legs feel like jello, muscles drained and depleted, but I am going to give this to him.

I sit up and ride him, lifting my hips up and down, our hands clasped together as he helps hold me up. I feel him start to move faster, and happily let him use my body the way I used him. After a few more snaps of his hips he stills and releases my hands, gripping my hips tightly, holding me in place as he comes. I can feel the moment his orgasm hits.

"Fuck! Yes. Millie!" he groans as he pumps through his release.

I fall onto his chest as we both try to slow our breathing. His heartbeat is swift, like my own.

We are both covered in sweat, and it smells like sex and Wyatt in my room. I can't form words for several minutes.

Finally, I lift off him, and we both moan as he slips out of me. I start to get up and Wyatt follows my lead, sitting up and kissing me again.

"Millie, I can't even tell you how amazing that was," he says sweetly.

"You don't have to," I reply as I lean down and kiss him again. We kiss softly, hands roaming and exploring while we come down from our high.

"Let's take a shower," he offers.

"OK, but you might need to hold me up." I laugh.

"I can do that," he says, sweeping me up in his arms. I squeal in surprise as he carries me to the bathroom.

We get into the shower, taking our time washing each other gently, talking, and laughing. His strong, soapy hands feel amazing, roaming over my body.

He doesn't tell me how he's feeling at that moment, and he doesn't have to. I can feel it in the way he touches me and looks at me. I can see it in his reverent gaze and feel it in his soft kisses.

We do need to talk about our relationship, but not tonight. Tonight, I just want to immerse myself in him.

Eventually we make our way out of the shower, towel off and climb back into bed naked.

I lay with my head on his chest, feeling his warmth and listening to his rhythmic breathing, kissing his chest every so often as he sleeps to remind myself that he is real. I feel happier than I have, maybe ever.

I'm smiling as I drift off to sleep. But when I wake up, my bed is cold and I'm alone.

Chapter 19

Gwen is sitting on my bed the next morning with Milo sprawled out across her lap. I sent the emergency SOS text this morning and she showed up with coffee and scones, ready for girl talk. She listens carefully as I recount the events of the previous evening, leaving out the best details for myself.

“He said it’s not the right time?” Gwen recounts.

“Yes.”

“Then he kissed you so good that it made your panties wet?” Gwen continues.

“Yes.”

“Then he drove you home in silence?”

“Yes.”

“Then he followed you in and gave you the best sex of your life.”

“Yes.”

“Then he held you until you both fell asleep, without you asking?”

“Yes.”

“Then he took off in the middle of the night?”

“Yes.”

“Well, fuck,” Gwen says defeated. “I’m just as confused as you are. Maybe he had to go to work?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But I sent him a few texts early this morning, and he read them but didn’t respond.” I exhale a shaky breath.

“It could be because he’s busy, Honey. Give it a few more hours before you assume the worst.”

I nod silently. My gut is telling me something is off.

In the time I have known Wyatt, he has been considerate and attentive. I don’t think his leaving without

saying goodbye was an oversight. It feels very intentional.

“Did you talk about anything?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re not a one-night stand kind of girl, Mouse. You never have been. Did you talk about that?”

I shake my head. “We didn’t talk about anything. I was hoping we would get to that this morning.”

We look at each other, and I start to cry. I know it’s silly, but I’ve been feeling horrible since I woke up alone this morning. I got up, stripped my bedsheets, threw them in the laundry and then snuggled up with my dog on the couch.

“It’s not like I’m heartbroken,” I tell her. “We’ve only known each other for a few weeks.”

I think we both know that I’m not being entirely truthful. I am a little heart broken. A few weeks or not, I’ve spent enough time with Wyatt to know that I have developed feelings for him. I don’t give my body to just anyone. Last night meant something to me. Waking up alone without a note, a text, or a call felt like a kick in the stomach. Any rejection is tough, especially when the person doesn’t give you the exact reason why. That’s when my brain likes to fill in the gaps with all of the things I don’t like about myself, so those must be the hidden reasons he doesn’t like me as well. While I know Wyatt didn’t outright reject me, the later it gets into the morning, the more it really feels that way.

“I don’t know what’s going through this guy’s head, Sweetie, but you need to talk to him.”

“I know,” I nod.

“Not to make things more difficult, but what about Theo?”

Fuckity fuck fuck shit balls. I forgot I’m supposed to see Theo today.

“I can’t even think about that right now,” I say honestly.

“Great. Then let’s take this beast of a dog of yours to the park. It’s supposed to rain later.”

I don’t want to go but I know it would be good for me mentally to get out of the house. Plus, my dog had to listen to my sex noises all night. He deserves a walk.

I go and grab Milo’s leash and other necessities and get my shoes on. I’m about to shut the door when I remember that I never set the alarm. *Stupid, Millie*, I chastise myself. That’s the entire reason I leave my shoes by the door. I really need to get over this Wyatt thing and focus. I punch in my code and shut the door, ready for our adventure at the dog park.



I watch as the three of them leave her house. The two women and one damn big dog. I parked nearby and waited behind a tall tree across the street for about twenty minutes.

This neighborhood has so many dark crevices it is not even a challenge to find a hiding space. These older craftsman-style homes are landscaped with tall bushes and trees. The ones that don’t have tall trees have tall fences around the perimeters.

Millie has a small white picket fence surrounding her little home. Cute. Not exactly a fortress.

I walk over to the fence and unlatch it like I have done 100 times before. I look like a delivery guy or even a friend visiting to anyone watching. I quickly slip around the right side of the house, as if I’m going to the garage, but instead go around to the back of the house where the window doesn’t entirely seal in the second bedroom. It takes two seconds to pry off the screen and lift the window. No alarm sounds. Her alarm is only tied to the front door, so it’s not surprising.

Once inside, I look around to see what’s changed since the last time I was here. There are two empty to-go coffee containers on the counter, and a dog food bowl and bed off to the right of the kitchen. Her laptop is on the coffee table in the living room. I open it and start it up, but it’s PIN protected. I

can take a few guesses before it locks down and alerts her to my presence.

I am just about to guess something trivial, like her birthday, when I hear voices and footsteps outside. I quickly shut the computer and slip out the window in the back room, just barely getting the screen back in place before I hear the dog barking and Millie asking him what's wrong. Good thing that fucking dog can't talk because I am all over that house. I can come and go as I please, and there is nothing that can stop me. Millie is mine. If she has not realized it, she will soon enough.



My dog is acting like a lunatic when we return back from the walk early. I forgot the poop bags and as soon as I opened the door he pushed past me, almost knocking me over.

“Cheese and rice, Milo!” I exclaim. “What’s your problem?”

He runs into the living room, sniffs everything, and then works his way around the house to the back room, spending most of his time sniffing there and jumping up on the wall by the window. I follow him there and switch on the light. I go over to inspect the area but don't see anything out of place.

This is the window Wyatt told me to get fixed, so I make a mental note to ask around for a handyman to do it since it would be awkward to ask Wyatt now. Milo continues to sniff around and whine slightly, clearly on a mission about something.

“What’s up with the beast?” Gwen asks, walking in after us.

“I have no idea. Seems like he’s anxious about something but I don’t know what.”

“Probably still just settling in after losing his owner and being stuck at the shelter,” she replies.

He's still standing in the center of the room, head up in the air, sniffing at something as if he's trying to process information.

"Come here, boy," I call, and he finally abandons his mission and trots over to me.

"You're just trying to figure all this new stuff out, huh, Handsome," I say as I kneel to his level and scratch his neck and face.

"I'd get him some of that doggie CBD stuff," Gwen offers. "Might help with the anxiety."

"That's a good idea," I tell her. "I'll head back to the pet store later."

Chapter 20

I look at my phone for the fourth time in an hour and read Millie's messages.

Millie: Last night was amazing. I wish we could have said goodbye properly.

Millie: I hope everything is OK?

Millie: Can we talk sometime today? Please.

Fuck! I can't believe I let this happen. I toss my phone on my desk and rake my hands through my hair. I'm supposed to be smarter than this. I am supposed to have more control. I could not let her walk away last night without understanding what she meant to me, but I only made it worse.

Leaving her this morning was the most difficult thing I have ever done. I was not lying when I told her I had not been with anyone in a long time. I left the days of drinking too much and fucking strangers behind me in college. The meaningless sex and lack of connection got old. I never felt good sneaking out in the middle of the night. *That is ironic, Asshole.*

There is also the strangler case. For the better part of the past year, that has been my sole focus, but Millie has gotten under my skin in a way I never expected. Obviously she is beautiful, but my attraction to her is deeper. She's smart and funny, and she challenges me. But I can't have her, and I know that, and I still allowed her to give herself to me last night. Not only did I allow it, I initiated it.

I'm a selfish bastard. I don't know how to handle this situation, but I know that I can't ignore her. I will not do that to her, even though it would probably be for the best. She is part of something much bigger that I can't ignore anyway. I need to talk to her.

Wyatt: Sorry I had to leave. Can we meet today?

I wait nervously for several minutes before she replies.

Millie: Are you OK?

This woman. I know that my leaving must have confused and hurt her, but here she is, asking me if I'm OK.

Wyatt: Yes. I just want to talk.

Millie: You can come over whenever.

I sigh. I would rather do this somewhere public, but that is a coward's way out.

Wyatt: I'll be over around 6:30.



When I hear Wyatt's car outside, I've nearly paced a hole in the floor and chewed my thumbnail to the point of bleeding.

He's here to let me down easy, *again*. I know it, and he knows it. I could have let him off the hook via text, but I want to see him and look into his eyes as he says it. I know this isn't what he wants, but something he has to do for some unknown reason. I can only partially blame him for last night. Yes, he followed me to the door when he could have let me go, but I also could have pushed him away, and I didn't. Or rather, I couldn't.

It's time to get some clarity on this relationship.

I answer the door before he even knocks. It feels like another kick to the stomach to see him again.

"Come in," I offer.

"Thanks," he says as he walks by me, making no motion to touch me.

He sits on the couch next to Milo and pets him softly as he starts talking.

"I owe you an apology," he begins. "I shouldn't have left without saying goodbye."

I nod in agreement. "Why did you leave?" I ask.

"Honestly?" he questions. "Panic."

"Why?"

“Please know I do not regret one thing that happened last night. But I can’t give you more.”

“So we’re back to this?” I reply.

“We never left,” he resigns. “I lost my head last night. It should not have happened.”

I knew it was coming, but it makes me feel sad and angry simultaneously.

“OK, Wyatt. I can’t begin to understand what exactly is going on here. It’s clear we have something and you’re intent on fighting it, so that’s all I need to know. I respect myself too much to put more time and effort into something with no future.” As much as I like him, I will not beg for any man’s attention.

He simply nods in understanding, but sadness is there in his eyes.

“I think you should probably leave.”

Wyatt slowly stands and heads toward the door. He stops just short and turns to me. “Millie, I—”

I cut him off before he could finish whatever he was going to say.

“It’s OK, Wyatt. Really.” It has to be. It’s not like I have any other choice. He drops his head and walks out the door.

I’m glad I had sent Theo a text earlier explaining that something came up and that it wouldn’t be a great day to get together. He responded that he was busy with work for the next few days but will get in touch soon. That’s perfect. I need a few days to lick my wounds and get my head back in the game.

Chapter 21

I spend the next few days doing what I love. I work, cook, and spend some time at the shelter. I hide from the world, but it's perfect because I got my period, so I feel like shit mentally and physically.

I haven't heard from Wyatt, but then again, I wasn't expecting to.

Milo is still being strange from time to time. He barks seemingly at nothing and sniffs through the house sometimes when we return from going out.

I spoke to the lady at the pet store and Barb, and we seem to have found something that helps his anxiety. I gave him some holistic calming bites earlier, and he is relaxing on the couch next to me when my phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Millie." The sound of his voice makes me smile.

"Hi, Theo. How are you?"

"I'm good. I was just thinking about you and wondering if you've eaten dinner yet?"

"No, not yet."

"How about I bring Chinese food over?" he asks. He's so thoughtful, and I love that he's always trying to feed me. It's one of my love languages.

"That sounds great."

"What can I get you?"

"I'm easy," I joke.

"So you put out for Kung Pao chicken?" he asks.

"No, Silly. Kung Pao is second base. I only put out for sweet and sour pork."

There's a slight pause, and then, "I'll be there in 45 minutes."

The line goes dead, and I jump up to get ready for my impromptu date with a smile on my face. Since he's just coming over with dinner, I put on a comfortable sweatshirt and my most flattering black leggings. I run a brush through my hair, put a bit of lip gloss on, and examine myself in the mirror. I look cute and comfortable, but not like I'm trying too hard, which is precisely what I'm going for.

I rush around, clean up a few dog toys, and throw away the trash from this morning when Gwen was here. When everything looks presentable, I turn on my favorite playlist on my speaker. I realize I'm excited to see Theo. He's incredibly handsome, funny, sweet, and attentive. His energy differs from Wyatt's, which is more intense, possessive, and mysterious.

"Stop it, Millie," I chastise myself out loud. "Stop comparing them. Wyatt isn't an option anyway."

I haven't allowed myself to think about him much in the last few days or how he warned me off from Theo. I'm not someone who appreciates being told what to do, especially in my personal life. Just thinking about it is beginning to irritate me again, but thankfully, before I get too far down the rabbit hole, I hear a car pull into the driveway.

Milo is still zonked out and happily snoring on the couch. I get to the door before Theo knocks and find him standing there with a bag full of food. I invite him in and he follows me into the kitchen.

"Wow, you got a lot of food," I say as I unload the red and white square cartons on the counter."

"Don't be too excited," he says mischievously, "It's all sweet and sour pork."

I can't help the laugh that explodes from my chest as I shake my head.

Despite what Theo said, he got us a variety of items. I load my plate with spicy meats, fried rice, noodles, and egg rolls and sit at the table to start eating, then I watch Theo expertly maneuver chopsticks with an agility I can only imagine.

“How did you learn to do that?” I ask, gesturing to the rice in his chopsticks.

“I have traveled all over the world. I spent several months in Hong Kong after college.”

“That’s amazing. Was it for work or just traveling?”

“Just traveling. I had always wanted to travel, so I figured I would do it before I got tied to a career. Little did I know I would be traveling for that, too,” he shrugs.

“What’s your favorite place?” I follow my question with a crunchy bite of egg roll.

He thinks for a long minute. “That’s a good question. I love Scotland, but if I had to name one place, I would say Thailand. The food, the people, the beaches. It’s magical.”

“I’d love to go there.”

“You would love it, Millie. As a photographer, you would be in heaven,” he smiles.

We eat for a few more minutes before I grab my fortune cookie.

“This is my favorite part,” I admit. Theo grabs his cookie and we both crack open our cookies and remove our fortunes. I read mine and smile at the accuracy.

“What does it say?” Theo asks.

“It says, ‘A passionate new romance will appear in your life when you least expect it.’” I blush.

“Does it now?” Theo smirks. “How interesting.”

“OK, Romeo, what’s yours say?”

“Be careful who you trust. Sugar and salt look the same.” He nods in agreement.

“Wow! What a nefarious little cookie,” I joke.

I get up and start to clear the table, and he jumps up to help me. I put the leftovers in the refrigerator as Theo wipes off the table.

I've really enjoyed spending time with him, and I surprise myself by wanting him to stay longer.

"Do you maybe wanna stay and watch a movie?"

"Yes," he says immediately, flashing me his boyish smile. We make our way into the living room, and I push Milo to the side to make room for both of us on the couch.

"Is your dog OK?" Theo asks.

"Yeah. I think he might be sleeping off a bad trip."

Theo's eyebrows rise in question.

"Well, he was acting a little crazy and seemed anxious, so I gave him some anxiety stuff, but he's been sleeping for a while now. I think I broke him."

"Nah, he's just chilling," Theo says.

He grabs my feet and lays my legs across his lap so we can all fit on the couch, then starts rubbing my feet through my socks as we search for something to watch. Milo opens his eyes as a slow growl emits from his chest. He looks at Theo and recoils.

Theo smiles at him and sticks his hand out for Milo to smell. I watch the interaction with interest. I can't tell if my new dog doesn't like my date or if he's afraid of him.

After a slight sniff of Theo's hand, Milo jumps down from the couch and falls onto his dog bed on the floor with a thud. He keeps his eyes trained on us the entire time.

"Well, that was weird," I say. "I just recently adopted him, but I haven't seen him be unfriendly to anyone else."

Theo just shrugs, clearly not offended. "I could remind him of someone from the past. Don't worry. I will win him over." He smiles, and I don't doubt he could win anyone over. He's got a smile that touches his eyes. It's both boyishly adorable and incredibly sexy.

I slide further down on the couch, so my whole legs are in his lap, and he slides his hands up and down my shins as I change channels mindlessly.

I settle on some dating show where all the contestants are half-naked on a beach, and we spend the next hour making fun of everything we watch. It's easy and relaxed, although it becomes more difficult to focus when he starts rubbing my legs under my leggings. His big, warm hands knead my muscles, going no higher than my knees before working their way back to my feet. It feels so good to close my eyes and soak in the pleasurable feeling, but I know this is as far as this will go tonight.

I open my eyes and peek at him. "Theo."

"Yes," he says, still rubbing my feet.

"Can we talk for a bit?" I move my legs and sit up to face him, grabbing a throw pillow and setting it on my lap as some sort of emotional support object.

"I like you," I say. "I think you are sweet and funny and obviously adorable."

"Obviously," he jokes. "Is there a *but* coming?"

"No. There is no *but*. There is an *and*." He looks at me with anticipation.

"*And*, because I like you, I want to be honest. I was recently spending time with someone, and just to be clear, I'm not anymore. But it left me feeling a little raw, and I need to take things a little slower with you, if you're OK with that."

"Of course, I'm OK with that, Millie. I like you. You set the pace here. OK?"

I exhale the breath I've been holding. I should've known Theo would be understanding.

He stands up and motions for me to stand as well.

"Come here," he says, opening his arms to allow me to walk into his hug. I bury my face in his chest as he wraps his arms around me. We are quietly enjoying the moment when my dog jumps up from his bed and runs to the front door, barking like he's heard something outside. It startles us both.

"Milo, what is your problem?" I yell in his direction. He continues to bark at the door, but now his tail is wagging as

if he's excited about something, or someone.

"He did this the other night, too. It scared the crap out of me," I tell Theo, who looks at me with a concerned look on his face.

"I'm gonna go check it out," he says. Theo shoves Milo away from the door and he tucks his tail between his legs, looking up at him. While he goes outside to check things out, I grab a cup of water. Theo comes back in a few minutes later.

"I walked the perimeter of your property but didn't see anything," he says. "I think Milo just heard an animal outside."

"That's what I was thinking the other night as well," I tell him. "I never realized my house is a mecca for woodland creatures." I snicker at my stupid joke, and Theo grabs my sweatshirt, pulling me closer to him for another hug.

"It's late. I should get going," he says. "If you are going to be alright?"

"I'm fine," I reply. "Are you in town for a bit?"

"I am, actually. Let's do this again, soon."

"Definitely," I smile as he leans down and gives me a sweet goodbye kiss. It's chaste and perfect.

I open the door and watch him walk to his Bronco, and wave as he begins to back up. I shut the door and engage the alarm and turn to look at my dog, who looks clearly guilty.

"You may not be team Theo, yet," I tell him. "But I like him, so get your shit together, Milo."

Chapter 22

I walk into work feeling mentally and physically exhausted. I don't know how long I am going to be able to keep up this double life. I spend my days here, looking for killers hiding in plain sight, and I spend my nights hiding myself as best I can, and watching. Always watching. With a heavy sigh and a pounding headache, I grab a cup of shitty coffee from the kitchenette and amble my way to the desk.

"Hudson," a voice behind me calls. I turn to see the captain headed my way. Once he reaches my desk, he looks me over quickly.

"You look like shit," he tells me.

"Thanks, Cap. You look great, too." He does not seem amused, so I continue. "Just putting in some extra time on the strangler case."

"Better not be on my time," he states coolly.

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir," I return and take a sip of the coffee that tastes more like piss than coffee.

"Listen up," he starts. "We've got a body over in Golden Leaf Lake. I want you to go check it out. It could be our missing girl. Preliminary reports are that the victim sustained a gunshot wound to the chest."

"The M.O. doesn't fit my serial case," I explain.

"No, genius, it doesn't. But last I checked, you work homicide. I doubt she shot herself in the chest." I nod my head in silent agreement.

"Ergo, get your ass up and go check it out."

With that, he turns and walks away at a speed much faster than his fifty-eight years.

I arrive about thirty-five minutes later at the scene where the body was found.

Golden Leaf Lake is a smaller man-made lake just outside of town, on the way to the freeway. It is not a popular

tourist destination, especially in the cooler fall months, but it is well-known by people in this area.

There are a few Sheriff's deputies already here, as well as the crime scene unit. I get out of the car and head to where several people have gathered around. The body has been retrieved from the lake and laid on a tarp.

The first thing I notice as I approach is the smell of death. Once you have smelled a decomposing body, you will never forget it. It hits me like a wall- rotting meat with a fruity, sweet undertone.

Violence and death are not new to me. I don't tend to let it get to me. As I approach, a few of the people turn to look at me.

"I need someone to walk me through the details," I say, cutting right to the chase.

A young deputy with the last name Dawson answers.

"Two older women were going for a walk at 0700 this morning. They saw something floating by those reeds over there." He turns and points to an area that is thick with tall grass and reeds. "They decided to check it out, saw that it was a body, and called 9-1-1."

"Bet they won't be walking around here anytime soon," I quip.

"Actually," Dawson responds. "They don't seem bothered at all. Apparently, they both listen to a lot of crime podcasts and see themselves as some real crime solvers. The one in green said she could "sense" there was something off here today." He rolls his eyes.

"Well, don't let Shawn Spencer and Burton Guster leave without a written statement," I tell him, alluding to the main characters in one of my favorite shows. "I might need to question them later."

Dawson says something else, but I am already moving toward the body. Female, young, blonde hair. This could definitely be the missing girl. She is bloated from decomposition so I cannot make out her features. She is naked,

and there is some rope around her neck. There has also been some animal predation, so I will need dental records to identify her.

“Think this could be the Sierra Falls Strangler?” Dawson asks. When I don’t answer right away, he continues. “Maybe a jealous boyfriend?”

“I suggest we save all speculation until we have an ID and we can work the case,” I say sternly over my shoulder as I head back to my car. There is not much I can do here until we get the body to the morgue. I’ll let the crime scene guys work the area and wait for the reports.

I start the car and start driving back to the office, planning to grab a bite to eat. I’m sure Dawson is telling everyone what an asshole I am right now, but I don’t give a fuck. I care about this victim and why she died. I have never really cared about being liked, truth be known.

Sometimes my personality keeps me from getting closer to people. People like Millie. That is still a sore subject. The way she looked at me almost tore my fucking heart out.

I let my mind wander as I continue the drive. I think about meeting Theo in college and becoming friends. His cheery and laid-back persona was so opposite of my own serious and calculated nature. Maybe those complementary traits are the reason we got along so well. We both saw ourselves as the smartest guy in the room, and we had some epic debates. We also pushed each other physically in the gym, always competing.

We spent our weekends unwinding and hooking up with women. A lot of women. Theo was a great wingman. People gravitate toward that good-looking motherfucker. Then he met Sophia and over the months we grew apart. He changed, or maybe I did, and by the last time we both saw Sophia, we were virtually strangers. I could not believe it when he called me and asked me to come over to his place. I had not spoken to him in months; although, I had spoken to Sophia often, both in class, and when we would meet occasionally just to chat.

When I got to his place and walked in, I was not expecting Sophia to be there. I was expecting what happened next even less. I physically shudder at the memory and the events that quickly followed.

No one ever saw Sophia again after that. Sick to my stomach, I decide to forego grabbing lunch and head straight back to the office, knowing there is a lot of work left to do.

