



*a romantic
comedy*

ARROGANT DEVIL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY

ARROGANT DEVIL

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Author's Note:

ARROGANT DEVIL is a full-length standalone novel of 93,000 words. At the end, I've included an excerpt from my #1 bestselling sports romance **THE SUMMER GAMES: SETTLING THE SCORE**.

ARROGANT DEVIL concludes at around 85% on your device.

Happy Reading!

XO, RS Grey

ARROGANT DEVIL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY

MEREDITH

I left my husband last night. There's something so nice about the past tense—*left*. He's still in California. Meanwhile, I'm standing in a gas station in Middle-of-Nowhere, Texas. I have no money, no car. I pawned a gaudy diamond tennis bracelet to purchase a plane ticket to San Antonio, and to its credit, the bracelet also paid for the taxi currently fueling up at the pump outside. However, my cash has run out and my stomach is growling.

I eyeball the shelves lined with an array of sugary junk food. It's the good stuff: half-dozen packs of white powdered donuts that are messier than glitter bombs and stacks of sad, deflated honey buns. It all seems like what aliens would come up with if tasked with recreating human food. In spite of this, my mouth waters just looking at it all. I want to tear open a bag of Doritos and waterfall the chips straight into my mouth. I want to double-fist the ancient, desiccated hot dogs destined to forever spin on greasy rollers—that's how hungry I am.

I didn't plan my departure very well. I didn't plan it at all, in fact. Last night, I was lying on my side of the bed, wide awake. Andrew was snoring loudly beside me, just as confident as ever that the sun would rise in the morning like it always does. An hour earlier, he'd come in late from a work dinner with lipstick smeared on his cheek. His white collar, meanwhile, was pristine.

I had a million reasons for leaving him—enough to fill this entire gas station snack aisle, enough to make any marriage counselor put a big down payment on a vacation home—but

last night, I only needed one. I left, and that's all that matters. There's half a country between him and me, and the only thing I have to worry about now is putting my next foot forward... well, that and the fact that I have nowhere to go, no money, no job, and no food. I'm also rapidly running out of sellable accessories, but let's not get bogged down by the details.

I stare at a can of peanuts sitting on the shelf. Yesterday, I could have slapped my black AMEX down on the checkout counter and dragged my arm across the shelf, knocking food into my basket like a contestant on *Supermarket Sweep*. Now, I can't afford peanuts; Andrew canceled my cards as soon as he realized I left.

I smile, imagining how pissed he must have been when the truth dawned on him. He never thought I'd do it. It was part of his spiel: *Who pays the bills? Who buys your clothes? You're nothing without me, Meredith—worthless.*

In a purely financial sense, he was right about the whole “worthless” thing. My net worth currently consists of a couple dollars and some loose change. He was wrong about the other part though. I left him, and I did it in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on my back. It's the outfit I had laid out for a charity luncheon—an event that must be taking place at this very moment without me. The ensemble is a frilly white blouse, Hermes belt, and designer jeans.

My great escape was a victim of my fleeting courage. I knew if I sat down and planned it all out, I'd lose my nerve. I needed to have no time to back out, no second-guessing. Now, I realize I should have been a *bit* more practical. I should have packed myself some getaway snacks, water, maybe some sneakers.

Honestly, though, I never thought I would be here. Of all the places I could have run to, Texas seemed to make the most sense because of my sister—well, technically she's my *half*-sister. I recall the phone conversation I had with her last night while I was at the airport trying to catch a red-eye. I had to dial her number about a dozen times before she finally answered.

“Meredith?” she asked, obviously shocked to see my name appear on her phone screen. We aren’t exactly close. She probably has me in her phone as *That Half-Sister I Hardly Know, Meredith*. To be fair, I have her in my phone as *Half-Helen*.

“Helen! Hey!”

She didn’t answer back right away. There was so much static on her end of the line.

“Are you there? Can you hear me?” I plugged my free ear with a finger and hoped the call would suddenly come through clearer.

“Barely!” she shouted. “What’s going on? I have like fifty missed calls from you.”

I blanched. “Yeah, well, it’s actually kind of a long story, but I’m on my way to Texas.”

“Texas?”

She sounded shocked, and that’s fair. She’s lived in the Lone Star State for six years and I’ve never visited.

I cut right to the chase since time was another luxury I’d abandoned.

“Yes, and I have a favor to ask...a rather big one actually.”

“Speak up, Meredith, I can hardly hear you. You need a favor?”

“Yes, well, that is”—I raised my voice—“I was wondering if I could stay with you for a while?!”

“What?”

“I’m actually already headed your way.”

A lighthearted, singsong chuckle on my end did not ease her shock.

“Are you kidding? Brent, hold on, it’s Meredith.”

I heard a door close and then she dropped a bomb.

“Well, I hope you haven’t left yet. I’m in Paris.”

“You’re in Paris?! *Paris Paris?*”

For the record, my sister is not a jetsetter. I hoped she meant Paris, Texas, not the croissant-filled country half a world away.

“Yes, *Paris Paris*. Brent and I are traveling for the next three months while our house gets renovated.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

I really almost broke down then. My throat was tightening. Tears were locked and loaded. People were starting to look at me and wonder if TSA had made a mistake letting me through security.

My flight was already boarding as my sister continued, “We’ve been wanting to redo the kitchen and bathrooms for a while...”

What the hell does that have to do with Paris?

“...so we thought, why not make a big trip out of it while our house is unlivable?”

Unlivable. I guess there’s more than one way to demolish a home, a life.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Let’s see, I told the bank, the contractors, the permit office—oh darnit! Now that you mention it, I *did* forget to tell the half-sister I haven’t spoken to since when...*Christmas?*”

Her tone implied that was my fault, and it was—partly.

“Sorry, I’ve been MIA.”

“It’s fine. Listen, why don’t we try to schedule something for the holidays like we always say we will? This time we’ll do it. I’ll fix up the guest room for you and Andrew—”

I rubbed my eyes, hoping I could push the tears back to where they belonged. There was so much to catch her up on.

“No, Helen. It’s a long story, but I need to come *now*. Can I stay in the house while you guys are gone?”

“It’s a disaster zone. There are exterior walls missing. That’s why we left.”

“Right.” Of course. She’d just told me that. “What about jobs? Do you know of anyone hiring? I could update my resume...I think I have it saved on my old university email somewhere.”

At that point Helen began to crack up, then she repeated my request to Brent, and together, their chorus of laughter pounded on my heart like it was a punching bag.

Oh ha-ha-ha, your life is falling apart before your very eyes. Stop, stop—you’re killing me!

“Is this a prank? If so, it’s a very expensive, overseas-phone-call prank. Did Andrew put you up to this?”

“Last call for passengers for flight 365, service to San Antonio. Final boarding at gate 12.”

She must have heard the announcement, because her next words were delivered in a much more serious tone. “Oh my god, you’re really at the airport, aren’t you?”

I was flying down the terminal, knocking down any and all children and elderly people in my path, trying to get to my gate before they closed the doors without me. They even said my name over the loudspeaker. I always wondered what kind of dummy has to have their name announced like that. Me. I’m the dummy.

“Yes. Helen, I’m coming to Texas and I need your help.” I was out of breath from running as I pleaded with her. “*Please*. I can’t explain, but I just need to cash in whatever love you might have for me.”

She sighed, exasperated. She was always exasperated with me about one thing or another, which was one of the reasons I hadn’t bothered visiting in the past.

“Fine. Call me when you land.”

Turns out I didn’t need to call her. She apparently guessed the gist of my situation while I was sitting in a metal tube 30,