Chapter 23

Theo and I have been texting and speaking regularly since the night he brought dinner over. He has been amazing about not rushing this relationship. He simply asks what I'm up to and lets me know he's thinking about me, so I'm excited when I get his text this morning, and he suggests a date.

Theo: Do you like mini golf?

Millie: Did Tiger Woods wear red on Sundays?

Theo: How are you so perfect?

Millie: Sold my soul to a crossroads demon.

Theo: You just keep proving my point.

Millie: I know.

Theo: Pick you up at 11:00?

Millie: See you soon.

“How the hell does this thing work?” Theo asks as he walks around the big bunny structure, trying to figure out where the ball goes.

I lean on my club, laughing. He's been getting more frustrated as the game has gone on. We are on hole 13, and I am dominating this man.

“You hit the ball into the basket next to the bunny, and it either shoots out his butt toward the hole, or it diverts to the back green.”

“What the fuck kind of place is this?” he asks. “This bunny shits a hole in one? Remind me not to bring Ellie and Emmett here.”

With that, he whacks the ball, and it hits the bunny in the face and bounces back toward us.

“Motherfucker!” Theo yells.

I am doubled over with laughter at this point.

“You have to use some finesse,” I tell him.

Stepping in front of him, I line up the ball, wiggle my hips, and then hit it with just enough force to make it into the basket. We both watch it shoot out of the bunny's butt and stop about six inches from the hole. I smile smugly as Theo drops his head in defeat. I saunter over to him and wrap my arms around his waist.

"You can suck at mini golf. I still like you," I say as I look up at his mouth.

"Prove it," he says as he tosses his club over his shoulder. I reach up and kiss his lips softly before pulling back. He smiles as he looks down at me. "Well, that's better. Come on, let's get this nightmare over with. You are buying me ice cream afterward."

We play a few more holes, including a volcano that spits Theo's ball right back out at him twice. He reacted by verbally assaulting the volcano and threatening to sue management. I was laughing so hard that I couldn't even hit my ball. We were having so much fun that we finished playing the last few holes without keeping score.

"I didn't realize I was dating a ringer," Theo says just as I take a lick of my fudge explosion ice cream. I freeze and it slides down my throat without me initiating a swallow, and the result is me coughing, red-faced, and gasping for air. Theo gently hits my back.

"Millie, are you OK?" He looks so sweet and concerned.

"I am," I say as I clear my throat. "You said we are dating."

His cheeks redden with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I am moving too fast. I didn't mean to rush you."

"No, you're not," I tell him, attempting to set his mind at ease. "We are spending time together so it's natural that we would talk about it. I'm just not used to a man initiating that conversation."

"Look, I haven't dated in a really long time," he admits. "It's difficult for me, because of my work," he adds

quickly. “But I think you’re amazing, and if you can stand that I am gone sometimes, I would really like to see where this goes. I would like to officially date.”

“I’d like that, Theo.”

“But there’s something we need to get clear,” Theo has forgotten about his ice cream.

“What?”

“Wyatt,” he says with disgust.

“What about him?” I didn’t mention Wyatt was the person I had been spending time with. I don’t know if he’s aware of it or if he just mentioned Wyatt specifically because they have a history.

“I won’t share you with him. I won’t share you with anyone.” His words give me pause for a moment. I am not planning on seeing Wyatt, and I understand his concern, given their past. But at the same time, there is a little voice in my head telling me that he sounds a little controlling. I quickly push it down, because this is Theo, and he’s not that kind of man. I think this is just a sore subject for him.

“I understand,” I tell him and grab his hand. He gives me a beautiful wide smile.

“Well, it’s settled then,” he says, as he leans over and gives me a very cold kiss that tastes like Theo and strawberries. I lick my lips to savor it as he gets up to throw our trash away.

Suddenly, I get the same familiar feeling that I’m being watched. I stop and look around, even turning around 360 degrees, but all I see are a few people sitting outside of the ice cream parlor, like us, and a few parked cars. One of the bigger trucks on the street pulls out and that’s when I see a black Mustang. I can make Wyatt out in the front seat, staring at me with murderous intensity. How dare he follow me around. The unmitigated gall of this man!

I look over my shoulder to make sure Theo isn’t looking, jump up and flip him the double bird. That’s how mad

I am. Regardless of his past with Theo, this is none of his business. I will not let him ruin this new relationship for me.

Chapter 24

I'm still pissed off at Wyatt when I wake up the next morning. After I spotted him acting like a deranged stalker yesterday it was difficult not to let my mood sour. I managed to keep it hidden from Theo throughout the drive home and the small make-out session against my front door. But Milo got an earful when I got inside.

"I mean, seriously? Who acts like that? I offered myself to him. He took a taste and then said, 'Thanks, but no thanks.' So where does he get off following me around and acting like he can dictate who I spend time with?" Despite Milo's affection for Wyatt, I could tell by his tail wags that Milo whole-heartedly agreed with me.

I'm tempted to go down to that police station and give him a piece of my mind, but there's two reasons why I decide not to. Number one: I don't want to encourage him. Maybe if I ignore him he will stop this nonsense. Number two: I told Theo I'd stay away, and I plan on keeping my word. Too frustrated to focus on much besides rage cleaning, I grab my running shoes.

"Come on, Milo, we're getting out of here for a while." He happily trots over to me and I put his collar on.

This is not going to be fun. I run like a wounded moose. It's not an activity I participate in often. I'm not built for it, with thick thighs and big boobs, my strides are shallow and nothing short of comical. But Milo and I are doing this. It's either we run to the coffee shop, or I drive to the police station and punch Wyatt in the face. I'm not looking for a felony today, so we're going with the wounded moose.

We make it to the coffee shop about thirty minutes later. I don't think you could classify what we did as "running," since we averaged a fifteen-minute mile. But we got here, and I'm much calmer than I was, the adrenaline and anger that had been coursing through my body now mostly spent trying to move my ass through the streets.

Milo kept up easily enough, but every once in a while, he would look up at me with a face that indicated he wasn't loving it. I think walking is more our speed. We will be strolling home at a leisurely pace.

I tie Milo up outside and go in to get him a bowl of water and order my Irish cream breve. *I deserve it, dammit.* My muscles are screaming, and I require sugar and caffeine. I take the bowl outside while they are making my coffee and catch sight of a scene that is equally beautiful and infuriating.

Wyatt is kneeling, rubbing my dog's ears and neck, and he leans in and kisses him right between the eyes. Milo licks his face lovingly, as if we didn't have this conversation last night. *Traitor.* I clear my throat to put an end to the love fest. They both look up, guilty, and Wyatt stands up and smiles.

I set the water down in front of Milo and square my shoulders for the incoming confrontation with Wyatt.

"Stop following me," I say sternly. He has the audacity to look slightly amused.

"I am not following you, Millie. I am getting a cup of coffee."

"I don't believe that for a second," I tell him. He shrugs as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

"What about yesterday?" I challenge.

"What about it?" he counters.

"Why were you on the street, in your car, watching me and Theo eat ice cream?"

"I was in the area on official police business."

"I swear to God, Wyatt, you are this close to getting kicked in the nuts." I hold my hand up to show him that my thumb and forefinger are one inch apart.

Wyatt chuckles and shakes his head. "I wasn't trying to ruin your date."

"Yes, you were. Theo and I are a couple now, and I will not have you ruin it." That finally gets his attention.

“Millie,” he says sternly. “We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.”

I hear the barista call my name, alerting me that my coffee is ready.

“Wyatt, we will not be talking. Whatever the issue is between you and Theo is exactly that: YOUR ISSUE. I am not interested in being part of the score you settle with him.”

“Score? Mil—” I put my finger up to silence him.

“Now. I am going to grab my coffee. When I get back, you will not be here.” Wyatt looks so sad, I can’t look at him, or this tough facade will break.

“Say goodbye to Milo and go away, Wyatt.” With that, I turn and march into the coffee shop. My hands are shaking, and my heart is beating too fast, two things which normally happen around Wyatt, but they are particularly pronounced today. I take a moment to calm my breathing.

When I go back outside, he is gone. I’m happy that he listened to me, but I also can’t help but feel some disappointment tight in my chest. I sit at the table and sip my coffee, replaying our conversation while thinking about how good he looked.

I chastise myself again, for about the hundredth time, for allowing myself to think about him. After I’ve settled down and drank my coffee, Milo and I slowly make our way home.

As soon as we walk through the door, I sense something is off. My house feels different, somehow. Goosebumps spread across my flesh. Milo feels it, too. He growls deeply and heads into my room before swiftly turning into my dark room. He sniffs furiously as I turn on the light and illuminate the space.

At first, nothing seems out of place. Then I notice it. On my desk is a picture. It’s older and crinkled, but I can make out the faces. It’s Wyatt and Theo. They look like teenagers, younger and carefree. They are in the center of a group of guys, some holding beers and some puffing on cigars, clearly

in a party atmosphere. Wyatt and Theo are in the center of the group.

Theo is wearing an orange and black Princeton sweatshirt, and Wyatt has his arm slung over his shoulder, smiling widely into the camera. They look like best friends, and my heart sinks as I ponder how close they once were. Wyatt, the taller and bigger of the two, almost looks like a big brother to Theo, hazel eyes twinkling with his boyish good looks. They both look drunk or high or both. I would smile at the image if I wasn't so freaked out.

Milo continues to sniff around and I can't help but feel that whoever was here was all over this room. It feels cold and foreign. I snap out of my temporary paralytic state, drop the photo, and run into the living room to grab my phone. Ten minutes later Theo arrives, crushing my head to his chest when I open the door.

"Show me," he says. We walk into the room and he walks around, surveying the area but careful not to touch anything. I put Milo in the bathroom, under Theo's advice, to keep him away from the scene. He doesn't like that, though, and howls from the other side of the bathroom door.

"Did you set your alarm before you left this morning?"

I think for a moment. "Shit, I'm not sure. I wasn't really thinking clearly. I just wanted to leave for a run."

"Why were you upset?" he asks.

I shake my head, deciding not to make this situation worse by telling him about Wyatt.

"I wasn't upset. Just rushing to get out the door before I talked myself out of going." I give him a half smile.

He surprises me with the next words he speaks. "You need to call Wyatt."

"No. Why?" I question, even though I know it's something that needs to happen.

"Millie, this is about him too. Whoever was in your home involved him by leaving this picture," he reasons.

I know he's right. I wish I could make sense of any of this. Tentatively, I sit down and make the call to Wyatt, making no mention of the fight or alluding to anything that happened earlier. I simply tell him what has transpired over the past hour, and he shows up less than twenty minutes later with two uniformed officers.

"Millie," he says when he walks in. "Let's go sit down."

He directs the officers to the room to survey the area and ignores Theo completely. I follow him to the kitchen table and take a seat. Theo sits next to me and takes my hand in his own, causing Wyatt's jaw to tense as he scowls at Theo.

"There is no need for you to be here right now, *Theodore*," he says condescendingly.

"As Millie's boyfriend, and part of this situation by being in the damn picture, I think there is a big fucking reason for me to be here, *Wyatt*," Theo spits back.

Wyatt wants to argue, but deep down, he knows Theo is right.

"So, walk me through what happened. Do not leave out a detail." He pulls a notebook out of the black satchel he sometimes carries to take notes.

"I went for a run with Milo this morning. I don't remember if I set the alarm on the front door. I was in a rush."

"Continue," he says.

Our eyes meet, and we silently agree that we can skip the part where I chewed him out at the coffee shop earlier.

"We walked home, and as soon as we got here, Milo went crazy, and I could tell something was off."

"How long were you gone?"

I do the math in my head. "About an hour and a half."

"When you say that you felt something was off, what do you mean?"

“I don’t know. It just felt like my house was colder somehow. It felt off,” I repeat. “I know, it doesn’t make sense, but that’s the only way I can explain it.” Theo squeezes my hand in reassurance.

“Did you touch anything?” he asks.

“I turned the light on in the spare room and picked up the picture. That’s it.”

Wyatt nods. “I will be right back.”

He walks over and speaks quietly to the uniformed officers and then turns back toward us. Once he takes his seat, he looks directly at Theo.

“There is something else,” I admit while chewing on my bottom lip.

“What?” Wyatt questions.

I glance first at Theo’s confused face and then meet Wyatt’s intense glower. “I have had this strange feeling for a while now that someone is watching me.”

“Why haven’t you said something?” Theo asks.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “I thought I was imagining it. I didn’t want to make a big deal out of nothing.”

“It is a big deal,” Theo says with urgency in his voice. “You need to tell me if anything like this happens.”

I nod in agreement, looking at Theo. “I will. I promise.” We both turn to look back at Wyatt, who is observing the interaction with a pensive scowl on his face. He writes something down in his notebook before he begins asking more questions.

“Where were you this morning, Theo?”

“What the fuck?” Theo snaps. “You think I broke into my *own* girlfriend’s house?”

“I didn’t say that,” Wyatt says coolly. “I simply asked where you were.”

“Where were you? Let’s talk about that, huh?”

Wyatt smiles. “My whereabouts are not in question.”

“Well, maybe they should be,” Theo argues. “Millie picked me over you. That can’t make you too happy, buddy. This is *deja vu*.”

Wyatt jumps out of his seat. “You need to shut the fuck up.”

Somehow, in my frazzled state, I find my voice. “Both of you need to shut the fuck up!” I yell. “I don’t know, or care, about this game you two are playing. I’ve had a shit day, and I want to let my dog out of the damn bathroom, take a bath, and relax!”

They both have the decency to look contrite.

“I’m sorry, Millie. You’re right,” Wyatt says.

Theo pulls me into a tight hug and kisses the top of my head. “I’m sorry, Baby,” he says with his lips pressed to the crown of my head.

“Theo, I need to see you outside.” Wyatt motions for Theo to follow him.

“I will be right back,” Theo says, gently kissing my cheek before following Wyatt.

I hear raised voices, but when they return a few minutes later, no one is bleeding, which is a win. I answer a few more questions, and the officers spend about thirty minutes looking around. Theo and I are drinking tea in the kitchen when Wyatt walks in.

“Millie, we are going to go. I’m taking the picture to check for prints. There’s no sign of forced entry, and even without your alarm on, there would be some damage to that door if it was pried open. I think whoever was here came in through that back window. I need you to get the window fixed.”

“I can call someone tomor—” I start.

“I will fix it tomorrow,” Theo interrupts. Wyatt gives him a curt nod.

“Are you going to be OK tonight?”

Before I can answer, Theo interjects. “She will be fine, detective. I will be here with her.”

Wyatt’s jaw tightens and it looks like he might bust a blood vessel in his neck, but he doesn’t argue. Wyatt and the two officers turn to leave and Theo locks the door behind them. I walk over, somewhat numb, and punch in the alarm code.

“Is it OK if I stay tonight?” Theo asks.

“I’d like that.”

We order pizza for dinner and laugh at reruns on TV. I am starting to feel better, but there’s still a chill deep inside my bones. Theo runs me a bath as he makes sure everything is locked up for the night. I settle into the tub, the water warming my bones and pinking my skin as I close my eyes and focus on breathing. When I wanted excitement in my life, this is not what I had in mind. After my bath, I dress in a baggy sweatshirt and sweats. I don’t think Theo is thinking of sex tonight, given the day I’ve had and our agreement to take things slowly, but once he sees my outfit, I’m sure it will be pretty clear. It screams “boner killer.”

When I emerge from the bathroom I see Theo, laying on the bed, still in his clothes, scrolling on his phone with his legs crossed at his ankles.

“Hey,” he says, looking up from his phone. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I reply. “You don’t have to sleep in your clothes, Theo. Please get comfortable.”

He smiles sweetly. “OK. Do you have a toothbrush I can use?”

“I have an extra in the cabinet in the bathroom.”

He stands up and walks over, kisses my temple, walks past me, and shuts the bathroom door. I am absolutely exhausted. A few minutes later when he emerges from the bathroom, I am having a hard time keeping my eyes open.

Milo usually sleeps with me, but he is camped out in his dog bed in the corner of the room.

Theo is wearing only his black boxer briefs when he slides into bed. He looks so gorgeous, with a light smattering of brown hair across his tan chest which tapers into a tight V at his waist. His skin is smooth and gorgeous. He cuddles up behind me, big spoon style, and holds me fast to his chest.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

“Why would someone leave a picture of you and Wyatt in my house? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t. I wish I could answer that for you.”

“Do you remember the night of the picture?”

“Nah,” he replies. “We used to party a lot. It could have been any night.”

I nod. My head is thick and heavy as I start to fall asleep with Theo’s warm body behind me for protection and his warm breath on my neck for comfort. The last thing I remember is him softly kissing my neck and whispering “goodnight.”



I take a long sip of the whiskey in front of me as I replay the evening. The warmth spreads into my chest, settling my nerves. Millie was so scared. I exhale and run my hand through my hair, playing over my conversation with Theo again.

“Theo, I need to see you outside,” I tell him. I am in no mood for his ass this afternoon. He follows me outside, chest puffed up, trying to intimidate me.

“What the fuck is going on, Wyatt?” he starts.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I retort.

“Did you seriously ask me, in front of Millie, where I was today?”

“It’s part of any investigation. Why are you being so defensive and secretive? Do you have something to hide?”

“Fuck off, Wyatt,” he scoffs. “If anyone has something to hide, it is you.”

“What would I possibly have to hide?”

“Why are you even here, huh? In Sierra Falls? Why would you come here? You always wanted to go back to San Diego. Yet, you ended up here, in my city. What are the chances?” He shrugs his shoulders in exaggeration.

“Your city? That’s a good one.”

“You know what I mean, Asshole. My sister lives here. My parents are an hour away. Do you seriously expect me to believe that you couldn’t find a job in LA or San Diego? What happened to the FBI, huh? Wasn’t that your dream? How do you go from Quantico to this shit-hole?”

“I don’t owe you any explanations about my life, Theo. What decisions I have made and why are none of your business.”

“Well, Millie is definitely my business. So back the fuck off.”

“Still the same insecure guy you were in college, I see.”

“Try me, Wyatt,” he spits, raising his voice and stepping closer to me. “Cop or not, if you try to ruin my relationship, I will not let it go this time.”

“You have a pretty skewed view of the past. I did not ruin anything in your life. You did that on your own. I will not let you hurt Millie. I will not let it go this time.”

“Stay out of my way,” he warns again.

“I’m going to do my job. That includes keeping Millie safe. I suggest you figure out how to deal with it.” I don’t give him a chance to say anything else. I turn and walk back into the house.

Leaving Millie's home was so difficult. I hated leaving her in Theo's hands. She should be with me. It should be me in her bed. I take another long sip of my drink.

This situation has gotten so far out of control. I no longer feel like I can command the outcome, which makes me crazy.

I am worried that Millie is in more danger than I initially thought. I cannot tell my captain; he will pull me off this case. I cannot tell Millie. At least not yet. I am in this alone, and if I'm wrong, the consequences will be catastrophic. I just need a little more time, but I'm not sure I have it anymore.

Chapter 25

Gwen sits in stunned silence as I recount the past few days' events. She listens attentively with wide eyes. When I'm done, she exhales, and I prepare myself for the slew of questions that I know are inevitable.

"So, you and Theo are dating?" she asks.

"We are."

"Doesn't that seem kind of fast?"

"No, not really. I mean, we both know we want to date exclusively, so why wait?"

"And Wyatt?"

"Is not an issue." My tone is dry and determined.

"OK. So, you are dating Theo. You are not talking to Wyatt, who may or may not be stalking you. You had a stranger in your home. Wyatt is blaming Theo for this. Theo is blaming Wyatt for this. Someone wants you to know they have a past, although other than being friends and knowing the same girl in college, they don't have any other deep, dark secrets."

"Not that I know of, no. They both seem confused and angry about what's going on."

"And you didn't sleep with Theo?"

"No. We've agreed to take things slowly."

"And these are the *Days of Our Lives*," she muses. "In the span of a little over a month, you have acquired a dog, a boyfriend, and a stalker. It's actually impressive," she snickers.

Suddenly she gets serious. "Mouse, I'm going to ask you this once. Don't get pissed at me."

"OK," I reply. I was expecting this.

"Is this worth it? I mean, they both seem like decent guys, whole weird history notwithstanding. But this is some fairly intense shit. Would it be easier just to walk away?"

“That’s a fair question. And, yes, it would be. But I can’t. I care for them both.” I finally admit it to Gwen and myself.

She leans forward and places her hand over mine.

“Well, I’m here for you. Anything you need.”

“Thanks, Gwennie. Actually, I could use a distraction. Tell me what’s new with you?”

She sits back in her seat and smiles. “Well, I’ve been talking to someone lately.”

“What? How am I just hearing about this?”

“Well, it’s new, and you have been uncharacteristically busy.”

“True,” I admit. “So, give me the tea.”

“His name is Johnny,” she starts, holding up her hand to stop me from interrupting her. “And before you say anything, yes, it’s a child’s name, and no, I don’t love it.”

I laugh for the first time in two days. “Unless your name is Johnny Depp. He gets a pass.”

“Definitely,” she agrees. “But he’s sweet. I met him at the gym.”

“What’s he do?”

“He’s an architect.”

“Oh wow. What’s he look like?”

“He’s about six feet tall, with dirty blonde hair, and dark brown eyes. He has kind of a surfer guy look. His body is ah-maz-ing.”

“Nice,” I tell her.

“So, have you gone out?”

“No, we’ve just worked out together so far, but if he doesn’t ask soon, I will.”

“This is exciting, Gwennie. Maybe we can go on a double date?”

“That would be awesome. It’s been years since we did that. I don’t wanna scare him off with this whole soap opera you’re living, though, so let’s give it a minute.”

I laugh and drop my head onto the table, the cold glass numbing the pounding in my head. Gwen rubs the back of my head.

“It’s going to be OK, Sweetie. When do I get to meet Theo?”

“He left unexpectedly for a work trip this morning, but definitely when he gets back.”

“Want me to come over tonight?”

“Actually, I’m going to go by the grocery store and then just go home and relax. A nice evening in sounds perfect.”

“Well, I’m just a phone call away,” she reassures me.

I’m at the grocery store a few minutes later deciding what to make for dinner when I hear my name. I turn toward the sound and see Wyatt, standing there in the produce section looking like a damn romance cover model.

As pretty as he is to look at, I don’t have the energy for this right now. I march straight up to him, primed to let him have it.

“It’s not OK for you to follow me around, Wyatt. In fact, it’s creepy.”

“I don’t give a shit,” he shrugs nonchalantly.

“I’m serious. Knock it off. You. Didn’t. Want. Me. I’m dating someone else and you need to respect that.”

“You can date anyone you want, Millie.”

“How kind of you.”

“Except Theo,” he adds matter of factly.

“Jesus Christ, Wyatt. HOW DARE YOU?! You can’t tell me who to date.”

“Have you noticed anything odd about him, yet?”

“OK fine, I’ll play your dumb game. Odd, how?”

“You tell me.” When he doesn’t answer, I start to walk away but stop when he starts talking again.

“Does he disappear often?”

“Well, he works out of town, so yes, that does tend to occur.”

“Is that where he is right now?”

“That’s none of your business!” I am so mad that I leave my basket right there near the cantaloupes and march out of the store with Wyatt hot on my heels.

“Millie, wait,” he calls.

I turn and stand my ground. “What do you want?”

“I want you to be safe.”

“I am safe,” I start. “Unless there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

He stares at me but doesn’t say a word.

“That’s what I thought.” I turn back around to leave.

“Wait,” he says, grabbing my elbow and spinning me around. “Did you get your window fixed?”

I sigh. “Yes, I got it fixed.”

He pauses for a moment, satisfied with that answer. I notice he doesn’t ask if Theo fixed it. Consequently, he didn’t. But he did call someone and watched attentively the entire time the guy was there fixing it. He also paid for it, despite my protests.

“How’s Milo?” he asks. I can’t criticize him for asking that question. My dog is a badass. “He’s good,” I say sincerely.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Can I stop you?” I quip.

He smiles at that.

“Do you know any self-defense?”

“I know how to hurt someone with my quick wit and sarcasm.”

Wyatt chuckles and it’s possibly the warmest feeling I’ve had in days, which is concerning.

“That is the truest damn statement I have ever heard,” he says. “Would you consider letting me teach you a few things?”

I cock an eyebrow at him, insinuating he may have another motive.

As if reading my mind he holds his hands up. “Purely platonic. I promise. Please, do this for me. I will sleep better knowing you have a few self-defense skills.”

I ponder it for a minute. I should say no.

Theo won’t be happy. But I am a woman, living alone, in a city where there might be a serial killer and there is definitely a weird, picture-leaving creeper.

“OK, yes.”

Wyatt visibly relaxes. “Can you meet me tomorrow morning at the gym on Del Rio Road?”

“I can,” I say.

“Thank you, Millie,” Wyatt says.

He seems relieved and grateful that I am allowing him to do this. It’s almost as if he feels responsible for this whole thing, which is ridiculous. Still, I humor him.

“You’re welcome, Wyatt. I will see you tomorrow.” I start to walk toward my car.

“What about your dinner?” he calls.

“I will see you tomorrow,” I repeat without looking back.

He watches me get into my car and drive off. It doesn't even matter that I didn't end up getting any groceries because my appetite is now nonexistent.



I watch them fight in the parking lot of the grocery store like a couple of junior high school students.

A person would have to be blind not to see the connection between these two. They look at each other with stars in their eyes. I am transfixed by the scene unfolding in front of me. I cannot hear anything from my truck parked on the curb, but I can see Millie is clearly irritated, her small arms flying all over the place as Wyatt just watches with his hands in his pockets, like a lost little puppy. He is so far gone for this girl.

I drop my head back onto the seat and take a deep breath. A calmness settles over me as I ponder how well this is going. Leaving that picture in her house was a fucking genius move if I do say so myself. I had to dig through many old boxes to find it, but it was worth it. Everyone is worked up like little bees in a hive. Buzz, buzz, little bees.

I can no longer hear raised voices, so I start to watch them again. Whatever Wyatt has said has calmed Millie down. Her small shoulders are no longer up around her ears and both of their expressions are more relaxed.

This is sickening to watch. They actually think anything they do makes a difference in this life. They think love exists. It is all a fucking illusion. One that I will be more than happy to shatter once the time is right.

I watch as they walk away from one another. I know any minute Wyatt will turn around and watch her walk away and he does. He watches her drive away before getting into his car. Knight in fucking shining armor, this guy. He thinks he feels guilty about what happened in college, but he will never recover from this one. I cannot wait. Buzz, buzz.

Chapter 26

I show up to the gym in my cutest workout clothes. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but the leggings, sports bra, and hoodie I'm wearing cost more than my car payment. I'm not really one to spend excessively, especially on clothes, but this outfit is perfect for when you want to look good, but not look like you are trying to look good. I curled my hair this morning and put it in a cute high ponytail. I applied a bit of tinted moisturizer, and a dab of lip gloss, patted my dog on the head, and left the house feeling confident in my decision to meet Wyatt. I don't know why it's important for me to look cute today, but it's girl code.

If someone breaks your heart, you need to make them eat their heart out by looking fabulous. *I don't make the rules.*

Now that I've arrived, I'm a little nervous. I grab my water and walk into the gym. Wyatt is leaning on the front desk talking to a pretty woman behind the counter and she's laughing at something he said. I feel the heat of jealousy rise from the pit of my stomach until it's spread throughout my body like poison. I'm not a jealous person, so the feeling is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Not to mention unwarranted since *he's not mine*. Nevertheless, they're there.

My first instinct is to turn around and walk out, which is completely ridiculous. I have a boyfriend. Wyatt is nothing more than an annoying "friend." But it's still with shaky legs that I approach them, feeling stupid for my body's physical reaction to seeing Wyatt talk to another woman. I step up and they both turn my way. The woman behind the counter flashes me a friendly smile as Wyatt looks me up and down with a sly grin.

"Stacy, this is Millie," he says to the gym goddess. "She is my guest today."

"No problem, Wyatt. Have a good workout," she says, handing us two towels.

I follow Wyatt further into the gym where he leads me into a big, open room that's deserted. There are some mats,

resistance bands, small hand weights, and stability balls in the corner, with mirrors completely covering one wall. We set our towels and water down by the equipment and walk to the center of the room, facing one another.

“Teach me your ways, Master Yoda,” I joke. It’s fairly obvious that I use humor as a defense mechanism in uncomfortable situations.

Wyatt quells my nerves with his beautiful smile and reassuring words. “I’m so glad we are doing this.”

“Me, too,” I reply. “Let me know if I need to take it easy on you.”

“Oh, I will,” he says with a laugh. “Let’s start by stretching. I haven’t been working out much lately so I’m a little tight.” He is definitely looking nice and tight from where I’m standing. I can’t help but let my eyes ransack his body and remember the way it felt against my own. I gaze at his lips and his hands and recall the way they made me feel. *I need to snap out of this lust-filled haze.*

“Do you usually work out here?” I ask, redirecting my thoughts.

“It can be difficult with my job, but I try to. If I can’t get to the gym then I run and at least do push-ups and sit-ups.”

I look him over as he dips into a runner’s stretch. He’s wearing black, loose, cotton gym shorts and a tank top cut wide and low on the sides, showcasing his amazing obliques. I try to look away before he catches me but it’s so difficult to tear my gaze away.

“Uh, Millie?” he smiles, interrupting my ogling.

I drop down in my stretch and change the subject quickly to hide my embarrassment.

“Any news on the picture left in my house?” I ask.

“No, there were no prints. I didn’t expect there to be.”

“Who do you think this is, Wyatt? Please be honest with me.”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” he admits.

We both stand to finish stretching.

“I asked Theo, but he didn’t remember. So I will ask you. Do you remember the night the picture was taken?”

“I think it was junior year. We used to go to this one bar a lot. I recognize it in the picture.”

“I wonder why Theo didn’t remember,” I question.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” he shrugs. “He used to party a lot in those days.”

“How about you?” I ask.

“I did my fair share,” he says honestly. “I’m not an angel, Millie. I enjoyed my late teens and early twenties a lot. I partied with my friends and I hooked up with a lot of women.”

Oh, great, jealousy has re-entered the chat.

“But I am not that guy anymore. I haven’t been in a long, long time.” He pauses, choosing his next words carefully. “Theo just seemed to take things to the extreme. He has always been like that. It actually amazed me that he was able to keep up with classes. He has always been too smart for his own good.”

“Huh?” I say. “Sounds like you actually respect him.”

“I used to respect him,” he corrects. “But I’m not even sure who he really is. I don’t think I ever really knew him.”

I can feel myself getting irritated with the conversation. I didn’t come here to get warned off from Theo, for the hundredth time.

“I’m sorry I brought it up. I don’t want to talk about him, OK?”

He nods in understanding.

“Do you know how to use a gun?” he asks, changing the subject.

“The only thing I shoot with is a camera.”

“We should probably go to the shooting range at some point,” he says more to himself than me.

“I have no problem with that,” I reply, “but since I don’t own a gun, is it really necessary?”

“Here’s the thing. Someone with a gun could attack you. If you are able to get it from them, you can use it on them. But only if you know what you’re doing,” he adds.

“Right,” I nod. “What else?”

“Turn around,” he directs. I do as he says and turn around. I wait for another direction before I look over my shoulder at him, standing about three feet behind me, unmoving.

“I said turn around.”

His voice is strong and assertive, and my body melts into the words, obeying his command.

He steps up behind me and grabs me tightly, one hand around my waist and the other on my throat. I swallow thickly as my pulse races under his thumb. He leans down and whispers in my ear, “What would you do if I came up behind you like this?”

Goosebumps break out over my flesh and I fight the urge to answer what I am really thinking. I push my butt back into his groin in an attempt to gain distance. All I manage to do is grind into him. *Great. Now I’m giving him a lap dance.*

“No,” he says, still holding my throat.

“That might be your instinct but it’s not going to work. If someone can put pressure on your carotid artery, here,” he says as he strokes his thumb over the tender spot, “they can render you unconscious in less than thirteen seconds.”

I close my eyes and try to focus on his words and block out the heat spreading throughout my body. All I can think about is the last time he touched me and the way he made me feel. Being this close to him is torture. I picture him above me, looking into my eyes as he thrust into me, over and over. I can feel his breath on my neck, commanding me to come on his

cock. *I think agreeing to do this might have been a huge mistake, but I can't walk out now. I have to see it through.*

“Millie, are you listening?” I can't form words so I nod slightly. His smell is all around me. It's intoxicating.

“OK. The first thing you want to do is stay calm. I know that sounds crazy, but you can't think clearly if you're panicking.”

Like I'm panicking right now? I nod in understanding.

“Next, tuck your chin into the crease of my arm and twist your head.” I do my best to follow his directions. “Try to put pressure right here at the highest point of my thumb.”

He places my hand on his own, showing me exactly where he wants it.

“You can also try to inflict damage by gouging the eyes or biting down hard on your attacker's arm.”

“Shouldn't I try to stomp on your foot?” I ask, having seen that in movies.

“No. It can cause you to lose your balance and end up on the ground. That puts you at an even bigger disadvantage.” He steps away and my body immediately feels the loss.

“Let's practice.”

He comes back behind me and I practice what I have learned. After a few minutes, I'm getting better at maneuvering around and I'm focused more on learning what Wyatt is teaching me and less on remembering our night together.

“Good. Let's try from the front.” He shows me what to do if the attack comes from the front and then tells me where the best spots are to hit or stab if I manage to obtain a sharp object, and after several minutes of practicing, we are both sweaty and breathing heavily.

“Let's get some water. Then we will do some grappling on the floor.”

My expensive workout clothes are stuck to my body. I no longer look like the cute, Lululemon-clad girl with the bouncy high ponytail who walked in here. I'm pasty, covered in sweat, and my ponytail is low and slicked to my face. Let's be honest. I look more like one of the founding fathers than a hot girl at the gym.

"Let's go, Millie."

"Sir. Yes, Sir," I shout. Wyatt laughs and points down at the ground.

"Lay down on your back." I do as he says, once again, because apparently, the dominant version of Wyatt is like gasoline to my libido.

He stands over me, one foot near each of my hips, and then lowers to straddle me, holding his weight off my stomach.

"Are you kidding me right now, Hudson?"

"I am not kidding you," he says seriously. "If someone gets on top of you, you need to know how to use their weight against them." He lifts my arms over my head and stares down at me. I lick my lips and stare into his eyes.

Finally, he breaks the silence. "Fight me." *Did he say fight me or fuck me?* I'm hallucinating.

"I'm too tired," I joke. "You can just put me out of my misery."

"This is serious," he says. "We are not leaving until you learn this."

"Uuuugh, fine." I half-heartedly try to snake my way out from underneath him. When I don't get too far with that technique, I arch my back and attempt to bridge underneath him.

"Good. That's a good girl," he praises, and I flush as I'm reminded of the last time he said that to me. The embarrassment over how my body is reacting to him fuels me to fight him harder.

He teaches me things called side control, arm bar, and guard. I'm not a jiu-jitsu expert, but I'm learning some helpful stuff. I'm feeling stronger and more confident as we keep practicing. It doesn't escape my attention that we have been tangled up like a pretzel for the better part of an hour.

Afterward, we sit on the floor, wiping the sweat off our bodies and drinking water.

"You did well."

"You are nothing if not thorough," I joke.

I see a smirk play on his lips before he gets more serious.

"I will not take any chances when it comes to you, Millie. Your safety is all that matters to me," Wyatt doesn't break eye contact when he says this.

I'm not sure if it's the sweat drying on my skin or his words, but chills break out.



Later that evening, I get a text from Theo.

Theo: Are you free to talk?

My initial emotion upon seeing his text isn't elation or even excitement. It's guilt. I spent time with Wyatt today; sexy, sweaty time, and although no boundaries were crossed, I know Theo won't be happy about it. I wouldn't want him to spend time wrestling around on the ground with a woman he's attracted to, either, so I owe him an explanation.

Millie: I am.

My phone rings a few seconds later.

"Hi!" I exclaim.

"Hey." His tone is somber.

"How are you?" I say cheerily.

"I'm fine, Millie. How are *you*?" There's an edge to Theo's voice that I am not used to. I can't tell if it's directed at

me or if he's just had a bad day.

"I'm good," I reply.

"What did you do today?"

"I went to the gym, did some online advertising, and worked on ordering prints. The usual."

"Hhmm," he starts. "I'm curious. Is it part of your usual routine to go to the gym with Wyatt?"

I pause. I'm caught off guard because how can he possibly know that?

"I did go to the gym today with Wyatt, to learn some self-defense. I was freaked out after the break-in, but I realized in hindsight that it was a bad idea and I was going to talk to you about it."

"And when were you going to tell me?" he presses.

"Well, seeing as how this is the first time we've spoken, I guess right now."

"I thought we had established this." I don't appreciate his accusatory tone.

"I know where you stand, Theo. I told you I wouldn't be seeing Wyatt, and I'm not planning on spending copious amounts of time with him. We went to the gym today. To work on some self-defense. That is all."

I can hear him sigh heavily on the other end of the phone. "I'm sorry. I just get worked up when it comes to that guy. I feel like he's going to try to undermine our relationship."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he's a miserable bastard who wants what I have."

My first thought is that he actually passed on what Theo has, which is dating me, but it's probably not smart to bring that up.

“He’s not undermining you, Theo. Like you said, he’s involved in this too, whether we like it or not. As a cop, and a human being, he’s just trying to make sure I’m safe.”

“I understand,” he submits.

Then I remember. He knew where I was today before I told him.

“How did you know I went to the gym with Wyatt today?”

“I miss you,” he says, ignoring my question.

Oh, Hell no. He’s going to answer my question.

“Theo. How did you know I was with Wyatt today?”

“I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

“Stop evading the question. What did you do?”

I hear a long sigh on the other end of the phone. “I put a tracking app on your phone”

I am so mad at this invasion of privacy that I want to reach through the phone and punch him right in his stupid, handsome face.

“When?”

“Millie, I just—”

“When?” I cut him off.

“The night of the break-in when you went to take a bath. I just can’t stand the thought of not being there to protect you.”

I take a calming breath to try to get through this without screaming at him, which is all my body wants to do.

“How do you have my passcode for my phone?” I’m met with silence. “Theo. Answer me.”

“The day I put my number in your phone, I saw you enter your passcode. I wasn’t actively trying to see it, but I did, and I remembered it.”

My temples start to throb. I pinch the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger, trying to delay the impending headache.

“First, I am a grown woman who does not need you to protect me like I’m a child.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Secondly,” I speak louder this time to interrupt whatever he was going to say. “You do not ever invade my privacy like that again. We are a couple. This relationship will be built on love and trust and mutual respect, or there will not be a relationship.”

He’s quiet for a beat, and even though he may not like it, he knows I’m right.

“Of course. I will never do anything like that again,” he promises.

“I like you, Theo, but do you understand this is a deal breaker for me?”

“I do,” he says sadly. “The app is on the last screen on your phone. When the location services are on, I can see where you are. You can delete it right now if you want.”

“I will do it after we get off the phone. How did you know Wyatt was there? Did you put a lo jacking device on him, too?” It’s an attempt to diffuse my anger and lighten the mood. It doesn’t work.

“No. Of course not. I know he works out at that gym. It was a lucky guess.” I can’t believe I’m hearing this right now. I feel angry and betrayed, and if I stay on the phone any longer, I may say something I will regret.

“Theo, I need a break from this conversation right now. Can I call you back later?”

“Yes,” he says softly. “I’m sorry again. Call me later.”

“Goodbye,” I respond curtly, then hang up the phone and look down at Milo, sleeping on my lap.

“You’re lucky you’re a dog, Dude. Your life is a cakewalk.”

He looks up for a moment, disinterested, yawns, and goes back to sleep.

I swipe my thumb across my phone until I get to my last screen. I see the app and immediately delete it, with a sigh. I’m tired, both physically and emotionally, but I force myself to get up and make some pasta for dinner.

I’m a pretty decent cook, but I’ve always hated preparing meals for one person. Cooking does help me think, though, and I need that right now. I gather my onions and garlic and begin chopping, thinking about this whole strange day, from the feelings I was experiencing while rolling around with Wyatt to the anger I’m feeling toward Theo right now. He really crossed a line. I understand why he did it, but it still wasn’t OK. I blame my Libra birth sign, but I tend to be able to see both sides of an argument. It’s both a blessing and a curse. I think it makes me more open to why other people act the way they do, but Gwen says it can make me a pushover because I’m always looking for the best in people, even when they show me the opposite. As I sauté

my garlic and onions I think about how she might be right. Even with my photography, I prefer to use the light to my advantage, to play off the angles and curves of my subjects, enhancing the clarity and emotion of the final product.

I once received an inquiry to do a dark photo shoot for a couple who love Halloween. They wanted black leather, chains, and fake blood. As an artist, I could completely understand the vision, but I also knew I wasn’t the best photographer for the project, so I referred them to my friend, Gage, who likes a darker vibe.

I just prefer to look through life with more light, I guess. Gwen is right, though. I need to make sure that optimism doesn’t come back to haunt me.

Once I’ve added my stewed tomatoes and spices and married the sauce, I decide I’m not even that hungry. I leave it

on the counter to cool off and take a much-needed bath to clear my head.

About two hours later, I call Theo.

“Hello?”

“I miss you, too,” I say, skipping the greeting. “When will you be home?”

“Saturday,” he replies. I can hear the relief in his voice that I called him back.

For someone so beautiful, intelligent, and funny, I’ve learned that Theo needs reassurance. I understand, especially since we aren’t physically in the same place right now.

It’s only Wednesday. I’ve barely been in a relationship for two weeks, and it’s already hard. I try to change the subject to something lighter.

“So, my best friend Gwen met a guy, and we were thinking we should go on a double date.”

“Awesome,” he says, jumping at the chance to change the subject. “What’s his name?”

“Johnny.”

“Cool, cool, cool. I assume she asked his mom for permission to go out with her since he sounds like he’s twelve.” I bellow. I like this version of Theo very much.

“Yeah, she’s not exactly loving his name either. Maybe we can give him a cool nickname, like Rex?”

Theo busts up laughing.

“Rex?” he repeats. “Is that a cool nickname?”

“I don’t know,” I giggle. “Better than Johnny.”

After that, our conversation is much more relaxed as we talk about the next few days and make plans to see one another on Saturday.

“I really do miss you, Millie,” he says.

“Me, too, Theo. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

I hang up feeling better and ready to go to sleep with the hope of tomorrow bringing a better day, but before I fall asleep I text Gwen.

Millie: So, interesting new development

Gwen: Did McDonald's bring the McRib back, because that shit was gross. But maybe we should get one anyway?

She's not lying. As much as I wanted to like those little ambiguous meat sandwiches, I just couldn't.

Millie: No, not that. Well, maybe that? I have no idea. But this is about Theo.

Gwen: Good development or bad development?

Millie: I'm not sure. Can we chat tomorrow sometime? I'm too tired to get into it tonight.

Gwen: Of course. Coffee in the morning. I'll text you after I leave the gym. I have some updates about Johnny!

Millie: Can't wait to hear about it! ♥

Chapter 27

The next morning, I meet Gwen for lunch at La Casita after her gym session. She looks much better than I did after my workout with Wyatt. But Gwen always looks good.

As soon as I walk in and see her, I embrace her in a hug, my face pressed to that comforting bosom of hers. I feel tears well in my eyes. I don't want to cry, but I'm just feeling so emotional lately. Maybe I'm getting my period or something.

"Hi, Mouse," she says, as she wraps her arms around me. "You just take comfort there, like so many before you," she deadpans.

I take a step back and laugh. "You know I find your boobs comforting?" I ask.

"Everyone does," she shrugs.

I sweep my middle fingers under my eyes to catch the few tears shed, just as the hostess tells us our seats are ready.

We sit down, and she brings us a massive bowl of chips and salsa. I am in heaven. This is precisely what I needed today. I dip a chip in medium-heat salsa and bring it to my mouth. The saltiness and acidity hit the front of my tongue, and the slow heat from the peppers settles in the back of my mouth.

"So," she starts. "What's going on?"

"I don't even know, Gwennie. I'm confused."

"About what, Sweetie?"

"So, you know how earlier this week Theo went out of town?"

"Uh-huh," she says, popping a chip in her mouth.

"It was just bad timing, right after the break-in and all."

"Right," she nods, listening intently.

“So, I ran into Wyatt at the grocery store. Well, ran into is probably not the right description. He followed me there.”

Gwen’s eyebrows draw together and she’s about to say something, but she recovers and restrains herself. Our server comes to our table to take our order. A gangly man with a crop of disheveled ginger hair and equally red smattering of jaw acne smiles awkwardly knowing he just interrupted our conversation. Gwen smiles coyly at “Steve” with her patented ‘all is forgiven’ smile and Steve becomes even more flustered. Steve takes our lunch order, and both Gwen and I smile cheerfully at him as we hand him back our menus. Our smiles disappear the minute Steve turns his back on our booth.

“I know,” I admit. “He shouldn’t have been following me. It’s creepy and weird. I yelled at him.”

“That’s actually not what I was going to say,” she says. “I mean, yes, those things are true, but it’s kind of romantic if you think about it,” she says with a shrug of her shoulders.

I’m so shocked by her assessment of this situation that my jaw falls open.

“What?” I ask.

“I just mean that he can’t have you for some mysterious reason, but he’s staying close and watching over you. He’s showing you how much he cares about you the only way he can right now.” She shrugs. “It’s kind of romantic.”

“Wow! Just wow. I did not see that coming,” I say, sitting back in my seat.

“Do you disagree?” she asks.

“No, there’s an element of truth there. It probably doesn’t speak too highly of me, but I like his devotion to keeping me safe.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” she states. “So what happened after you yelled at him?”

“He asked me if he could teach me some self-defense. He said it would make him feel better if I knew how to protect myself.”

“OK,” she nods.

“So we spent some time at the gym. It was beautiful, grueling torture. We wrestled, we fought, and at one point, we were basically in the 69 position.”

“Now that’s a workout,” she jokes.

“Right?” I laugh. “But it was a great day. I left there feeling amazing. I felt more like myself than I have in a while.”

“So what’s wrong?” she asks.

“Well, I knew I had to tell Theo, which I was not looking forward to, but when he called, he already knew. And he was pissed.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry. Back up. What?”

“Yep. He put an app on my phone to see my location. He knew I was at the gym with Wyatt.”

“Mouse, I know you like to see the best in people, but that is a huge red flag.”

I nod. She’s right, and I know she’s right.

“I agree with you. Normally that would be it. But I know Theo is just freaked out about what’s been going on. It bothers him that he can’t be here to protect me.”

Steve brings our food over and Gwen orders two margaritas. “We need those,” she laughs. I have to agree. Steve smiles and nods in enthusiastic agreement, never taking his eyes off Gwen.

“So, what? You’re giving him another chance?”

“Yes, and I know it’s crazy, but I feel like he deserves it.”

“Well, you know him better, obviously. But please just be careful,” she says. “From what you’ve told me he just seems a little insecure and controlling.” It doesn’t escape my attention that Wyatt has used those same words to describe his behavior.

“I will, Gwennie. I promise.”



All I can think about for the next two days is how badly I messed up with Millie. I almost blew everything. I won. I got the girl, and yet, I still feel like she could be stolen from me at any moment.

Wyatt is a smart guy and he can be there when I'm not. I am sure he loved every minute of teaching my girlfriend "self-defense." He probably had his hands all over her.

My blood boils as I think about it. We've talked twice since our fight on Wednesday night and I can tell she is still upset, even though she denies it. She is a little colder than normal, a little more distant.

I will feel better when I get home and see her in person. I miss Ellie and Emmet, too. Those kids do more to sustain my sanity than just about anyone else. I told Millie I was coming home on Saturday, but I will be done working here late Thursday evening, and I plan to get home on Friday to chat with Wyatt in person.

Chapter 28

“We’ve got the ID on that body from the lake,” a young woman from the lab tells me. I think her name is Carly? Shit, I can’t remember.

I look up from my desk and close the file I was reviewing.

“Thank you,” I say as she smiles at me. It’s a little too friendly, and I’m not interested. I can

still hear my father’s voice in my head. “You don’t shit where you eat, Wyatt.” That was part of my birds and bees talk from my pops. The man definitely doesn’t mince words. I miss my parents. I have been so busy with work that I haven’t kept in touch as I should. I make a mental note to call him as I look back at the piece of paper she handed me. Something in this report does not seem right.

“Hey, wait,” I call to the girl who brought it to me. She turns around.

“Are you sure this is the victim from the lake?”

“Yes, why?”

“It’s our missing person, but this report says she was raped, stabbed, shot, and strangled.”

She looks down at the report.

“Yes. That’s right.” She looks at me with wide eyes, waiting for a follow-up question, but I just shake my head in dismissal.

“OK, thank you.”

I read it again. And again. This does not make sense. I thought for sure this was another victim of the strangler. The age and appearance of the victim fits the preferred victim for this guy. I was counting on the fact that he was getting impatient, so he grabbed her and dumped her quickly. But this was brutally violent. The strangler doesn’t sexually assault his

victims. He has also never stabbed or shot a victim. Overkill is not his style. This murder was disorganized and very angry. I know how smart he is. I have been following this case long enough to know that this could just be his way of throwing us off.

I'm trying to sort out some of the details in my head when my phone alerts me to a message.

Theo: I'm outside. I need to talk to you.

Interesting. I cannot believe he still has my number. Then again, I never deleted his, either.

Wyatt: I'll be out in a minute.

Just because I'm anxious to talk to him doesn't mean that asshole is gonna tell me what to do. I take my time walking outside and spot him standing near the curb.

"You need to stay away from her," he starts, ignoring any sort of socially acceptable greeting.

I ignore his declaration. "Hey, Buddy. What's new?"

He doesn't respond. He looks at me like he wants to murder me in the street, so I continue to press.

"Maybe *you* need to stay away from her," I offer coolly.

"Or what?" Theo laughs. "What do you think you have on me, Wyatt?"

"I have enough."

"You don't have shit. You have some half-assed idea about Sophia," he scoffs. "She left the school voluntarily after getting exactly what she asked for, Man. She was ashamed or some shit."

"No, she wasn't. She was scared."

"Of who, Wyatt? Of me? Or you? It seems to me that you were the last one to speak to her before her disappearance. What did you say to her?"

"Fuck you, Theo. You know I did not do anything to that girl." I'm starting to get pissed now.

“Nothing, huh? What about trying to take her from me? What about what you’re doing now?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I haven’t seen you in years. You never mentioned wanting to become a cop in all of the time we knew each other in college. How did you go from wanting a career in politics to settling for being a small-time detective?”

“There is a lot you don’t know about me. Just because you haven’t seen me, doesn’t mean I haven’t been around.”

“Well, here is something I do know. You knew my family lived here. We spent time here, *together*, you and I. You knew I wanted to move back. And this is where you choose to get a job in law enforcement? It’s fucking creepy, Man.” A bitter chuckle leaves his throat. “Maybe it’s me you are obsessed with?”

I let out a hearty laugh. “You’re right, Theo. I am obsessed with you. I am obsessed with Millie seeing you for the person you are.”

“What about the person you are, you fucking hypocrite? Does Millie know about what a fucking manwhore you were in college? Does she know that you got your dick sucked by a different girl almost every weekend?”

“That was a long time ago. I know your blow job-to-partner ratio makes me look like a Quaker. I’ve grown up in the past few years. Those things are not who I am now.”

“Who are you now, huh? Because you seem like a sad, empty guy with nothing better to do than stalk a girl who doesn’t want you?”

“There you go, Theo, trying to deflect. You always do this. It’s a nice tactic, but it’s not going to fucking work on me anymore. We both know who you are and what you did. I am not going to let you hurt Millie.”

“I would never hurt her,” he argues.

“Did you leave that picture in her home?” I ask.

His answer is immediate and resolute. “No.”

“Have you ever broken into her home?” I continue.

Again, he looks me in the eye and answers immediately.

“No.” He pauses, looking down at the ground before raising his head to meet my eyes.

“I care for her a lot. I have not felt this way about anyone since Sophia.”

I smirk. “You are good, Theo,” I tell him. “I almost believe you.”

“Whatever, Man. I don’t care,” he says, throwing up his hands in defeat. “If you had anything on me, I would be in jail. Just stay out of my way.” He turns and walks toward his Bronco.

I watch him walk away and think about the Theo I knew. He was a good guy, always a little guarded and insecure, but so are most people in their early twenties.

He is right about one thing. We used to be as close as brothers. That is how I know that he is somehow involved in Sophia’s disappearance. He knows more than he is willing to say, but I’m starting to question if he has been involved with the things happening with Millie. He seems to care for her, but then again, he could just be playing me. If he is telling the truth, then there is something bigger going on. That thought scares the shit out of me.

Chapter 29

Theo returns on Saturday, just like he said, and calls me bright and early.

He's already committed to going to watch Emmett's soccer game this morning and he invites me along. It sounds absolutely perfect.

I get myself and Milo ready, and we are already waiting outside when Theo pulls up.

He gets out of the car and rushes toward me, scooping me up in a hug that has me squealing and my feet dangling in the air. The beautiful smile he graces me with has my heart melting just a little right before he leans down to kiss me. His scent invades my senses, warm and familiar, and his lips feel welcoming against my own, soft and firm. His teeth sink into my lower lip, causing me to open for him, and he wastes no time dipping his tongue into my mouth, deepening the kiss. It's like he's showing me how much he missed me. I pour myself into it, grateful that we agreed to put our fight behind us. It's still in the back of my mind, but I'm doing my best to give him the benefit of the doubt.

After pulling back and giving me his patented grin, he sets me down and rubs Milo's head. For some reason, Milo is wholly indifferent to Theo. It's like he can't be bothered by his presence. *My dog is a snob. Who knew?*

Despite his surly attitude, he gets in the back of the Bronco, and Theo opens my door for me. Sitting down, I notice a cup of coffee waiting for me, and he has turned on the seat heater. I take a sip and realize it's one of my favorites.

It's those little things that I like about Theo. He's always so thoughtful. I take another sip and sit back in my heated seat.

"Thank you for this," I say as I hold up my coffee.

"Of course," he says. "I need my girl caffeinated to watch 8-year-olds play soccer."

“That bad, huh?” I question.

“It’s brutal,” he grins. “Like herding cats.” He grabs my hand and holds it in my lap. Why is it so sexy to watch men drive with one arm? *I think I have a driving kink.*

“So, how was the rest of your week?” I ask.

“Not bad. I had to work on locking in a contract with some long-time clients.”

“I don’t think I would do well in sales,” I muse. “I’m not persuasive enough.”

He looks at me quickly with a side eye and squeezes my knee. “You are plenty persuasive.”

He pauses for a second. “Besides, as someone who works for herself, you are in sales. You have to advertise your product and sell it constantly.”

“Hmm. That’s true. You and my best friend, Gwen, are more natural at it, though.”

“Maybe,” he says with a smile, and I catch a small dimple on his right cheek. I reach over and put my finger on it. “That. That is why you are good at sales,” I tease.

“My face doesn’t really help me with these oil guys, unfortunately. They’re a bunch of salty assholes.”

“Well, your face works for me,” I tell him, smiling. “Oh, I talked to Gwen the other day and she is down for the double date idea.”

“With Knox?”

“No, it’s Rex.” We both laugh at our dumb inside joke.

“Sounds good. I’m here for at least two weeks.” He brings our joined hands to his lips and kisses my knuckles before settling them back in my lap. We are finally starting to feel like a real couple.

Once we arrive at the park, I can see what Theo meant. There are kids everywhere. No one seems to be listening and it’s utter chaos. They look less like soccer players and more like small, drunken pirates.

I go back and grab Milo, making sure his leash is tight. It looks like there are about four different games going on concurrently.

“Look for the royal blue team,” Theo tells me. “They are the Blue Lightning,” he says with a chuckle.

“Oh, over there!” I point out.

We make our way over to where some of the parents have set up their chairs. We stop periodically for kids and parents to fawn over Milo along the way. He is gracious with his adoring fans.

Theo walks over and hugs Sarah and Jeff, and reintroduces us.

“Hi, Millie. It’s so good to see you again,” Sarah gushes, as she gives me a big hug.

“I was so excited when Theo told me you were coming today.”

“Thanks for playing it cool, Sis,” Theo responds.

There’s clearly so much love between these two. It makes me feel so happy to see families who are close.

“So how does this work?” I ask.

Jeff answers, “We are playing the yellow team.”

“The Hungry Hornets, Babe,” Sarah corrects him.

“Forgive me.” He laughs. “They will start the game and every player on the field, including the goalies, will run toward the ball and become one large super team. The coaches will yell ‘no bunching’. It will be chaos. Every once in a while you get an athletic kid who can handle the ball, but it’s usually a mosh pit.”

I chuckle lightly. I can’t wait to see this unfold.

“By the way,” Theo adds, “that one kid with some athletic prowess is not Emmet.” Both he and Jeff laugh while Sarah swats at her brother playfully.

“Where’s Ellie?” I ask.

“She’s at a friend’s house. She just makes these things more stressful,” Jeff adds.

We watch the game and it was every bit as entertaining as promised. I stand with Milo on his leash to my right and hold Theo’s hand with my left. The game ends in a 1-1 tie. How anyone scored, I have no idea.

Afterward, we drop Milo off at home and then we all head to a pizza parlor for a late lunch.

“What do you like on your pizza?” Theo asks.

I answer confidently because I’ve found the answer to this question can cause normally level-headed people to lose their damn minds.

“Canadian bacon and pineapple.” I stare at him, gauging his reaction. I notice a twitch in the outer corner of his right eye, but otherwise, he has no other tell to indicate his disgust.

“What do you like?” I ask.

“Pepperoni, of course,” he says, as if it’s the only possible answer. “How about half and half?”

“Perfect!” I exclaim, happy with our compromise.

We all start eating and laugh while Emmet regales the group with tales of his soccer prowess.

It’s been a great day, but when Theo drops me off at home later, I’m feeling pretty tired.

“I’m kind of beat,” I yawn. “You can come in but I may fall asleep on you.”

“Me, too. How about we take a nap?” he proposes.

“That sounds heavenly,” I reply, leaning over the console and kissing his full lips.

So that is exactly what we do. We snuggle up on the couch next to the warm fire, our bellies full of pizza and Pepsi, pull a big blanket over ourselves, and fall asleep for two hours.

I wake up to a hot, heavy, foul-smelling breath on my face. I scrunch my nose up and squint at the big brown eyes greeting me in anticipation.

“Milo, Dude, that is not good,” I tell him. I look at the clock and realize it’s after 5:00.

He’s hungry and probably needs to go outside. I try to unwind Theo’s arms from my waist without waking him, but he stirs and hauls me back to him. I lean down and kiss his cheek.

“Sleep, Babe. I’m going to take Milo outside.” He grumbles something and falls back asleep.

I grab my shoes, and Milo and I head outside for a quick walk around the block.

We don’t have distinct seasons here in Sierra Falls, but a few trees turn orange and then lose their leaves, indicating we are heading into winter. There is a chill in the air. That is the first excuse I think of when my skin breaks in response to the chills I’m experiencing, but it doesn’t go away when we increase our speed, and I pull my jacket tighter.

Suddenly, Milo stops and abruptly turns around, a low growl erupting from his chest. I turn 360 degrees and don’t see anything, but parked cars. I definitely *feel* something, though.

Someone is watching me. I know it.

“Wyatt?” I yell. “Are you following me again? Wyatt?” I call again.

He doesn’t step out of the late-day shadows to put my mind at ease, and I know deep down, it’s not him. Wyatt might watch me, but he never tries to scare me.

Milo is tugging on his leash and barking now. I refuse to be that dumb girl who goes to investigate something strange when every part of my body is telling me I shouldn’t. Instead, we speed up and finish our walk around the block, with me looking over my shoulder every few seconds.

I decide I’m not going to say anything to Theo when I get home. The more I’ve thought about it, the more I’ve

convinced myself that I'm just being paranoid. As for Milo, he has a beef with every squirrel in the neighborhood, so that's probably all it was.

I find Theo standing in front of my open refrigerator, one arm holding him up as he leans into it. At some point while I was gone, he decided to take his shirt off. I'm definitely not mad about it. He shuts the door and looks at me looking like he's in trouble.

"I was hungry," he says sheepishly, as he scratches his six-pack abs. "And sweaty." He looks completely adorable. I walk up and envelop him in a hug, feeling his strong heartbeat against my cheek.

"I don't have much, but I can make us some grilled cheese sandwiches and soup," I offer.

"I love grilled cheese!" he exclaims. So, we make dinner together and eat in the dining room, talking and laughing about nothing in particular.

By the time we've cleaned up, it's getting late. I don't know if I should invite him to spend the night or not. I'm not ready to take this further yet but I love his company and snuggling with him.

"Do you want to spend the night?" I ask hopefully.

"I should actually head home tonight," he says. "I haven't been to my apartment in a while and I have a few things to do. I could also really use a shower."

I'm disappointed but I do my best to hide it.

"I will call you tomorrow," he says as he stands and walks toward the door. I walk with him, holding hands until we get there, but before he steps through the door, he turns and shoves me against the wall, dipping his head to kiss me. It starts innocently enough but quickly heats up.

I return his kiss with the same intensity he is pouring into it. He takes hold of both my hands and pins them over my head, then his lips leave my mouth to trail kisses down my neck. I moan as I give him better access.

He stops and whispers in my ear, “I know we are taking this slow, but once I fuck you, I won’t be able to stop.”

Then he places a chaste kiss on my lips, gives me one more heated gaze, and then walks out the door.

I stand there, stunned and turned on beyond words. *That was new.* I punch in my alarm code and then make it over to the couch, where I fall onto it with a thump and try to settle my beating heart.

Chapter 30

I've spent the better part of the past two weeks with Theo. Whenever I'm not shooting a fall-themed photo shoot, we are together.

With sex off the table, we are forced to talk and get to know one another. It's refreshing.

I have learned that he hasn't had a serious relationship since college. He didn't offer specifics, but I gather whatever relationship caused his rift with Wyatt is the one that really messed him up. I know that's where a lot of his hostility comes from. He never got any closure with her, and that has to be difficult.

I've also learned some small stuff. He prefers strawberry flavor to vanilla. He loves history and documentaries. He's hungry all of the time. He enjoys taking naps with me as much as going for walks with me and Milo. He's funny and sweet and sensitive. He's good with numbers and good with his hands. We've had some pretty intense make-out sessions and while we haven't ventured past second base, he's learned his way around my boobs like a pro.

Last week we went to a pumpkin patch with the kids, ate apple cider donuts, and carved pumpkins. We spent Halloween together, making chili and cornbread, handing out candy to cute little ghosts and goblins, and snuggling up on the couch watching slasher flicks.

I've quickly found a groove with him, and he makes me happy.

I have thought about Wyatt occasionally, but he crosses my mind less and less often. I haven't seen him around or heard from him since our day at the gym. I also haven't felt like I was being watched since the day Theo got back. He does have to go out of town tomorrow, which bums me out, but I have a few shoots booked next week and plenty to keep me busy.

The past two days I wasn't feeling well and Theo was amazing about taking care of me. He brought me soup and ginger ale to settle my stomach. I would fall asleep on the couch and wake up to find him working quietly on his laptop, at the ready in case I needed anything.

I'm feeling better today, thankfully, because we are meeting Gwen and her new guy tonight for dinner. I'm actually kind of excited about our double date. Theo left earlier to go home and start to pack for his trip tomorrow and shower and change.

He picks me up right at 6:00, and we make the short drive to the steakhouse Gwen chose for dinner. We walk in hand and hand and spot Gwen and Johnny already at the table, sitting with their backs toward us.

We round the table and I get my first look at this guy. He's attractive, with dirty blonde hair, and dark brown eyes, and he's tall and built, just as she described. He looks familiar, but I can't quite place him.

He stands idly as we approach and shakes Theo's hand as I hug Gwen.

I introduce Gwen to Theo, and she hugs him and then introduces me to Johnny. Instead of embracing me or giving me a small wave, he briefly looks me up and down. *That's where I know him from! I recognize him from the farmers market. He is the same guy that told me to be careful.* I don't like this guy. Something about the way he looks at me feels sleazy, but no one else seems to notice the interaction, so I push it away for now, debating if I should tell Gwen about our interaction. I quickly decide to hold on to my judgment for now and see how dinner goes.

We order drinks and begin with small talk.

Johnny works for a small firm in town. He and Gwen have been spending time together outside of the gym for about a week now.

"So, how long have you kids been together?" Johnny asks.

“A few weeks,” Theo answers.

“And what do you do again?” he asks Theo.

“I’m in the oil industry,” he says sweetly, because my boyfriend is sweet. “Sales, actually.”

“Seems like kind of a waste of a college degree, isn’t it?” Johnny says condescendingly.

“Johnny!” Gwen chastises. “Don’t be a dick.”

“Sorry, Babe,” he says. “I didn’t mean it like that. Poor choice of words.” He waves his hand dismissively, as if he’s swatting a fly. “I just meant that college is expensive. You must have very understanding parents. That’s all.”

Yep, Johnny is a douche. To Theo’s credit, his eyes narrow in irritation, but he doesn’t take the bait.

“My parents are wonderful,” he says, coolly. “They’ve always supported me. No matter what.”

I squeeze his hand under the table.

“Good for you,” Johnny replies, with an edge to his voice.

“So, Gwen,” Theo asks, trying to salvage this awkward evening, “tell me more about 18-year-old Millie.”

“She was an angel even back then,” she starts.

They begin a side conversation as I wonder how I’m going to tell Gwen that this guy is a loser. I look up and catch him staring at me. His eyes look almost black in this light.

He holds up his beer in silent cheers and then finishes draining the pint. I wonder for a moment if he’s on drugs. His behavior isn’t outright rude, but he’s definitely toeing the line of normal social boundaries.

I focus on Gwen and Theo for the rest of dinner. They seem to be getting along well. Every once in a while, Johnny will lean into her, kiss her cheek or throw an arm around her. There’s no affection there, though. It’s as if she’s a prop on his arm.

As we are finishing up our cappuccinos after dinner, there's a commotion at the front of the restaurant. We see a few police officers rush past the hostess stand, and then Wyatt comes rushing in.

My eyes bug out of my head and my heart starts beating fast. *What's he doing here?* He sees me and heads straight for our table. This is not going to go well.

"Millie. Are you OK?" he asks as he reaches our table.

Theo stands up quickly, nose-to nose with him. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Wyatt pushes him back slightly. "I got a call."

"What do you mean 'you got a call'?"

"Someone called the police station. Said something bad was going to happen at this restaurant and that 'Detective Hudson' would be personally affected. The only person I care about is right here, so I don't know what the fuck is going on."

"Well, as you can see, Millie is fine. She is on a date with her boyfriend," Theo explains.

I place my hand on his arm and speak to him quietly. "It's OK, Theo."

I look at Wyatt, and my heart aches. I had somehow forgotten his intensity and beauty. His eyebrows are pulled together, and his chest is heaving with worry, for me.

"Wyatt, I'm OK. I promise," I tell him. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm not in danger."

He starts to reach for me but pulls himself back and takes a steadying breath. "I don't understand," he shakes his head. I want to hug him and reassure him, but I can't.

"I'm sorry someone scared you," I tell him.

"Well, this just got interesting," Johnny says as he continues to drink another beer, leaning back in his chair like this is fucking dinner theater. He opted not to switch to coffee like the rest of us.

"Who the fuck are you?" Wyatt asks.

“I’m Johnny,” he sneers.

“Well, Johnny,” Wyatt responds. “Shut the fuck up. No one asked you.”

I can’t help but smile. I’ve been trying to hold back all night, and Wyatt shows up and calls this guy out on his bullshit within two minutes.

“Hey,” Johnny says, holding his hands up, “I’m not trying to upset anyone. It’s just obvious that Millie here is fucking both of you.”

Both Wyatt and Theo lunge for Johnny. It’s Wyatt who reaches him first, grabbing him by the shirt.

“Don’t say another word, Fucker.” He throws him back into his seat.

Johnny just laughs, his head lulling to the side, clearly drunk. Wyatt turns to Gwen.

“Hi, Gwen. Nice to see you again,” he says with humor in his tone.

“You, too, Wyatt.” She laughs.

“Can you get this ass hat home OK?” he asks, motioning to Johnny.

“Yeah, I got it,” she tells him.

“Let’s go,” she says sternly to Johnny.

He gets up on shaky legs and starts to follow her but turns on his way out and says, “I hope this all works out for you three.” Then he stumbles after Gwen.

“Well, he’s a charming guy,” Wyatt replies.

“Yeah, he’s definitely a keeper,” I joke.

“Millie is fine, Wyatt. You can leave now,” Theo interjects, putting his arm around me.

Wyatt looks sad for a moment before covering it up. “I am just going to check this place a bit more. See if we can find out who called. You two have a good night.”

Theo hands me my jacket, and we start to walk out, but not before I make eye contact with Wyatt, seeing the devastation in his eyes.

The ride home is quiet after such a strange evening. I'm sure we're both still processing it as we pull up to my house and shuffle to the door.

Theo walks me inside, but the minute we're through the door, he starts walking me backward and then pushes me down onto the couch, hovering over me with a desperation in his eyes that I've never seen before. He leans down and starts kissing me passionately, tilting his hips to grind against me. It's much rougher than our typical make-out sessions. It feels like he's trying to possess me in a way.

He nips at my jaw and neck, licking the sting as he goes, then bites down on the junction between my shoulder and neck and sucks hard, marking my skin.

"Aaahh," I cry out. One of his hands reaches down, cupping me hard over my jeans. My body screams *yes*, while my head tells me *no*, and my heart is somehow in between them both.

We are supposed to take this slowly, but I can tell he needs this tonight, he needs this closeness, and maybe I do, too.

He lifts my shirt and kisses my stomach, moving up to my left breast, he pulls my bra to the side, and begins swirling his tongue over my left nipple as he kneads my right breast. Moving slowly over to the right, he repeats the action as he sucks and bites my nipple, causing me to arch my back into his expert touch.

Sliding down, he presses kisses to my stomach and licks his way across the skin just above my jeans, looking up at me through heavy-lidded, lust-fueled eyes. Holding my gaze, he flicks open my top button.

"Theo," I say breathlessly.

"I know, Baby," he says. "I just need to taste you tonight."

I can't deny him. I need this as much as he does. Biting my lower lip, I watch him as he lowers my zipper and helps me shimmy out of my jeans. He turns me so that I'm partially laying on the couch, and then opens my legs, placing a soft kiss on the wet spot in the center of my panties, before he pulls them slowly down my legs. Settling back between my open legs, he stares at me ravenously with lupine intensity. He slowly spreads me open with his thumbs, and then places a kiss right on my clit, licking down one side and back up the other before returning to the sweet spot.

"You're so fucking perfect," he says, as he continues his slow torture. With every pass, he applies just a bit more pressure, until his mouth is concentrated solely on my clit. He kisses, licks, and sucks in perfect succession, and my hips respond by greedily moving against him. I slide my hands into his hair and hold him in place, grinding harder against his face. With one hand, he reaches up to squeeze a breast, while he slides the middle finger of his other hand inside me and begins pumping slowly. A moment later, he adds another finger and starts pumping harder while he applies even more pressure on my clit with his tongue. My entire body tenses up and then releases as my muscles contract and spasm around his fingers. I writhe and moan, soaking in every feeling. And at that moment, when my mind is clear, and my body is chasing pure bliss, I close my eyes and see Wyatt's face between my legs. I think about Wyatt's hands and Wyatt's tongue, and the high from my orgasm is quickly eclipsed by confusion and guilt.

Theo kisses both my hip bones before laying his head on my stomach. I play with his hair, looking up at the ceiling. It's wrong, and I know it's wrong, but I need to fill the aching void in my chest.

"Theo," I say softly.

"Mmm," he mumbles in a sleepy voice.

"I want you."

He looks up at me with hooded eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I nod. "I'm sure."

His eyes brighten and heat at the same time, like I've just granted him his most coveted wish. He slides up my body, pressing little kisses along the way to my mouth, and then he kisses me softly, letting me taste myself on his lips. A quiet groan rumbles from his chest before he stands up and pulls his shirt off over his head. I gaze up at him, admiring his body. He really is such a beautiful man.

He unbuckles his belt while keeping his sights set on me, then nimbly undoes the button on his jeans and slides down his zipper. Looking at me with lust and love in his eyes, he pushes down his jeans and boxer briefs. His erection springs free and he takes hold of the base, stroking himself up and down slowly.

I'm momentarily mesmerized, but then snap out of it and sit up and take my shirt and bra off, both of us now naked and studying one another with lust-filled eyes. Theo moves between my legs as I lie back on the couch.

I part my legs for him as he pushes my hands above my head, kissing me with more urgency as he grinds against me, the hardness of his cock rubbing against my still-swollen clit, a delicious chirapsia that I need.

He releases one of my hands and lines up his cock against my wetness. With one thrust of his hips, he enters me, filling me completely as my back arches. He kisses me passionately, his tongue exploring my mouth and tangling with my own, as he begins moving. He sets a slow pace at first, holding most of his body weight off of me.

"Touch yourself," he directs.

I do as he says, reaching down to trace my clit as he begins to thrust faster. Then I tilt my hips up off the couch to meet him thrust for thrust, while working myself harder.

I look up at him, so gorgeous and mine, and feel the orgasm cresting.

"Yes, that's it, Baby," he says breathlessly.

I want so badly to give this to him, to both of us, so I close my eyes and focus on the feeling, blocking out the

nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that I'm making love to Theo for the wrong reasons. Soon, my body responds.

My muscles tighten, and I still as the orgasm rips through me. I've barely come down when Theo abruptly pulls out and flips me around so that I'm on all fours on the couch. With one foot on the floor and one knee bent on the couch next to my hips, he slams back into me.

"Fuck!" he groans, as he begins thrusting at a frantic pace. "You feel so good."

He's a lot deeper this way. I close my eyes and take him, trying to savor this moment. He thrusts his hips a few more times and then stills, coming with something between a grunt and a moan. I can feel his cock jerk inside me as he holds me in place by my hips, before leaning over and gently kissing my shoulder. I lay down on the couch, and he falls behind me, nuzzling my neck.

"You mean everything to me, Millie," he says with his face still buried in my hair.

I choke on my words so I just grab his hand, kiss his knuckles, and wrap his arms around me tighter.

The experience was amazing, but somehow, I feel more empty than I did before, even with his warmth at my back. I close my eyes tightly as a single tear falls silently down my cheek.

I clear my throat and start to get up, needing a moment to gather my thoughts. Theo runs his hand down my back.

"Is everything OK?" he asks in a concerned tone.

"Everything is fine," I lie, still turned away from him.

"I'm just going to grab a glass of water and get cleaned up."

"Um, OK," he says. I get the sense that he doesn't believe me, but it's better than him seeing me cry thirty seconds after we finished having sex.

How have I made such a mess of things?

Chapter 31

The next morning after Theo leaves, I call Gwen and we decide to go for a walk on the beach.

When Milo and I arrive, she's standing by the water, looking out over the gray ocean. It's foggy and wet outside. The smell of the ocean, the crashing of the waves, and the squawking of the seagulls awaken my senses. I've been in a haze since last night. I laid there, awake most of the night, trying to make sense of my feelings.

In the end, I fell asleep feeling just as confused as ever.

"Hey!" I yell as we approach.

"Hi, Sweetie," she says softly, kneeling down to pet Milo. She kisses him and stands back up, looking pensive and contrite.

"Before we start our walk, I need to apologize about last night," she starts.

"You don't need to apologize. It wasn't your fault."

"Well, I still feel bad about it. Granted, I haven't known Johnny for long, but I hadn't seen that side of him. I honestly don't know what happened."

"What do you mean?" I ask as we start slowly walking down the beach.

"He wanted to meet you guys. He was excited about it, even, and he was in a great mood up until the moment you reached the table. Then, it's like he just couldn't help himself. He turned into a giant douchebag."

"That would be an accurate assessment, yes," I joke. "You know me, I try to see the good in everyone. But the only good thing about that guy was when he was gone."

I look over at my best friend, who is biting her lip and shaking her head. I decide not to say anything about recognizing Johnny. There's no need at this point.

"I'm sorry, Gwennie. Did you really like him?"

“Oh shit, no. I mean, the sex was good, but he never struck me as my forever guy or anything. I’m more embarrassed than anything else.” Gwen looks down at the sand she is toeing with her Ugg boot.

“Don’t be. It takes a long time to get to know someone,” my voice comes out sounding wistful. I think about what Wyatt said about never really knowing Theo.

“So you slept with him, huh?” I try to keep the squeamishness I feel out of my tone.

“Yes, and it was good. I figured, if nothing else, we could have some fun. That was before he turned into Captain Dickbag at dinner.”

I start giggling at first, but then it turns into a full belly laugh and I have to stop walking because of it.

Gwen starts laughing at how hard I’m laughing and then we’re both doubled over in hysterics and it feels so good. The last 24 hours have been so intense.

“So, what happened after you left the restaurant?” I ask when we’ve both settled down again.

“Well, I took his drunk ass home and told him not to call me again,” she says.

“Good. That guy wasn’t even close to being worthy of you.”

“I know,” she agrees.

“So, that was pretty crazy how Wyatt showed up?” She looks at me sideways to gauge my reaction. “Do you think he made up the thing about the phone call?”

“No,” I shake my head. “Wyatt is an honest person. He wouldn’t make that up. Besides, he’s more of a subtle stalker. He’d just sit in the bar if he wanted to piss me off. For all we know, that phone call wasn’t even about me.”

“True, but either way, he did seem truly upset, Mouse. Anyone with eyes can see how much that man cares about you.”

I stop and look out over the ocean, watching the waves roll in. They seem to be mimicking my emotional state; slowly rolling, unsteady waves with unreliable peaks and crests.

“You OK, Mouse?” Gwen asks sweetly.

“I’m just so confused,” I answer honestly. “I’m committed to Theo, and I care about him. I have loving feelings for him,” I pause, hating to admit what I’m about to say, “but I’m not in love with him.”

She is quiet while I put my thoughts together.

“I slept with him last night.” I wait for her to say something but she just listens quietly, so I continue. “I have this reaction to Wyatt. It’s like my body, my mind, my heart, all of it, spark to life in his presence. I’m trying to let it go. I really am.”

She gently rubs my arm as I continue.

“GAH! It’s just so frustrating. I don’t want to hurt Theo. I keep waiting, you know, for my feelings to intensify, but they aren’t.”

“Are you going to tell Wyatt,” she asks.

“Why bother?” I say in defeat as I throw my hands in the air. “Wyatt isn’t available to me, regardless of our connection.”

I undo Milo’s leash and pick up a stick and toss it in the surf. He runs and grabs it, bringing it back to me. I do this again and again while I try to sort out my feelings.

Gwen allows me this silence, because best friends know that sometimes the best thing you can do is be near someone in solitude, giving them quiet strength to make difficult decisions.

I focus again on the sounds around me and a feeling of calmness settles into my soul.

“I need to stop dating Theo,” I say to myself more than her. “This is not fair to him. He deserves someone who can give him 100% of themselves. I’m not her.”

Gwen holds my hand. “I’m proud of you, Mouse,” she says stoically. “When are you going to talk to him?”

“He’s headed out of town. I won’t do this over the phone. So I’ll talk to him next week.”

“Come on, let’s walk some more,” she urges.

We trudge down the beach and while it helps relax my soul a little, I never lose the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. It only deepens later when I get a text from Wyatt.

Wyatt: I’d like to take you to the gun range this week. Are you available?

Millie: Do you really think I need to?

Wyatt: Yes, I do. Especially considering that weird incident at the restaurant.

I’m at odds with myself, like I usually am when it comes to this man. But I would like to learn a bit more about guns. My grandpa would have wanted me to know the basics. I haven’t spoken to Theo yet, but nothing is going to happen with Wyatt. He’s helping me be safe, I tell myself.

Millie: I have 2 shoots tomorrow. I am free this afternoon though.

Wyatt: Sounds good. I’ll pick you up at 1:00.

Millie: See you soon!

Wyatt knocks on the door and Milo goes absolutely crazy. My dog has no chill.

I open the door and usher him inside, noticing he is holding something behind his back. For the briefest moment I think he brought me flowers until he pulls out a large rawhide bone and offers it to Milo. I internally roll my eyes at my stupidity.

“You don’t have to buy his affections, you know. He loves you already,” I tell him.

“He’s a good boy,” he says, as he proceeds to wrestle the bone out of Milo’s mouth. I watch them roll around on the floor for five minutes before putting a stop to the lovefest.

“Are we actually leaving anytime today, Wyatt?”

He jumps up and tries to wipe the dog hair off his jeans. “Yep. Let’s roll,” he says. He’s driving a different car today. It looks like some sort of unmarked squad car.

“Where’s the Mustang?” I ask.

“She’s at the station. It’s easier to put boxes of ammo and stuff in this one.”

“She?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. She,” he responds. “I helped rebuild that car with my dad and his buddy about 10 years ago. She is special.”

“I get that,” I say. “My grandpa actually really liked learning about guns. He loved to read about the history of guns and rifles. He’d be proud of me today.”

“That is really cool,” he exclaims. We drive for about ten minutes until we get to a fence just outside of our own small airport.

“This is a gun range?” I ask. Wyatt punches some numbers into the keypad and the gate starts to open.

“This is one we use to practice. Expecting something fancier?” he questions.

“Expecting something indoors,” I reply and Wyatt chuckles.

He parks, and we get out of the car and head to the trunk. He opens it and pulls out some fancy earmuffs, a box full of bullets, and a shiny black gun.

“This is a gun,” he begins, and I roll my eyes. He chooses to ignore it and continues. “Specifically, a Glock 17. It’s a 9mm. It should be easy for you to shoot, but there’s no traditional safety on this gun, so you have to be very careful.”

I make a move to grab it, and the man flicks me in the forehead.

“Ouch, you dick,” I exclaim.

“You aren’t allowed to touch this weapon until we go over the rules,” he says seriously.

“OK, but after we go over the rules, I may choose to use it on you,” I say as I rub my forehead.

“Fair enough,” he responds.

“Rule number 1- All guns are always loaded. No exceptions. That is how you will treat any weapon you are around.”

I nod in understanding.

“Rule number 2- Never point the muzzle at anything you’re not willing to destroy.” He points to the muzzle to make sure I understand what he’s saying.

“Rule number 3 - Your finger sits straight until your sights are on the target and you’ve made a conscious decision to shoot.”

“They don’t do that in the movies,” I offer sarcastically.

“Millie, I swear to Go....”

“I’m just kidding. Geez. I get it. Keep going.”

The vein in his temple is threatening to explode. It’s nice to know I have the same infuriating effect on him that he has on me.

“Rule number 4 - Line of sight. Line of target. That means that you need to be aware of what is behind your target. You are responsible for everything you hit.”

“I understand.”

“These are noise-canceling,” he says as he shows me the headphone/earmuff things. “You can turn them on and still hear people talking but it will mute the sound of the weapon firing.”

He grabs a pair and places them over my ears. He smiles at me and says something.

“What?” I yell. He reaches over and turns a black knob underneath the left ear and says,

“Now you can hear me.”

“I can,” I yell excitedly.

“Stay here while I go set up the target,” he tells me. He carefully sets the gun in the trunk of the car and grabs a big cardboard target with the outline of a man on it. He walks over to an area where he can hang the target. There’s nothing around, just a big dirt hill behind it. When he returns, he smiles at me and says, “Follow me.”

We walk up to an area about ten yards from the target. My shoes make a tinging sound every time I take a step and kick bullet shells of all sizes out of the way.

“Are you right-eye dominant or left-eye dominant?” He asks.

“Right eye,” I respond excitedly. I actually know the answer to this question since I’m always looking through the lens of my camera.

“OK, this is what I want you to do,” Wyatt says, as he starts to show me how to stand and hold the gun. He shows me how to use the sights, if I need to do that, but encourages me to keep both eyes open, if I can.

“Stand behind me,” he directs. Then he takes his stance and shoots the target three times quickly, unloading directly into the chest two times and once in the head. It might be the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. Watching him be so capable and confident makes my whole body tingle.

“Now, I want you to try it,” he says. “When you squeeze the trigger, I want the pad of your index finger on the trigger and squeeze consistently until you feel it fire. It will have a bit of a kick. It’s going to surprise you.”

“Should I aim for the target?”

“Yes, but don’t worry about hitting anything right now. I just want you to get used to the gun’s feel.”

I grip the gun carefully, take a calming breath and hold it up in front of me, the way he taught me. He directs me the entire time, standing over my shoulder. I squeeze the trigger and feel the inertia of the bullet leave the gun and push my shoulder back. It's surprising, for sure, but I quickly learn to expect it. We continue this way, stopping to reload, as necessary, until I feel ready to aim for the target.

He shows me the front site and how to use it. I aim, squeeze the trigger, and I think I hit the target in the shoulder. I smile. With Wyatt behind me, the metallic smell of the bullets, the way the shells hit the ground with a "clank," and the weight of the gun in my hand, I feel powerful. It's the first time I've felt in control of anything recently.

I get better as we go, but I'm not sure if I ever even hit the target. Wyatt encourages me and by the time we walk back to the car, I have the biggest smile on my face. After we drop everything back in the trunk, I launch myself, without thinking, into Wyatt's arms.

"Thank you," I say as I squeeze him tight. "Thank you for helping me feel like myself again."

He kisses the top of my head and holds me against him tight. Then he steps back and runs his hands up and down my sides while leaning down to meet my eyes.

"There is nothing I won't do for you, Millie," he says.

I want so badly to throw myself back into his arms and kiss him with all of the emotion I'm feeling, but I know it would be wrong for so many reasons. So, I simply grab his shirt and tug him close to me again, and whisper in his ear, "Thank you, Wyatt."

I'm still feeling pretty good about the day when Wyatt asks if I'm hungry for lunch.

"I'd love to grab some food," I tell him.

"I know a cool place. It's a little hole in the wall," he says.

"Sounds perfect. Let's do it."

We drive back to the police station so he can lock up the stuff we used and switch out cars. Soon we are headed out of town in the Mustang, with the windows down and the wind in my hair. We drive for about twenty minutes and end up in the next town along the coast. We pull up to an older-looking brick building with the words Irish Pub above the door.

“Is that the name of the restaurant or the description of the food?” I laugh.

“Told you it was a hole in the wall,” Wyatt responds.

We walk up the three steps into the Irish pub and it’s apparent that this place has definitely seen better days. There is a booth in the corner off to the left and a large bar on the right. The wood is old and faded, and the brass is tarnished. It smells like stale beer and fish battered and fried. I love it. We can hear a commotion around the corner, and the bartender tells us we can grab a seat in the back. I think Wyatt expects me to run out of the place, but I smile and charge toward the commotion, grabbing his hand and dragging him behind me.

In the back of the pub are a few more booths and high tables with stools. It’s even darker and dingier back here. There are two televisions mounted on the walls and they are playing some world dart competition. I don’t know exactly what’s happening, but the group of guys gathered around this area seem very excited as the score goes down for the Irish competitor. We grab one of the tables just as the server comes by.

“What can I get you, Love?” she asks me.

“I’ll take a Guinness Extra Stout, please,” I answer. Wyatt’s eyes look like two dinner plates when he hears my order.

“I’ll take one, as well,” he tells her, and then he turns to me.

“That’s a heavy beer,” he says. “I didn’t peg you for a Stout girl.”

“Let’s face it, Wyatt”, I tell him, “You could write a book with everything you don’t know about me.”

“Wow, Millie has some bite to her,” he jokes as our server sets our beers down on the table.

“You’re learning jiu jitsu, learning how to shoot, and ordering Guinness. Gwen should not call you ‘Mouse.’”

“What would you call me?” I ask as I take a sip of beer.

“Millipede,” he responds quickly.

“You think I’m a worm?” I ask incredulously.

“No,” he starts, before I cut him off.

“Yes, you do. You basically just called me a worm.”

Wyatt throws his head back and laughs heartily, and the sound makes my heart feel light in my chest and my limbs tingle.

“Let me finish,” he says as he slows to a chuckle. “Millipedes are so cool. There is this one species that lives in the mountains here in California. I used to see them when I visited my grandparents in the summer. I was actually obsessed with them when I was a kid.”

Wyatt’s only talked about his family once, and I am excited that he’s sharing this with me.

“I love how they glow in the darkness. They spend their days underground, but at night they come out and light up the forest floors. Their glow is actually an ominous warning to predators. They can release toxic cyanide from their pores. I have always thought of them as beautiful and kind of badass.”

“So, I’m a poisonous, glowing worm?” I smile.

“Yes, Millie. You are a poisonous, glowing worm.” He smiles and takes a sip of his beer.

Shaking his head he says, “I just mean that you are beautiful. I’ve seen a lot of darkness in this job and you are the exact opposite. You’re a light in a dark world,” he pauses,

“and also slightly dangerous. I think it’s a perfect combination.”

His intense gaze meets my eyes and I am momentarily speechless because of his adoring words. The silence threatens to become awkward so I change the subject.

“So, explain what’s going on with the darts? I thought you just threw them around when you were drunk. What’s the deal?”

“Oh no, people take dart competitions very seriously,” he answers. “These guys are playing 501. The goal is to reach zero first by subtracting the total scored after throwing three darts.”

“The big guy seems like a serious shit-talker,” I muse.

“Yes, I believe they score extra points for superb shit-talking,” he muses.

They play several rounds, and once the Irish competitor wins, the group breaks out into a lively song.

Wyatt and I are on our second beer and I’m completely caught up in the moment. I am smiling from ear to ear as they begin to sing.

“In Dublin’s fair city,

Where the girls are so pretty,

I first set eyes on sweet Molly Malone....”

I don’t know the words exactly but I’m vaguely familiar with it and I can’t help but try to keep up. The group is encouraging me with an “Aye, Lass,” every now and then and I find myself having the best non-date I’ve ever had.

“I can’t believe how much fun that was,” I tell Wyatt as we finally leave the pub an hour later.

He stops and reaches for my wrist and I turn toward him, still smiling.

“What?” I ask.

“I just love watching you laugh,” he says, as he sweeps a piece of hair out of my face behind my ear. I close my eyes and lean into his touch. It feels so perfect, but the moment is broken when he speaks.

“How did you get Theo not to have a hemorrhage over you spending the day with me?”

To hear him mention Theo’s name immediately shifts the tender moment and I step away.

“He’s actually out of town for work,” I tell him. “But I can make my own decisions.”

“I know you can, Millie.” He pauses for a moment as if he’s not sure if he wants to open whatever can of worms, or in his case, millipedes he is about to. “Are you sure he’s out of town for work right now?”

“Of course, I’m sure. I spoke to him earlier.”

Wyatt’s face is unreadable at first and then I can see the minute he makes a decision.

“Do you trust me?”

I don’t answer right away even though my entire body is screaming “yes!”

“Do you trust me,” he asks again.

This time I answer with confidence. “With my life.”

“I need to show you something then,” he says.

We get in the car and start to drive.

When Wyatt said he wanted to show me something, I never dreamed we’d drive an hour to San Francisco and end up in front of a seedy nightclub. We didn’t speak much on the drive. My anxiety was working overtime and Wyatt was deep in thought.

“What are we doing here, Wyatt?” I’m trying to hide the irritation in my voice, and failing miserably.

“I told you,” he answers evenly, “there is something you need to see.”

“Let’s get it over with, then.”

He lowers his head to his chest and takes a breath like he doesn’t want to do this anymore than I do. I think he’s about to say never mind, but he suddenly grabs the door handle and exits the car. I get out, not waiting for him to open my door.

We walk past the bouncer, who doesn’t ask to see IDs. I get the feeling he could care less if we are underage anyway. He’s probably just here if someone gets stabbed on the dance floor because from the looks of this place, it’s not that far of a reach.

I follow Wyatt to the edge of the dance floor. “What am I supposed to be seeing?”

Before he can answer, I see exactly why he brought me here and it makes my heart plummet.

There, on the dance floor, is Theo. He looks different from the Theo he is when he is with me. This Theo looks meaner, darker than my Theo. His sleeves are pushed up on his forearms, revealing his corded muscles, and he’s wearing distressed jeans with rips in the knees. He looks younger, somehow. But it’s not the way he looks that has me spinning. It’s the fact that he’s dancing with a woman. I don’t even think you can call it “dancing.” He’s basically dry fucking her on the dancefloor. He’s behind her, grinding into her, with one hand on her hip and the other splayed across her stomach. She’s wearing a tight black dress that’s barely covering her ass. I don’t need to see it anymore.

I turn to leave but Wyatt blocks my path.

“You need to see this,” he says gently. He puts his hands on my hips and spins me back around to face the dance floor. My eyes land back on Theo, whose right hand is now traveling up the woman’s outer thigh. Her dress is hiked up and I have a full view of the side of her ass and the shred of fabric that she’s wearing for underwear. Her head drops back onto his shoulder and his hand moves the front of her G-string panties and slips inside.

I stand there, blinking back tears, unable to look away. Theo's hand is working her, right here for anyone to see. She is grinding her ass into him and riding his hand, her arms clasped behind his neck.

I feel Wyatt's breath on my neck.

"I told you he wasn't a good guy."

His hands are still on my hips, flexing back and forth. His lips are an inch from my ear and I can feel his hot breath on my neck.

On the dance floor, Theo has moved his left hand up to the woman's neck. He has her on the edge. Behind me, Wyatt is hard, and I can feel him pressing into my ass. As horrible as this is to watch, and as disgusted as I am, I'm also turned on. *What is wrong with me?*

Wyatt's breathing is quick and his hands continue to flex on my hips.

"Watch, Millie," he whispers in my ear. "See him for who he really is."

I'm intoxicated by everything — the feel of Wyatt behind me, his hands on my hips and his voice in my ear, the way he smells, and the way the woman on the dance floor is chasing her orgasm. My panties are soaked, my breasts are heavy and my nipples are hard and pebbled as I watch Theo finger this stranger.

I can tell the moment she comes. I hear a moan. Her mouth opens but no sound comes out, and I realize the moan came from me. The woman in Theo's arms goes slack and smiles widely, her arms slowly falling back to her sides.

He slowly removes his hand from her panties and her dress falls back into place. He keeps one hand on her neck and runs his hand up her dress, wiping the evidence of her orgasm on the black fabric. The look in his eyes is crazed and distant. I've never seen him like this.

He leads her off the dance floor, and they disappear into a darkened hallway. I know exactly what's about to

happen back there. I can't take it anymore. I abruptly turn around and race out of the club.

I'm crying heavily by the time I get to the car.

"Millie! Millipede. Please look at me. I'm sorry."

"Don't, Wyatt. Just fucking don't." I push him. "Why? Why did you have to show me this?"

"I don't know. Fuck," he says as he rakes his hand through his hair. "You told me he was out of town. I hate that he lied to you. I hate that you believe him."

"How did you know? How did you know he was here?"

"I've been following him."

"Because he's dating me?" I question.

"No, of course not. I've been following him because he's a person of interest in a case, Millie. That's all I can say right now."

"Of course, it is. You and your cryptic warnings, Wyatt. You know what the real irony here is? I was going to break up with him. I made up my mind yesterday. I was just trying to wait to do it in person."

Wyatt exhales and leans against the car standing next to me, both of us breathing heavily and shaking.

"You know what I would love?" he asks.

"What's that?" I ask coldly.

"If we could stop fighting in parking lots."

I'm not in the mood to smile, but that does elicit a tiny smirk.

"Come on," he says. "Let me take you home."

We don't speak at all on the drive home. I'm angry and embarrassed and Wyatt is upset that I'm angry and embarrassed.

When we pull into my driveway, I pause with my hands on the seat belt buckle, and decide that I need to know.

“Is the case you’re working on about the missing girl from college?”

“What did you say?” Wyatt asks in disbelief.

“Theo told me about the girl you liked in college. The one you expressed your feelings to, so she left.”

He moves the stick shift into neutral and pulls the hand brake, letting the car idle before turning to me.

“What did he tell you about Sophia?” Wyatt asks through clenched teeth.

“Never mind,” I back track. This is none of my business. I get out of the car and walk briskly to the door. Before I know it, he’s right behind me.

“Sophia,” he says again. “What did he tell you about her?”

“He told me less than you just did,” I reply. “*He* never even used her name.”

I turn to go into the house and get away from this conversation, get away from the way my heart feels, and get away from this entire day.

Wyatt grabs my wrist and spins me around before I can get too far. I momentarily lose my balance and step back, caught by the door behind me. Wyatt steps up in my space, arms on either side of my face.

“Dammit, Millie, this is important. I NEED to know what he told you.” His chest is heaving as he stares into my eyes.

“He said you all knew each other, OK? He said you developed feelings for her. He said you drove her away and she disappeared.” I say it so fast it comes out like one long sentence. Now my chest is heaving and my eyes are tearing up. The last thing I want to be doing is talking about a woman who they both obviously care about.

“Fuck!” Wyatt yells and slams his hand against the wall next to my head, making me jump. He takes a deep breath and looks at me with pain in his eyes.

“Millie, listen to me. You have to listen to me. You don’t know the whole story.”

“Wyatt,” my lips quiver, “Don’t you understand? I don’t want to know the whole story.

It hurts me to think of you with someone else.”

He drops his arms to his sides and releases a pent up breath. “I don’t ever want to hurt you, Millipede. Ever,” he emphasizes. “I’m only telling you what you need to know.”

I hug my body. “I don’t understand why.”

Wyatt places his hand on my cheek and strokes it softly.

“I can’t tell you everything I want to tell you right now. I can’t. But I do need you to know that Theo’s version of what happened with Sophia is not what actually happened.”

“Then tell me, Wyatt.” I say softly.

“The situation was complicated,” he starts. “I met Sophia first. We became friends. I didn’t have any interest in her as anything other than a friend. That’s why I introduced her to Theo. I knew they would hit it off.” He pauses to make sure I’m still with him. I give him a small nod as if to say, “go on.”

“They started dating. The relationship was very intense, from the beginning. They obviously had a lot of passion and fire together. That also included their fights. More than once she came to me. She was scared, Millie.”

“She was afraid of him?” I ask.

“Yes, she became afraid of him. She told me that she had seen sides of him that she couldn’t understand. He was insecure and controlling. He was always worried she was going to leave him. It made him act a little crazy. I told her to leave, because I thought it would be better for both of them. Not because I wanted her.”

I gather the courage to ask the question that’s been nagging at me. “Did you sleep with her?”

Again, he sighs. When he looks at me I can tell he's fighting with himself, internally. He doesn't want to continue, but if he needs me to understand this, he has to.

"Theo talked me into it." He says flatly.

"What?" I ask incredulously. "What do you mean 'Theo talked you into it?' How does that even work?"

"Look, I'm not proud of it, but that's what happened."

He takes a step back and looks down at his shoes. After a moment, he continues. "He came to me and said it was a fantasy they had shared together. He said he trusted me. I knew it was a bad idea. I didn't realize what would happen," he admits.

"What happened, Wyatt?" It's painful to hear this, but it would kill me not to hear it.

He continues. "We all agreed to do it once. Sophia and I talked about it. She had her reservations, but she said she loved him and wanted him to be happy," he says, shaking his head at the memory. "She thought if we did this, and she was still with him, he would let go of some of his insecurities." After a moment he continues. "While we were together, he was watching us. It wasn't normal the way he was watching us, Millie. He looked at us like we were doing something wrong. He got jealous. He got angry. Afterward, he started yelling about how he knew she always wanted me and that this was a test. He said we failed him, like everyone always did."

Wyatt's voice is cracking, like this memory is tearing him apart. "We both got scared and got dressed and left. I took Sophia home. I told her to relax and that I would talk to him when he calmed down. Then I left. No one has seen her since."

"Theo said you drove her out of town."

"No, that's not what happened. I'm telling you, I drove her home and told her I would come by the next day to check on her, and when I did, she was gone."

"And you think Theo had something to do with it?" Despite the sides of him I've seen, I can't believe he'd actually hurt anyone.

“I do. Yes.”

“How could you let me date him if you think this of him? I thought you cared about me,” I say quietly.

“Look at me,” he says. “When I first noticed he had an interest in you, I was obsessed with getting information on him in any way possible. I would have never let him hurt you though.”

“I can’t believe this,” I tell him. My voice is so small. I don’t even have the energy to fight this anymore. Then something occurs to me.

“Did you meet me on purpose, outside the photography shop?”

His silence is all the answer I need.

“So, it was all a setup, Wyatt?” At this moment, all I want to do is forget about the last several weeks.

“I couldn’t say anything. If my captain found out I knew Theo, he would pull me off the case. If I told you, I would be jeopardizing it.”

“So, I was a means to an end?”

“No. You are a beautiful, intelligent, funny woman who I developed serious feelings for,” he says.

“Stop, Wyatt. Just stop. It’s all fake.”

“How I feel is not fake,” he says. “Somewhere along the way I quit caring about catching Theo, and my only goal became to protect you.”

“Have you broken into my house, Wyatt?”

“No. Jesus, Millie. No.”

“Have you ever lurked around outside my house?”

He pauses. “Yes. I have. I was outside checking on you the night you got Milo. I didn’t know you had a dog, and he heard me outside and went crazy.”

I laugh softly through the tears. “He really is the best boy,” I say sadly. “He’s the only boy I trust.”

I open my door and walk through it and turn to Wyatt who stands, sad and stunned on the other side.

“Goodnight, Millie,” he says quietly. I don’t give him a chance to say anything else. I shut the door in his face.

Chapter 32

I ignore two calls and several texts from Theo the next day.

Wyatt is smart enough to take the hint and leave me alone after last night. I'm so exhausted that I don't even bother to get dressed.

I reschedule my photo shoots, giving the excuse that I'm sick, and it's not a complete lie. I am sick over this whole, crazy, complicated situation. It wasn't so long ago that my life was boring and uncomplicated. Now I'm living in some sort of telenovela. I don't know what to think about any of this so I've decided to bury my head in the sand for the near future.

I stay in my pajamas, pick at real food but really only eat a pint of Ben and Jerry's and snuggle with my dog.

Around 4 o'clock, I decide I need to at least take Milo for a little walk, so we make a quick trip around the block. At some point during the walk my sadness morphs into anger. I am so angry at Wyatt for using me and then thinking he can just say some beautiful words to erase everything he's done. I'm angry with Theo for being a liar and a cheater. Even as angry as I am with him, I honestly don't think he had anything to do with Sophia's disappearance. But mostly, mostly, I'm angry with myself. I allowed myself to develop feelings for two men, neither of whom are who I thought they were.

Once we get home, I turn on a Spotify playlist. I'm clearing my head as I rock out to bands like Fallout Boy and Linkin Park. Then I hear the vibrant piano melody of Miss Vanessa Carlton making her way downtown and I get sad again, thinking of how Wyatt surprised me by singing it that night in his car. It was at that moment when I really began to understand the depth of my feelings for him, only to sleep with him and wake up alone.

I grab my phone and skip to the next song, which also starts with the striking sounds made by the vibrations of a sound board by piano strings. This one, however, is perfect. Within minutes, I am standing in my kitchen, wooden spoon in hand, mimicking a microphone, shouting the words that never

sounded like a breakup song before, but now resonate through my confused soul like they were written just for this situation.

*“My power flurries through the air into the ground
My souls is spiraling in frozen fractals all around
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast
I’m never going back, the past is in the past
LET IT GO, LET IT GO
When I’ll rise like the break of dawn
LET IT GO, LET IT GO
THAT PERFECT GIRL IS GONE
Here I stand in the light of day
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway”*

I hit repeat again. And again. And again.

My dog is terrified. I think he’d call 911 if he could.
Then Wyatt would show up.

I play the song again.

By this point I’m exhausted from trying to sing a song that should only be attempted by a Broadway star, and I sit in the kitchen and laugh and cry at the same time. Milo comes up and puts his head in my lap now that I’m no longer screaming like a lunatic.

I don’t know how long we sit on the cold, kitchen floor but when I try to stand up later my limbs are heavy and my back is killing me. I drag myself into the bathroom to take a nice, long bath and then crawl into bed. Tomorrow the statute of limitations for feeling sorry for myself runs out, and I need to face the world, including Theo.



Theo: I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m worried.

Theo: I am back in town early.

Theo: Millie, call me back.

Theo: I'm coming over.

I wake up after a mostly sleepless night and read the text messages from Theo. Back in town early, huh? He probably never even left.

With a heavy heart and even heavier limbs, I get dressed and make myself a cup of coffee, but before I can even take a sip there's a loud pounding at my door.

Milo barks nervously so I shush him, take a deep breath and open the door. Theo rushes in, enveloping me in a hug but I keep my arms tight to my body. Theo notices and drops his arms as I take a step back from him.

"Millie, what is going on?" he asks, with a panicked look on his face.

"You tell me," I reply coldly.

"What does that mean? What's been going on? Why have you been avoiding me?"

"Well, ever since I saw you finger some woman in a seedy nightclub, I just haven't felt like talking to you is high on my priority list. I'm funny that way."

Theo has the audacity to look offended.

"What did you just say?" he asks.

"You heard me," I tell him matter of factly.

"Millie, I don't know what someone told you but..."

I hold my hand up. I was going to watch him stammer through this, but I've lost my patience.

"I saw you, Theo. I was there."

He gives it one last try to make me think I'm wrong.

"Wait? You saw me where? What are you talking about?"

“I. Saw. You.” I repeat. “At the club. I saw it all with my own two eyes.”

It’s then that I see the anger spark in his eyes. “How’d you even know about that, Millie?” Before I can even answer he continues.

“Oh, let me guess. Wyatt? This has him written all over it.”

“Is that honestly the best you can do, Theo? You’re not going to turn this around on me. Or Wyatt.”

“I just find it really fucking interesting that you happened to know where I was last night.”

“I don’t give a damn what you find interesting, Theo. Not since you cheated on me. You can try to deflect all you want, but this is on you! I’m not going to let you manipulate this situation.”

“Millie,” he pleads, “Whatever you saw, it doesn’t matter. It didn’t mean anything.”

“It means something to me!” I grip my head in frustration. “God, who are you right now?! What happened to my boyfriend?!”

“Maybe he got sick of being second best,” he spits.

“That’s bullshit and you know it. You were never second best,” I seethe. Our voices get louder with each word being spoken, our emotional control evaporating.

“Is that right? Because it seems to me that you never really gave your heart to me and we both know why.”

As much as I want to argue with him, there is some truth to his words, and it hurts me to know that he felt it.

I take a step back and gather myself. Yelling is getting us nowhere.

“You’re right,” I say more calmly than I feel. “I wanted so badly to give you my entire heart, and it wrecked me that I couldn’t, but don’t think for a moment that you don’t mean something to me. Seeing you with another woman, especially

right after we were together, makes me physically sick. We didn't even use a condom, Theo! Jesus Christ. Should I get tested for an STD now?"

Theo sits down on the couch and sighs heavily, dropping his head and clasping his hands behind his neck.

"No, of course not, Millie. I would never do that to you."

"Have you had sex with anyone else since we've been dating?"

"No, I swear. That woman in the club," he pauses. "I don't know. I don't know why I did that. We didn't have sex though. I promise."

I take a seat opposite him.

He shakes his head while still looking down. "I was never worthy of you, Millie."

"Is that why you cheated? Because you think you're not worthy?"

He looks up, considering my question before answering. "I wish I knew," he admits. "My whole life I've never felt good enough. It makes me do things. Things I don't understand."

Chills break out over my skin at his admission. I think about the things Wyatt has said about Theo being two different people. I'm scared to probe further, but I have to know.

"Theo, what kinds of things?" I ask tentatively.

He's quiet for a long time before speaking again. "I get angry. I don't trust people, especially women."

"Why?"

"Because they leave me," he says solemnly.

"Who has left you, Theo." He doesn't answer. "Is this about Sophia?"

He inhales and blows out a deep breath. "Of course, Wyatt told you about her."

“He did,” I say. “He told me about the night she went missing.”

“So you know that she chose him over me.” Pausing, he looks into my eyes. “Just like you did.”

I am still so angry and hurt, but I also recognize that the man before me is broken, and I am partially to blame.

“I wasn’t there so I don’t know what she was thinking or feeling, so I can’t speak for her,” I reason, “but I can tell you that I never chose Wyatt over you.” *I never had a choice when it came to him.*

“It’s better for everyone if I just keep my distance,” he says. “I’m so sorry that I hurt you, Millie. I never wanted to do that to you.”

I believe him. I believe that he has experienced something that makes him push people away before they can hurt him. It’s a defense mechanism. I feel sad for him because his life is going to be very lonely if he continues to live this way.

“I know,” I tell him.

I don’t want him to leave yet. I feel like there is so much left that is unspoken between us, and I want to explain myself to him as best as I can. I want him to understand how much I care about him. He stands abruptly and I reach for his hand.

“Theo,” I plead, but before I can finish, he pulls his hand away and shakes his head.

He walks to the door and turns just before reaching it. “I love you, Millie. I love you, and you love him, so please don’t tell me you didn’t choose him, because you did.”

He turns back and walks out the door.

I am left standing in my living room, silent tears rolling down my cheeks as I think of all of the pain the past few months have brought all of us.

I walk over to Milo, who is laying on his dog bed, and curl up next to his bed with my head on his belly, crying until I

fall asleep.

Camera Image

I watch as Theo walks out of her house in a hurry. He wasn't in there long, maybe thirty minutes at the most.

His shoulders are slumped. It's done. I've been waiting for this moment.

He's normally so well put together, not a thread out of place, but those threads are unraveling quickly.

He gets in his car and throws it into reverse, screeching out of the driveway. I can hear loud music pouring out of speakers as he passes by me, parked in my truck, idling against the curb near her house. I don't even attempt to duck.

He's not paying attention to anything right now. I make a U-turn and follow him as my hands itch with anticipation.

Chapter 33

I wake up in a cold, dark house.

While I was asleep, the sun went down and the chilly winter air snuck in through cracks and crevices, making my home feel uncomfortably isolated.

Stretching out my legs I sit up and try to make out the shadows being cast across the room. It's dead quiet and while I normally like that, I find myself craving some ambient noise.

I slowly get up and turn on the television. I can hear the laugh track of a familiar sitcom and it soothes my nerves as I walk around the house, turning on lights and shutting the curtains. I check the locks and windows, which has become my routine every time I return home since finding that picture in my spare room.

I have a nagging feeling that I should tell Wyatt about my conversation with Theo. It's not that it's any of his business and it's not that I owe either of them anything, but I have been in the middle of this long enough and I want to put an end to it.

Millie: Can you come over?

Wyatt: I'm at work. I'll leave now.

Wyatt is at my door before I even have a chance to finish steeping my tea. I answer the door before he has a chance to knock.

"Is everything OK?" he asks as he walks in.

"Yes. It's fine. I talked to Theo today."

I can't make out the expression on his face. "Did you confront him about what we saw?"

"Yes."

He's anxious to get more information. "And what happened?"

"I broke up with him. Just like I said I was going to."

“Millie, that could’ve been dangerous. I wish you had told me so that I could have been here.”

“I’m capable of breaking up with my cheating boyfriend without a chaperone, Wyatt.”

“It’s more than that,” he says. “He’s dangerous.”

“That’s just it. I don’t believe that he is,” I shrug. “He’s messed up somehow. I will give you that. But I don’t think he’s dangerous.”

He takes my hand and leads me to the couch.

I slowly sink down into the cushion and he kneels beside me so that we are eye to eye. He grabs my hand and meets my eyes with intent.

“I need to tell you something, and I need you to listen to me. Really listen to me,” he begs.

My entire body is tingling and I’m terrified of what he’s going to tell me, but I give him a small nod.

“I’m not in Sierra Falls by accident,” he says calmly. “I followed Theo here.”

“Why would you do that?” I ask.

“Because I suspect that he is a serial killer.” Wyatt’s face is stone as he says it, and it seems so absurd that I can’t help but laugh.

“What?” I ask. “I know you hate him, but that’s a little far-fetched, don’t you think?”

“I don’t hate him, Millie. I fear him. I have seen the darkness in him and I trust my instincts,” he says matter of factly.

“Your instincts?” I question. “That’s what you’re basing this off of? Do you have any proof?”

“I have three dead girls and a missing girl from college. He was in the area during all of the incidents. He fits the profile and I KNOW him,” he emphasizes. “And you look like the other victims.”

“OK,” I exhale, “Let’s say for a moment that I believe you. You’re telling me that I was dating a serial killer? That I could’ve loved a serial killer?”

Wyatt stands up and looks at me like I’ve just slapped him across the face. “You don’t love him, Millie. You can’t.”

“I can’t? Are you fucking serious, Wyatt? You think you can tell me how I feel?”

“No, fuck!” he says exasperated. “That’s not what I meant. I just meant that you don’t know him. The real him. So you can’t possibly love him.”

“So, who is he, Wyatt? A crazy serial killer who moonlights as an oil salesman and doting uncle?”

“He is not crazy, Millie. He is the smartest person I have ever met. But yes, he has a job and a family, just like a lot of sociopaths.”

I push away from Wyatt and start to pace. “I don’t want to hear this, Wyatt. It’s not true. You have the wrong guy.”

“I don’t have the wrong guy, Millie.” He places his hands on my shoulders to steady me. “I don’t,” he repeats.

“So, I’m in danger?” I ask, going along with this conversation for the moment.

“I don’t think so,” he shakes his head. “At least not right now. He’s deviating from the profile, but I’m not sure why.”

“He’s in love with me,” I say softly.

“Millipede, look at me,” Wyatt nudges. “He’s not capable of loving like a normal person. Eventually, he will snap.”

“The only person who has snapped is you, Wyatt. Listen to yourself. Your view of this entire situation is myopic.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he scoffs.

“You have been obsessed with Theo for how long? One year? Longer? Since Sophia disappeared? Do you think

it's possible that you are seeing things that aren't there because you want to? You want him to be the guy, so you're fitting the narrative around it. I mean, you know him. You know his family. I'm sure you've looked into his past. Is there anything there or are you just conveniently ignoring the facts?"

He shakes his head as if what I'm saying is impossible to even consider. Then he sits down on the couch, staring straight ahead in thought.

"This case is making you crazy," I continue, with a softer tone. "I mean, you were willing to use me to get him. Think about that. You put me in jeopardy. Can you really say you've been clear-headed here?"

"I would never let anyone hurt you, Millie. I would move heaven and earth for you."

"I believe that's how you feel *now*. I do," I emphasize. "But you were willing to in the beginning."

He shakes his head in disbelief. The realization dawns on him that I'm right and he shakes his head.

"Jesus, Millie. What if I *am* wrong? All I see when I look at those crime scene photos of those women strangled with a red scarf is Theo. But what if I've been wrong this whole time?"

"Then you find out who the real killer is and catch his ass," I tell him.

He grabs my shirt and pulls me to him, placing his forehead against my stomach.

I comb my fingers through his hair and lean down and place a kiss to the top of his head. This situation is so complicated and he and I have so much to work through, but all I know at this moment is that I love this man deeply.

"All I wanted was to catch this guy and give these families some peace," he admits.

"I know," I tell him, my lips still pressed to his head, inhaling his scent. "You will."

“I need to get back to work and look at the case files again.”

“Tomorrow,” I whisper. “You can start tomorrow.”

I can feel the tension leave his shoulders as they lower.

“Are you hungry,” I ask.

“No,” he replies. I’m just tired. So damn tired.”

“Come on,” I tell him, as I pull him up. “We are going to take a bath and get some sleep.”

“Are you sure about that? You only just ended things with Theo.”

“Yes, I’m sure. We both need this.”

I take his hand and lead him to the bathroom, then we strip each other naked and get into the bath, his front against my back. We sit there in silence for a long time, our fingers intertwined, letting the heat of the water and our proximity mend our rifts.



Thump. Thump. Thump.

I wake up to the smell of coffee and the sounds of something or someone stomping on my kitchen floor.

I yawn and stretch and roll my neck from side to side, trying to ease some of the tension that has taken up permanent residence there over the past week.

Forcing myself to get out of bed, I use the bathroom and walk into the kitchen.

Wyatt and Milo wrestle around on the living room floor. I stop and smile, enjoying the scene. When I clear my throat a pair of blue eyes and a pair of brown eyes pop up to meet mine in surprise. They both look up at me like kids who got caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” Wyatt says as he gets up.

He goes into the kitchen and opens three different cabinets before he finds my coffee cups. I watch him with amusement but don't bother to offer any help. I'm too busy enjoying the view of him in my kitchen.

We haven't talked about us at all, instead just spending the night wrapped up in each other. We will have that conversation in the future, but for now, I feel like we just need to be together.

Wyatt's voice shakes me from my thoughts. "I woke up early and didn't want to leave yet so I thought I'd make you some coffee."

He walks over and hands me a cup, almost filled to the brim. It's exactly the correct tan color, indicating that he added just the right amount of creamer.

"Thank you," I tell him, holding it in both hands and savoring the smell as it hits my nostrils.

"I tried to call Theo this morning," he says. "I need to talk to him."

"Do you still think he had something to do with Sophia's disappearance?" I ask.

He sighs. "I do, Millipede. I'm not sure how exactly, but he knows more than he's letting on."

"Do you think he left that picture in my house? I mean, why would he do that?"

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe to fuck with me?"

I nod my head. I know Wyatt has to see this thing through no matter what.

In the end, if Theo was involved, Wyatt will do what he has to do.

"When I called," he explains, "it went straight to voicemail. He may have blocked me."

"I can try to call if you want?" I ask tentatively. I don't want to, but Theo isn't doing himself any favors by avoiding these questions.

“No,” he shakes his head. “You are done with this.”

He sets his coffee cup down and walks over to me. “This has been hard enough on you the past few months,” he says, as he places a hand on my cheek.

I lean into his strong hand and turn my head to place a kiss on his palm.

“I have to go,” he tells me, before embracing me tightly.

“I know,” I reply, even though I don’t want him to go. I’m afraid that the connection we began building last night will be dismantled when he leaves. As if reading my mind he pulls my chin up to look into his eyes.

“I’m only going to work, Millipede. I’m not going anywhere else.”

Tears well up in my eyes at his words. “If you’ll have me, I’m never going anywhere again.”

My heart swells in my chest. I’ve wanted him to say these words for so long.

“I’ll have you,” I tell him, through a shaky voice. “I might just keep you forever.”

Chapter 34

After Wyatt left this morning, promising to come back after work today, I still felt unsettled. I couldn't focus on work so I did a little cleaning and then decided I'd go to the grocery store to pick up some food to make us a nice dinner tonight.

As soon as I left my house that familiar feeling of being watched crept in. I looked up and down the street and didn't see anything except for parked cars and a black truck that has been around a lot lately. Nothing looked particularly out of place. After I got home from shopping, I started to unload the groceries, not even sure what to make with the jumble of items I haphazardly purchased.

I can't help but think about a question that's been nagging at the back of my mind since last night.

Why would Theo leave that picture on my desk?

Assuming it was Theo. I can't seem to let it go, so against my better judgment, I call him. It goes straight to voicemail. That's unusual, but maybe he's working. I decide to leave a message.

"Hi Theo, it's me. I know I'm probably the last person you want to hear from right now, but I really need to talk to you. It's important. Please call me back."

I begin making a marinade for some chicken. When I still haven't heard from Theo in a couple hours, I call again and leave another message, this one more urgent.

"Theo, please call me. I'm sorry to do this but I need to talk to you about something right away."

The afternoon shadows begin to move around my living room as I continue to pace, trying to put the pieces of the past few months together.

Without Theo's help, I'm coming up empty. I need to know if he snuck into my house and why. Without giving it much thought I grab the keys and run out the door.

I show up at Sarah and Jeff's house looking for answers. I'm not sure what I'm hoping to find, but maybe she can somehow help me clear my confusion.

Who is Theo Brissett?

Is he the man I have come to know and care about, or the man that Wyatt has described to me over the past few months?

I know it's against all of my professional ethics, but I looked up his sister's address from the information she gave me ahead of their photoshoot. I steady my breath and knock on the door.

I can hear kids laughing and running around inside, and my heart hurts, knowing I won't get to spend time with them anymore.

Sarah answers the door with a wide smile, which slightly falters when she sees me.

"Um, Hi, Sarah. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions." She looks momentarily surprised, but then recovers.

"Of course, Millie. Come on in."

She leads me into the kitchen and we take a seat at the bar.

"Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea?" she asks.

"Tea would be wonderful. Thank you." Sarah gets up and busies herself making tea. She returns moments later and places a cup in front of me.

"You know Theo is out of town?"

"I didn't know," I tell her. That explains why he isn't answering me. At least, I hope that's the reason. "Actually, I was just hoping to talk to you a bit."

"Is everything OK with you two?" She questions.

"No. We, um, broke up."

“He didn’t tell me,” she sighs sadly. “He called yesterday to say he had to go out of town. He didn’t sound like himself, but I thought it was just because he was stressed about work.”

“I don’t want to speak badly of him or our relationship. He means a lot to me, but he never really let me see who he really is. Does that make sense?”

“Is that why you’re here? For answers?”

“I guess so. He never really explained to me why he is so guarded.”

“Hmm.” She nods her head. “It’s true that he is a bit guarded. I think it’s because of his past.”

“His past?” I question.

“Yes, with his biological mother.”

“Wait,” I shake my head, not quite understanding. “What do you mean?”

Her eyebrows draw together in the same confused look that mirrors my own face.

“He didn’t tell you he was adopted?”

Before I can answer she begins to shake her head back and forth quickly. “Dammit. I shouldn’t have said anything. This is not my story to tell.”

I place my hand over hers. “I understand that, but please, I just want to know him,” I say honestly.

She nods understandingly.

“Theo came to live with us when he was six. I was eight at the time. My parents weren’t able to have any more children after I was born. They tried for a few years but eventually decided to look at adoption. They ended up doing their home study and getting registered as potential parents through the foster care system. They had only just become available to start looking at available children when a social worker called them about Theo.”

It's obvious that this is difficult for her. She takes a moment to gather herself and continues.

“He had been very badly neglected. He was very underweight. My parents never shared any details with me, but whatever he had gone through must have been horrendous.

He barely spoke for the first six months,” she recalls. “The doctors said he was perfectly capable, incredibly intelligent, in fact, but he just didn't want to. The only time I heard his voice was when he would wake up screaming at night. It was horrible,” she recalls, as a shiver runs through her body.

I cannot believe she is describing Theo. *My Theo*. He's so charismatic and funny. I can't believe he went through something like this.

“I do know that his mother had died,” she continues. “That much I've learned over the years. Also, he never knew who his father was and there was no other living family so my parents were able to adopt him.”

My heart is breaking listening to her describe his young life.

Sarah continues. “It took a long time, but slowly he started to come out of his shell. Between therapy and the love my parents gave him, he adjusted and became a normal littleboy.” She stops for a brief moment. “Well, mostly normal.”

“Mostly?” I inquire.

“I mean, he had some anger issues, which is completely understandable. He would lash out sometimes and kick the dog, or fight with kids at school.”

“I can't even imagine that,” I say. “That sounds nothing like the man I know. He's so caring and sweet.”

Sarah smiles. “He is. He outgrew that stuff pretty early on.”

“I wonder if he remembers his mom?” I ask. His distrust of people, particularly women, is beginning to make

sense as she speaks.

“I’m not sure,” she answers. “He’s never talked about it, so we never bring it up.

He was the cutest kid though. I think I have a picture somewhere around here from right after he came to live with us.”

She gets up and goes into another room. I’m reeling from this information. There is so much Theo hasn’t told me. I understand why, but it is important information that he’s purposely left out.

We’ve had so many personal discussions. He knows all about what happened to my family. My heart drops as I think of our conversation at the beach on our first date. He told me he wanted to be a parent to give his child the things he never had. I thought he was just speaking in generalizations at the time, but he was talking about safety and security.

My God, that poor child.

Sarah returns and places an old worn-out photo in front of me. It’s a 4x6 photo, obviously taken a long time ago. In the center of the photo is a small boy. His hair is disheveled and his amber-colored eyes are sunken and completely void of all emotion.

He is so incredibly thin, with sharp, skeletal shoulders visible under the tank top he is wearing. His pajama pants are too small, loose at the waist due to his underweight status, but two inches too short. He’s not wearing shoes. My gaze scans his face and body again and stops at what he’s clutching in his tiny hand, as my pulse spikes and my heartbeat thunders in my ears.

“I had forgotten about that,” Sarah muses.

“He used to carry that red scarf everywhere,” Sarah says. “It was like his security blanket. One day he just stopped carrying it,” she remembers.

I can barely focus on anything she is saying as I stare at that red scarf. My whole body feels paralyzed. I barely

register the noise when the teacup I was holding hits the floor and shatters into pieces.

“I’m so sorry,” I stammer numbly, stumbling back. “Is everything alright?” she asks with furrowed brows, as she reaches for a roll of paper towels.

I need to leave. I rattle off some excuse that I don’t even remember and rush out the front door, leaving a confused and concerned Sarah behind me.

My hands are shaking so badly by the time I get in my car that I’m barely able to dial his number and it takes me a couple attempts.

“This is Wyatt. Leave a message.” The second I hear the beep, I start rushing out the words in a panic while pulling out of Sarah’s driveway.

“Wyatt. He did it. He fucking did it. You were right. He has an entire past we didn’t know about.” I’m not even sure if I’m making sense at this point with all the dots connecting in my head.

“I’m coming to the station.”

Suddenly a black truck pulls out in front of me. I swerve to the left to keep from hitting it and cross the median strip lined with oak trees. Thankfully, no one is coming the other way and I manage to screech to a stop before going up onto the curb. “Fucking Asshole!” I yell, as the truck speeds away.



I’m staring at photos hung on my whiteboard when my phone rings, but I don’t make a move to answer it.

I’m on the cusp of something. It’s right there, within reach. I can feel it.

I flop down in my chair and rake my hands through my hair. The photo left in Millie’s house stares back at me, from within a clear evidence bag on my desk.

My mind drifts back to that night. I haven't allowed myself to go there yet, because that was the night things with Theo started to fall apart. It was our junior year of college. We had been drinking at our apartment when Theo suggested we go to The Boardroom, a bar we used to frequent in those days.

"I don't feel like paying \$8 for a beer," I tell him.

"Come on, man. I'm bored. And horny," he jokes.

I shake my head at him. "Jesus, Theo, how do you even pass your classes?"

"My IQ is 136," he shrugs.

"Yeah? Well, you are going to be the only genius in the room whose dick fell off from venereal disease by the time you are thirty," I joke.

"Might be worth it," he says with a laugh. He lights the joint in his hand and brings it to his lips for a long hit before exhaling and handing it to me.

"Nah," I shake my head. "I'm driving."

Theo throws his arm over my shoulder. "Always so responsible," he says. "Like the big brother I never had," he pauses, "or wanted."

"Alright, let's go. But I am not staying there all night so you can taxi your ass home if you wanna get laid."

"Sounds fair," he says with a cheesy grin.

We arrive at the bar and meet up with a few other buddies that Theo had texted on the way. This place has a cool vibe. It is mostly college students and young, twenty-something professionals. The back room has a huge table, like you would find in the boardroom of a big international corporation. It can seat at least twenty people, and that's usually where we end up.

We are headed back there when I spot her. Blonde hair falls in waves down her back and she laughs before taking a sip of some fruity cocktail at the bar.

“I’ll meet you in there,” I tell Theo, who is probably too busy laughing with a group of guys to even hear me.

She looks up and smiles as she sees me. “Wyatt, Hi!”

“Hey Sophia,” I smile back. We’ve been in classes together all semester and flirt regularly, although, nothing has come of it. It is not that I don’t want to pursue it. I really like Sophia, but she seems like the kind of girl you make your girlfriend, and that isn’t what I’m looking for right now, so I’ve just let it be.

“How is your night?” she asks. She seems tipsy already.

“Good. How about you?”

“Good.” She giggles, as her eye catches something behind me. The next thing I know Theo claps me on the back.

“Hey Buddy,” he says, but he is looking at Sophia the whole time. He flashes her that boyish grin, his dimple pops, and I can see it right away. She is hooked. I shake my head. This kid never misses.

“Theo, this is Sophia,” I tell him.

“Sophia, Theo,” I introduce them.

Theo steps in front of me and starts talking to her, making her laugh within seconds. I don’t intervene, thinking that maybe she will be good for him. I suspect a relationship is secretly what Theo wants; although for some reason, he would never admit it. Regardless, any thoughts I have about potentially hooking up with her are over.

I’m drinking one more beer and talking to my buddies when Theo and Sophia walk up, holding hands, both clearly drunk. I can’t help but smile. Fucking Theo...the guy just has a way with people.

“Hey,” Sophia says to someone behind the bar. Take our picture.

She hands her phone to a guy and we pose. Some of the guys are puffing on cigars and holding their beers out. After he takes the picture he says, “One more,” as Sophia

walks out of the shot. I throw my arm around Theo and we all smile for the picture. Then the guy lowers the phone. His face comes into view. I am immediately transported from my memory to the present.

I grab my phone and keys and run out of the station. I am just about to open my car door when I hear a noise behind me and feel a sharp pain in my neck as an electrical current flows through my body. My body convulses and everything goes black as I hit the ground.



I don't even remember the trip to the police station. I pull up and park wildly in the first visitors spot I can find. I don't even register yanking my door open and running inside. A pleasant looking elderly woman sits at the desk in front of a computer. She looks at me with a warm smile but I don't have time to exchange pleasantries.

"Detective Hudson," I manage to say, breathlessly.

"Can I help you, Miss?" she asks, not listening to the words I am saying.

"Yes. Please get Detective Hudson. It's important."

"Hang on, dear," she says, and walks at a snail's pace through a door that leads to the station. *Not like this is life or death anything.*

I'm leaning and jumping up trying to see into a small window when she finally returns.

"Detective Hudson is not here," she tells me. "I'm told he left a few minutes ago."

"Fuck!" I scream.

She places her hand on her chest. "Excuse me?"

"Nevermind!" I yell over my shoulder on the way out.

Wyatt still isn't answering his phone, so I drive like a maniac all the way home since that's where he was planning on going after work.

I don't see his car when I pull into my driveway, but I do see that my front door is ajar. I don't remember setting the alarm in my haste to go to Sarah's house for answers. I must be temporarily insane because all I can think of is that Wyatt is inside, waiting for me and I run into the house.

"Wyatt! Wyatt! Are you here?" The house is silent. Too silent. I turn in a circle and see Milo, slumped in his dog bed. "Milo!"

I run over to him and put my head on his chest, listening for his breathing. His chest rises and falls slowly. *Why isn't he waking up?*

Suddenly, my senses are on full alert. My skin prickles and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. I recognize this feeling as the same one I've been having for months now.

I'm not alone.

"He's going to be fine, '*Millipede*,'" a familiar voice says from behind me.

He's on me before I can even make a move, grabbing the back of my hair and slamming my head against my counter. The pain is the most excruciating thing I've ever felt. Sharp needles stab at my temple and eyes while the back of my head pounds, mimicking the beat of my heart. The smell of blood floods my nostrils as it pours from my head and down my face. Nausea threatens my stomach.

I fall to my knees and try to crawl away. I'm trying to focus on what Wyatt taught me about self-defense, but my mind is too foggy. I crawl a foot or two before a thick, heavy boot makes contact with my stomach. I try to will my body to fight, but it's no use. Everything is getting dim as I'm picked up and thrown over his shoulder and carried away.

I'm dropped into the backseat of a truck with a heavy thud. As much as I try to look around at my surroundings, the blow to my head keeps me from being able to focus on anything. He shifts the idling truck into gear and then takes off. The movement of the vehicle adds to the spinning sensation in my head and the nausea increases. I curl up in the

fetal position and try to go to sleep, hoping when I wake up this will all have been a horrible nightmare.

Chapter 35

The ground is cold where it meets my cheek. I can barely make out the drip, drip, drip of a leaky faucet. Or maybe it's the sound of the blood dripping from my head onto the cold cement floor.

I try to open my eyes, but I can't. Pain spikes through my nerves, from the top of my head to my toes. I can hear the shrill squeak of a chair being dragged across the floor. Finally, I manage to open my eyes and force myself to focus.

I'm lying on my side on the floor in what appears to be some kind of industrial building. I can hear footsteps and shallow breathing nearby. It takes every ounce of strength I possess to lift my head up four inches and look around.

"Look who's awake," a voice taunts me from nearby.

As soon as I hear it, I remember what happened and the nightmare in which I've somehow found myself. Only, I am not going to be waking up from this. I lay my head back down on the ground to stop the spinning.

"Nah, ah, ah," he says. "We need you awake and alert for this. You are the main attraction." Footsteps approach me from behind and suddenly I'm yanked up. I groan at the painful sensations traveling through my body as I'm dropped into a metal chair. I begin to slump over, but I'm jolted upright, my arms pinned behind the chair and fastened with something sharp behind my back. *Probably zip ties, my foggy brain reasons.*

I try to wiggle my hands but the plastic cuts into my skin. I feel the hot, acrid breath on my face, so I gently open my eyes, wincing at how even that causes me pain.

"Boo!" Johnny yells, three inches from my face, causing me to recoil in surprise and disgust. My brain starts to decipher what's happening, and I slowly gain the ability to form coherent thoughts and speak.

"Johnny," I say weakly. "What is going on?"

“What’s going on, Mills,” he says, void of any emotion, “is that we are going to have ourselves a little party.”

He walks out of my line of sight and I can hear him dragging something behind me. Suddenly he appears to my left, dragging the body of the man I love behind him.

“Wyatt!” I scream, but it’s useless because his limp body tells me that he is unconscious.

“Wyatt!” I try again, with no response.

“It’s no use. He’s out cold,” Johnny mocks.

I scan Wyatt for injuries. He doesn’t seem to be bleeding much, except for some scrapes visible on his arms and through the rips in his jeans.

Johnny walks behind me again, and the dragging sound is back. This time he is dragging Theo, who looks like he’s been fighting in a war. His eyes are swollen and he has a gash on his left eyebrow. His lip is split. His arm is hanging limply as if it might be broken.

“Oh my God, Theo!” I cry as Johnny drags him to the opposite side of the room. He is starting to come to, mumbling to himself. “It wasn’t him!”

With Theo on the ground in one corner and Wyatt on the ground in the other and me in the middle, Johnny grabs a duffel bag and drops it in front of me.

He reaches in and pulls out a small vial of white powder and sets it on the ground. Next, he reaches in again and starts pulling out items and laying them down on the ground next to me, one by one. First, more zip ties. Next, a large butcher knife. Then, a gun.

Finally, a red scarf.

He looks up at me and smiles sadistically. My body shudders and I begin to cry.

“Let’s get started!” he voices.

He grabs the vial and walks over to Wyatt. He lifts him up to the sitting position. Wyatt’s arms are tied behind his back

and his head is resting on his shoulder. Johnny grabs him by the hair and lifts his head up, slaps him hard in the face, and places the vial under his nose. Wyatt inhales and his eyes open while gagging and coughing. I watch, with tears running down my face.

Then Johnny repeats the process with Theo, placing the smelling salts under his nose. Next, he walks to the center of the room next to me and yells, “Here we go!”

Wyatt looks at me, a mixture of relief and fear in his eyes.

“Millie,” he sputters. “Millie, are you OK?”

“Wyatt, I’m OK.” Although, my head is pounding.

Theo coughs and spits out some blood on the floor, causing us to look in his direction. It kills me to see him like this. I can’t imagine the extent of his injuries, but he looks like he’s in agony.

“Wyatt,” Theo says weakly. “I’m sorry.” Wyatt shakes his head.

“Don’t be sorry, Theo. You didn’t do this.”

Johnny begins clapping loudly, bringing the attention back on himself.

“Well, this is all very touching, Kids,” he exclaims, “But it’s time to move this little reunion along.” He pauses to make sure we are all looking at him.

“So, this is how this is going to go,” he starts. “Is everyone listening?”

No one dares to speak. Who knows what this psychopath will do.

“I call this game ‘Millie’s Choice,’ and this is how we are going to play.”

He comes up behind me and places his hands on my shoulders. I jerk to break free, but his bruising touch only gets rougher, digging into my skin.

“Millie here has a choice. Who’s it going to be?”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“I will explain it, then,” he exclaims, giddy with excitement.

“Someone is going to die,” he says, coming to stand in front of me and looking directly at me. “And you, as the guest of honor, get to decide who.”

“Johnny, no. Stop this,” Theo pleads. His pleas are ignored.

“So, Millie, who’s it going to be?” he repeats. He walks over to stand by Wyatt.

“In this corner, weighing in around 200 pounds, with a badge and a shitty attitude is Wyatt Hudson, whom you profess to love.” He shakes his head and laughs and walks over and stands by Theo, making a big production out of this little act.

“And in the corner, weighing in around 175 pounds, is Theodore Briss-ssett,” Johnny hisses out the name “Brissett” overexaggerating the “ss”. Johnny continues with satisfaction, “who you feel sorry for because he never got a fair shake in life.” He laughs again. Then he looks at me with those cold, dead eyes of his and repeats, “So choose.”

“Millie,” Theo pleads. “You don’t have to do this.” He looks at Johnny. “She doesn’t have to do this!” he yells. “I already told you to kill me.”

“No!” both Wyatt and I yell at the same time.

“That’s not going to happen,” I cry. “I won’t do it.”

He picks up the knife and holds it up, inspecting it. “Hmm. I thought you might say that. So here’s the thing. If you don’t choose, then they both watch as I fuck and then kill you. But let’s face it, I might do that anyway. It just depends on my mood,” he says with a nonchalant shrug.

“You sick fuck!” Wyatt yells. He’s struggling to free himself against the restraints behind his back.

“I said kill me,” Theo says again. “I deserve it.”

“No, Theo! No!” I yell.

“Millie, I did it,” he says quietly as he hangs his head. “Wyatt was right. I killed Sophia. I deserve to die.”

Before I can process what he’s said, Johnny starts laughing loudly.

“Oh, this is just perfect. I love it! But how about a little story?” Johnny snorts with delight.

He paces for a moment before starting again. “Once upon a time, you didn’t kill her, you fucking moron. I was *there*. I saw the whole thing.”

Theo looks at him, confused, as blood pours out of the open wound on his head.

“What? What are you talking about? I pushed her and she fell. She died.”

“I can see I’m going to have to keep repeating myself,” Johnny says with an exaggerated sigh.

“You. Didn’t. Kill. Her. Although, it’s fucking perfect that you’ve lived the last eight years thinking you did.”

“But I felt for her pulse. She didn’t have one,” Theo says, with a shaky breath.

“Well, it’s a good fucking thing you weren’t pre-med,” Johnny snickers.

“You two are really incredibly stupid,” he says, looking between the two men. “You think you were the only guys fucking Sophia? That slut was getting pounded like a porn star.”

Theo winces at Johnny’s words but doesn’t say anything.

Wyatt is still, silently watching as he processes what Johnny is saying.

He catches my eyes and I can see a tear fall from his right eye and the wet spot darkens the cement where it lands.

“See, I went to college, too. You didn’t know me. I wasn’t part of your precious group. But I was there, watching everything around me.” He stares at the knife poking into his finger. “Oh,” he adds, “and I was fucking her, too. When she had her little freak out about you and Wyatt, I was there for her. I told her she should get away for a while, to clear her head. I was going to kill her no matter what,” he shrugs nonchalantly. “The world doesn’t need whores like that. What I didn’t anticipate was you following her,” he says, looking at Theo. “That was too perfect for words.” He walks over to Theo and crouches in front of him.

“You see, I saw you confront her in that alley. I heard her tell you that she was in love with Wyatt. Fucking Wyatt. What is it with this guy?” he says to Theo as he motions to Wyatt.

“Guys like us don’t stand a chance. Right, Princess?” He questions, as he moves to me.

He yanks my hair back and forces me to look into his black, soulless eyes. He spits in my face and releases my hair, my head falling forward with his cold saliva inching its way down my cheek.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” Wyatt yells. Johnny smiles at him but ignores his threat.

“Anywho,” he says with a grotesque, slick smile on his face, “I saw your face when she told you. I saw the anger, the rage. Then you, Theo, Golden Boy, did something I didn’t expect. You grabbed her and threw her down.” He jumps up and down like an excited child on Christmas.

“WOO HOO!” he screams. “It was awesome, too! I mean you shoved that bitch right to the ground while calling her a whore.”

Theo is crying and staring straight ahead as if brought back to the memory and reliving it in his mind.

“Theo, listen to me,” I plead. “You’re not like him. Don’t listen to him.”

Theo continues to look straight ahead, oblivious to my pleas.

“You got that right, Sweetheart,” Johnny hisses. “Theo, here, is most definitely not like me. He has a fear of abandonment and anger issues, but he’s weak.” Johnny begins pacing again.

“So, he throws her down hard and she goes down like a sack of potatoes. I swear I almost came in my pants. She hits the ground and her head bounces off the fucking concrete, and what does our boy do? He runs up to her and starts crying and whining about how he didn’t mean it. He’s so sorry. Blah, Blah. I wanted to puke. He actually earned my respect for about two seconds there, but then he had to go and blow it.”

Johnny studies the knife for a minute, touching the blade with his thumb again, the metal glinting over the overhead industrial lighting, before continuing.

“Like I said, Theo crouched next to her and that’s when he started to spill his guts. I mean he was really laying it on thick. Talking about Mommy Dearest and how she was horrible. How he was neglected and how he found her dead with a red scarf tied around her arm and a needle hanging out of it.”

He turns to look at Theo, whose head is still bent in shame. “Seriously though, Dude, that probably sucked.” Then he shrugs and continues his stomach-churning monologue.

“That’s when my genius idea was born. I mean, Wyatt was always a nosy fuck. I knew he had theories about Theo. He had seen some shit and he wasn’t going to let it go. So I used it to my advantage. After your boy here spilled his guts,” he turns to look at me, “to his *not so dead* girlfriend, he took off. Left her there in an alley, like a piece of trash. I mean, at least I have the common courtesy to dispose of the trash correctly. But not Theo. He left. So I grabbed Sophia and took her to an old barn. I made a stop, of course, to pick up a nice red scarf.”

“You’re fucking sick,” I spit, to which Johnny simply shrugs.

“Maybe,” he says casually. “But this has been so much fun, pretending to be Theo, in those moments of watching the light leave women’s eyes. I drew on his life and his pain.” He stops and studies the knife again. He’s talking faster now, thoughts running together.

“It was so much more fun than my life. I had a normal childhood. Grew up in the suburbs. Boring and generic. My parents love me, or so they profess. I have an older sister, who’s a bitch, but it’s not like she molested me or anything. I was just born broken. I knew it early on. It’s not like I am full of hate. More like an empty void. Do I fit your MO, Detective?” he asks, looking over toward Wyatt.

Wyatt says nothing. He’s just looking at Theo with regret and a pang of sadness in his eyes I’ve never seen before. Not even on the day he left me.

Johnny is in his own world now. It seems important to him for us to know this for some reason.

“I remember when our family dog, Biscuit, died. Everyone was so upset, and I couldn’t be bothered to care at all. I faked it, just like I always faked even liking that little fleabag. I became an expert at masking how empty I was. I just mimicked other people’s mannerisms, emotions, and expressions. And it was. So. Fucking. Easy. I worked in that bar your boys here used to frequent in New Jersey. They never even noticed me, but I watched them. Both of them. They were like this force, the two of them. People flocked to them. So I watched and learned. When I heard Theo’s confession, my new tortured persona was born. I killed these women, as you, Theo. And I did it to coincide with whenever you ‘left town,’” he says the last two words with quotation marks. “You are going to be famous one day.” He squeals with delight before continuing.

“You should have seen Sophia. She was my masterpiece. My first.” He recalls. “She thought I was going to kill her because she chose Wyatt. Like I give a fuck about that. But *Theo* would. So, I channeled his emotions and strangled that bitch with a red scarf, after I had a little fun with her, of course. Then I sat there and watched her die, just like Mom.”

I can't believe what I'm hearing. He so fucking sick that I can feel the bile rising in my throat. I bend over the side of my chair, as much as I can while still being restrained, and vomit on the floor. Johnny doesn't miss a beat in his twisted soliloquy.

"I stayed close to him and studied everything he did. I had to mimic Theo's life in order to pull this off. My performance has been nothing short of Oscarworthy. And that fucking picture was the cherry on top of it all. All three of you were spinning. It was hilarious."

He turns to look at me. "Oh, and Mills," he deadpans. "Maybe use a different code for your door alarm. Your dead grampie's birthday wasn't exactly difficult to decipher."

"Fuck you," I yell and Johnny sneers. He's having the time of his life right now.

"I decided to get even closer, so that's when I used Gwen." He's actually laughing deeply now, and the sound bouncing off the cold concrete walls is chilling and psychotic.

"I was right in front of you," he says. "Wyatt suspected Theo. Theo hated himself for what happened with Sophia, and I was behind all of it, pulling the strings." Johnny stops and sighs loudly.

"I was getting tired of this little charade, though. And you are smarter than I gave you credit for, little Mouse."

"You're a fucking psycho," I spit.

"Indeed," he agrees proudly, applying the serrated edge of the knife to his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. He touches his lip and sees the drop on his finger.

"Whoopsies!" he exclaims.

"But now we are in a real pickle, *Millipede*." The use of Wyatt's nickname for me makes me wretch again.

"So, here we are. We are not all getting out of this alive, clearly," he muses. "So, I am giving you something I never had. A choice. Is it gonna be Theo, the tortured uncle with an unfortunate past and possibly some undiagnosed anger

issues?” he asks with a chuckle. “Or Wyatt, the man you love? The man who is quite possibly the worst detective in history, who couldn’t find a serial killer if he shared a meal with him?”

“Me. Kill me,” Theo murmurs again. His voice is so small.

“No, Theo. No one is dying. I’m not choosing anything.”

“Johnny, kill me,” he says devoid of all emotion.

“No, Theo. No! Please don’t do this,” I cry. “You don’t have to do this.”

I’m crying so hard it’s hard to form sentences. Theo is sitting on the dirty gray floor, leaning against the wall, with his head back, looking up at the ceiling. When he lowers his head and meets my eyes there is no light anymore. He looks like a shell of the man I first met.

“You do not have to choose, Millie,” he says robotically. “I am not a good man. Johnny is right. There is some darkness inside me. You have seen it. I thought I killed a woman and I left her there. I hurt you,” he winces. “Wyatt is right about me.”

It’s then that Wyatt finds his voice. “Theo, you are NOT a killer! You are not him. The only person who deserves to die is Johnny.”

“God, this is touching,” Johnny says, clapping slowly. He has his phone out and he’s recording everything.

“Untie me, Johnny,” I scream. “Now!”

“Wow, Millipede, I like this side of you. It’s making me hard.” He adjusts himself in his jeans as he walks over to me. “Alright, I’ll untie you, but I will gut you if you try anything. Capisco?”

“I understand!” I scream.

Johnny kneels at my feet and cuts the zip ties. Next, he goes around behind me and does the same to the zip ties on my wrists.

“I mean, I’m being pretty generous here. You get to decide who dies. Unfortunately for you, you will die afterwards, since that’s always been the plan, but at least you don’t have to watch both men you care about die.”

I jump up and kneel in front of Theo, placing my hands on either side of his face and forcing him to look up at me. For everything he has done and everything he is, I know he loves me, and I know he is not the evil person he has condemned himself to be.

“Theo, look at me. Look at me, now,” I plead. “It’s going to be OK. We can stop all of this. You can get help.” I place my forehead on his and try to steady my breath.

Tears form in his eyes as he leans back to look into my eyes. “There is no help for me, Millie. I’m broken. I never cared about anyone, except Sophia, and I hurt her. And then you, and I hurt you, too. It’s too late.”

A lone tear falls from his eye. It mixes with the blood on his face and by the time it hits the ground between us, it’s like he’s crying blood. My heart is breaking for Theo, for the life he could’ve had if he’d ever been given a chance.

He was just a boy, so badly neglected that his capacity for love deteriorated in that dirty apartment. He watched his mother die. No amount of love the Brissett’s gave him could ever supplant the void that settled in his young heart. He doesn’t understand love like a normal person. He doesn’t understand how to be vulnerable with someone. My own soul is in agony for his family, for me, for Wyatt. It’s all so monumentally unfair.

“You were never meant to be mine,” he whispers.

“You know what you have to do,” he then says, motioning to Johnny who is still recording the scene as it unfolds.

“Theo, NO!” I beg. “I can’t. I won’t. What about your family?” I cry.

Johnny sets the phone and the knife down on the chair that I vacated and starts slowly clapping. “This has been very

entertaining, but it sounds like Theo here is ready to meet his maker. Just say the word, Millie.”

“I refuse to do this,” I screech.

“Theo, forgive me,” Wyatt yells from the other corner, interrupting us. “Forgive me for everything.”

Theo smiles through his beaten and bloody face. “All is forgiven, Brother,” he says softly.

Johnny comes up behind me, knife in hand, and yanks me backward, holding the knife to my throat.

“I’m tired of this shit. She didn’t choose. Now you both get to watch her die,” he insists.

His tone is unwavering. I close my eyes, silently making peace with this life I’ve been given. I say a prayer that someone will take care of Milo and Gwen and that both Theo and Wyatt will come out of this somehow and be OK.

Suddenly, Wyatt jumps to his feet, hands still tied behind his back, and runs at Johnny. He rams straight into him in a tackle, without the use of his arms. Johnny drops the knife and falls to the ground. He and Wyatt roll around before scrambling to their feet, and then Johnny ends up landing a hard punch to Wyatt’s cheek, momentarily throwing him off balance and causing him to fall against the wall. Johnny quickly grabs the gun and turns, firing a shot.

I close my eyes tightly and brace myself for the pain that never seems to come. Peeking my eyes open, I see that Theo had somehow gotten up and jumped in front of me, taking the bullet. His body is flung backward into me from the force of the impact before he drops to the ground in front of me.

A sob rips out of my chest at the sight of him on the dirty concrete. Before I can think about what I’m doing, I race to where the knife was dropped and snatch it up off the ground, then I lunge toward Johnny. He doesn’t make a move to escape or attack me. It’s as if he knew it would come to this, and maybe he did. Maybe this is what he wanted. Everything moves in slow motion as I grip the knife by the handle and

plunge it into the left side of his chest, just near the armpit like Wyatt taught me. I must hit his axillary artery, because the blood starts spurting out in a steady stream as Johnny groans and doubles over. His instinct is to cover up the wound, but then he simply collapses on the floor and lays on his side, curling up in the fetal position in a lake of his own blood.

I drop the knife as both my hands fly to my face and I scream in a guttural voice I've never heard before. I feel myself outside of my body. It's like I'm floating above the scene, watching it happen to someone else. When I hear Theo whispering something with his last breaths, I'm pulled back into reality and race over to him, dropping to my knees beside him. I let my senses hone in on what he is saying. I can't hear anything but his voice. I only see him.

"I love you," he whispers. "Wyatt will take care of you now." And then all of the tension leaves his body and he goes completely lax. His face is set, eyes open and fixed, void of any life. Those eyes that used to make me feel so warm and safe are dead now.

I cry silently, hugging my body as I rock back and forth next to him.

I look over at Johnny, his dead, lifeless body in a pool of his own blood. My skin breaks out in gooseflesh and I'm shaking. I'm brought back to all of those times when I felt someone watching me, felt someone was there, waiting for me. I sensed the proximity of his evil, even when I didn't realize it. I notice his phone and reach for it, throwing it against the wall with a painful cry, destroying all evidence of the diabolic events from today.

"Millie," Wyatt rasps.

"Wyatt!" I answer and run over to where he is collapsed against the wall.

I kneel in front of him and reach out, gently placing my hand on his swollen cheek. His eyes focus on me and the confusion starts to clear. Relief spreads across his face when he sees that I'm OK. Then he looks over and sees Johnny dead

and his shoulders relax. But as soon as his gaze lands on Theo's lifeless form, he begins to silently weep.

“Wyatt, I'm here,” I say gently as I kiss his forehead and then his cheek. I kiss every inch of his face and hold him close.

“Are you alright?” he says faintly.

“I'm OK. We are going to be OK,” I say as I hold him, but don't know if I believe my own words. We sit amidst the blood and the smell of gunpowder, rocking back and forth, holding on to one another for dear life. In the distance, the wailing of sirens is getting louder.

Epilogue

8 Months Later

“You’re doing so good, Millipede!” I say as I grip my girlfriend’s hand. “That’s it. Breathe .”

Millie has been in something called “active labor” for almost four hours. She’s exhausted, drenched with sweat, and short-tempered. She is also the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Her face is red and there are tears in her eyes, but she’s handling labor with the same grace as she handled her surprise pregnancy.

Gwen appears out of nowhere and smooths the sweat-soaked hair from her forehead with a cold, wet washcloth.

“Breathe, Mouse!” she says. “Remember your breathing.”

The doctor pops up from between her legs and makes an announcement.

“You’re at ten centimeters, Millie. It’s time to push.”

“You’re doing it, Baby,” I tell her. “Push. And don’t forget to breathe.”

“Stop telling me to breathe! I’m breathing,” she snaps.

While still holding her hand, I try to slyly sneak a peak of the action by leaning ever so slightly to the left.

“Wyatt! Get back up here!” she yells. “We talked about this. If you try to look down there one more time, I’m going to make sure it’s the last time you ever see my vagina.”

“Geez,” I say under my breath. “I just thought it would be cool to see the baby coming.”

“Right?” Gwen agrees. “It’s the miracle of life. I wanna look at Millie’s vagina, too!”

“I can hear both of you!” Millie grits out. “No one looks at my vagina! Keep it up and you are both getting kicked out.”

I'm pretty sure I hear her doctor snicker from his perch between her thighs.

Gwen and I make eye contact and chuckle like a couple of kids who have been caught doing something wrong, but Millie's painful groans quickly bring us back to the moment.

"Wyatt," she cries. "It hurts."

"Look at me," I tell her. "Look right here." I look directly into her eyes. "Focus here and breathe." I look into her gray-blue eyes and see the strength there that she has always possessed but sometimes forgets.

"AAAHHHH," she cries again. "I can't."

"Millipede, listen to me. You are the strongest woman I have ever met. You are minutes away from meeting him. You will do this." This time when we lock eyes, I can see her resolve. Yep, my girl's got this.

She nods and grips my hand harder. I see the knuckles on her other hand turn white as she's gripping Gwen's hand with the same force. I know it's the same force because Gwen looks like she is about to pass out.

"That's good, Millie," the doctor says. "Just a couple of more pushes." Millie leans forward while I help by leaning in behind her. She pushes one more time with a loud noise somewhere between a grunt and a scream and then falls back onto the bed.

I look down and see a tiny, red, squishy, goopy mess of a human being tended to by the doctor. Ten fingers. Check. Ten toes. Check. Tiny penis and balls. Double check. The baby gets handed to the nurse who rubs him with a towel, and he starts to cry. They weigh him and check his APGAR scale (*I paid attention in birthing class*) and then he gets wrapped in a tiny blanket, then the nurse hands him to Millie, who is crying from joy and sheer exhaustion.

"Hi Handsome," she coos, looking into his little face. I know I'm biased, but he is the cutest baby I've ever seen. Millie places kisses on his tiny cheeks and nose. "You will

never have to wonder how much I love you. Do you understand that? Never.” She unwraps his blanket and kisses his tiny fingers. “I.” *Kiss*. “Will.” *Kiss*. “Never.” *Kiss*. “Leave.” *Kiss*. “You.” *Kiss*.

The tears I’ve been holding back break free and travel down my cheeks. I am not much of a crier but hearing her speak those words twists my heart inside my chest. Gwen, who has been crying silently, finally speaks.

“Mouse, I’m going to go spread the good news and give you two some time alone.” She leans over and kisses Millie’s forehead and Millie smiles up at her, only momentarily taking her eyes off of the baby.

When we are finally alone, she looks at me expectantly. “Do you want to hold him?”

“More than anything,” I say without pause. She carefully hands me the baby and I cradle him in my arms, supporting his neck. He looks up at me and opens his eyes briefly. It’s such a surreal feeling to look into the eyes of my best friend. His hair is lighter, like Millie’s, at least for now. But those amber-colored eyes are from his father.

“How do you feel?” Millie asks, chewing on her lower lip with worry.

I exhale, looking down at the baby boy in my arms, and then at her with a smile.” I feel like I have a son.”

Millie’s tears start again, and so do mine.

When Millie found out she was pregnant she was terrified. They gave her a routine pregnancy test in the hospital when she was being treated after what we now refer to as “the incident.”

She tried to hide it from me initially, but I knew something was off.

Finally, one day while we were walking Milo on the beach she stopped me and told me that she was pregnant.

She explained that she hadn’t been feeling well and skipped her birth control pills for a few days due to nausea,

and that must've been when it happened.

She was burdened with guilt about sleeping with Theo, not because she did anything wrong by me, but because she felt it was then that Theo knew they had no future.

She struggled to forgive herself for the way it happened. I held her tightly as she cried. Then I told her that I planned to be there for her and the baby, who would become the biggest blessing we could ever dream of. As messy as our situation was, it was still *our* situation and *our* love, and that made it beautiful to me.

I try not to dwell on the events that led us to finding one another, but rather revel in gratitude that I found the love of my life.

I suspect that initially Millie thought it would get tougher for me to stick around as we got deeper into the pregnancy. She worried I might leave, knowing that the baby was Theo's. She said she'd understand if that happened. But it didn't. If anything, I felt closer to Millie and the baby. We went to birthing classes, we shopped for clothes, diapers, swings, and everything else we could think of, and I built a crib. I loved every minute of it.

We went to see Theo's family, the Brissetts and the Carsons, together to tell them the news. It was great to reconnect with them after all these years. They were devastated by his death and knowing some small part of him was going to live on, brought them a modicum of peace.

We have both been doing well in therapy, trying to work through the entire crazy experience of last year. Mine is department mandated, but I would have gone anyway. I wanted to be as mentally healthy as possible before the baby arrived.

I'm holding him close and kissing his tiny head, basking in the new baby smell, when there is a small knock at the door. Millie is finally sleeping so I get up to meet Theo's family at the door. His mom and Sarah enter first, both crying as soon as they see the bundle in my arms.

I hand him to Sarah and step away to let them bond.

Millie and I decided that no one needed to know the details of what happened with Theo and Sophia. Her dying at Johnny's hands was inevitable, regardless of Theo's involvement. I never put it in my report and I didn't tell Sophia's parents when I called them to finally give them the news they'd been expecting for years.

Johnny never disclosed where he left Sophia's body, so that was difficult for them, but at least they had some closure.

Johnny's family could not believe he was the Sierra Falls Strangler. We will never know how many women he killed, and the thought haunts me. I suspect it's somewhere in the teens.

His family never saw any signs of his potential psychopathy, as often happens in such cases. He was that good at masking it.

He will go down in infamy as a serial killer, just like he wanted, but the details, the details, Millie and I keep for ourselves. He doesn't get to control that narrative.

Theo is remembered as a hero. He sacrificed his life to save Millie and the unborn son he didn't know existed. This baby will be so loved by all of us and will never know the same type of pain that Theo grew up with. I made a promise to Millie, and a silent promise to Theo one day, while visiting his grave, that I would always be there for the baby and be the father that he never had. I think he would've said, "Thanks, Asshole," if he could have. And that's enough for me

Extended Epilogue

“I swear, Wyatt, I’m going to ground him. This is the final straw.”

“You know you have never been able to be upset with him for too long. He just pops that dimple at you and you are putty in his hands.”

“Nope. Nope.” She shakes her head. “Not this time. Do you know what he did?”

I grab a highball glass and pour myself two fingers of whiskey. “There’s no telling.”

“Listen to this! He got caught, sneaking into Harper Thompson’s room through her bedroom window!” *Of course he did. My son is nothing if not determined.*

“This is going to be a whole thing, isn’t it?” I ask, plopping down in my chair.

“Ya think?” she screeches. “Harper’s father is pissed, as he should be. I mean she’s eighteen, but still.”

“I’ll call her father later,” I concede.

Millie is still frantically throwing ingredients on the counter. I don’t know what she’s making. I don’t even know if *she* knows what she’s making, but she’s going to anger-bake something amazing and we all reap the benefits. She’s still seething as she searches for something in the pantry.

“He’s such an intelligent kid. Why does he always have to push the boundaries? I’m so mad, Wyatt. I’m so mad.”

She’s not actually talking to me, so I just let her go, watching her work out her frustrations in the kitchen.

My wife is still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. At forty-four, she turns heads everywhere she goes. She’s still got her beautiful blonde hair, luscious curves, and snarky attitude, but she’s not the naive girl I fell in love with. Her wisdom comes from the trials she faced as a child, to “the incident,” to being married to a cop, and raising three kids.

Kane, at seventeen, tests us the most, but the twins, Jack and Lexie, at age fifteen, aren't far behind. Kane reminds me so much of Theo sometimes. Theo's family sees it, too, and they dote on that boy like you wouldn't believe. He's very close with them and his cousins, especially Emmett, who treats him like a little brother.

My son is brilliant and can read people, a gift handed down from his father, so he can sweet-talk his way out of trouble in most situations. I can't decide if that's a good thing or bad thing yet.

I look around this home we've built. It's warm and wonderful, with photographs of our life together, all taken by my wife, scattered around: pictures of Millie pregnant with Kane; she and I holding him at the hospital; our wedding day with my family and Gwen; Kane with the Brissetts and Carsons; Millie pregnant with the twins; Millie with the kids and Milo; and then, a very old Milo, the summer before he died; and candid family shots of all us. It all surrounds me and gives my life meaning. We outgrew the house Millie's grandpa built long ago, but we still have it and rent it out. Millie could never let go of that place and all of the memories. I couldn't either.

I was promoted to lieutenant five years ago so I could be home with my family. My dad was right. Being a detective is tough. Once I felt that it started to affect my ability to be a good husband and father, I decided to make the change. I spend my time in the office, doing administrative tasks that are honestly boring as shit, but I'm home in the evenings and I don't regret it for a minute.

Millie is still talking to herself as she stirs chocolate chips into the bowl of batter.

"He could be anything in this life, Wyatt. Anything. Yet, he chooses to be a juvenile delinquent."

I can't help but laugh.

"Millipede, come here." She stares at me as she furiously stirs the batter. "I'm too mad."

I lean back in my chair and cock my head to the side. “Baby, come here.”

She finally drops the spoon and marches over to me, standing right in front of me, hands firmly placed on her hips.

“Good Girl,” I tell her, my eyes ogling over her body, and she smiles slyly, the anger she’s feeling with Kane dissipating under my admiration.

I pull her down so she is straddling my legs and she winds her hands into the hair at the back of my neck. I pull her to me, kiss her lips softly, and rub my nose against hers. It feels just as good now as it did eighteen years ago.

She smiles and kisses me again, this time sucking on my bottom lip and sliding further into my lap. I put my hand on her ass and squeeze the meaty flesh. She moans into my mouth.

We hear the front door slam and keys being dropped into the bowl on the table at the entryway.

“Gross. Get a room,” Lexie says, entering the kitchen, with Kane and Jack not far behind, laughing and talking about something that happened at school.

Millie drops her head into my neck and laughs, because what else can you do? This is life with kids.

Kane walks over, sweeps his finger into the cookie batter, and smiles deviously before putting it in his mouth.

“You,” she says to him, sliding off me and standing up, “are on my list.”

Lexie and Jack snicker as Millie walks over and hugs both of them.

Lex looks just like my Millipede, and it scares the shit out of me. She’s a little bit taller, thanks to my genes, but her face is all Millie. Jack definitely has my height, already as tall as Kane. The twins both have light brown hair and blue eyes.

But right now, it’s Kane’s amber eyes that Millie is honed in upon. “Go get washed up for dinner,” she tells the twins as she marches over to Kane. He’s at least seven inches

taller than her, but right now he looks like a boy, about to get his ass chewed by his mother.

“Kane Theodore Brissett Hudson,” she starts, and my son’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Oh, Son,” I tease, “It’s on. You just got middle-named.”

“What did I do?” he mumbles through a mouthful of cookie dough, shrugging innocently.

“Harper Thompson!” she scolds.

“Oh, that.” He chuckles, and I think her head might explode.

I shake my head, knowing he will talk his way out of this eventually, and we will have a man-to-man talk later in private.

I have learned a lot in my forty-six years on this earth. I’ve seen things that no one should have to see: the ugliness of life, the worst things imaginable.

But I have also been privileged to experience this. The people I love, laughing and crying and fighting and hugging. Living life.

I often remember something Millie said a long time ago about looking at life through the camera lens. You see it through the amount of light you allow in. *I’m a lucky son of a bitch*, I think to myself.

My life is pretty fucking bright.

The End.

Afterword

Thank you for reading Aperture! I am so honored that you spent time with these characters that I created.

I have several more books in the works. I don't plan on stopping anytime soon!

Follow me on my socials to keep up with new releases.

Facebook: [steffanie.blais](#)

Instagram: [author_steffanieblais](#)

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My Gratitude page

I cannot start this acknowledgment without first thanking the person who has been telling me I should write a book for years, my husband, Eric.

With four very busy teenagers in the house, he stepped up and took over the majority of the cooking, shopping, cleaning, rides to practices, and homework so that I could park myself in front of the computer for hours on end.

Babe, I can't thank you enough for your help, your sweet words of encouragement, your validation that I have good stories to tell, and you neck rubs. There is no book boyfriend that could ever come close to your level of amazing.

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You are one of my favorite people in the world and I literally could not have done this without you!

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About The Author

Steffanie Blais



Aperture is Steffanie's debut novel. She is a lifetime lover of books, especially in the romance and thriller genres.

Steffanie lives on the central coast of California, where she is a Registered Dietitian, and busy mom to 4 teenagers. Her favorite

things to do when not writing include cooking, taking bubble baths, traveling, and spending time with her husband and children.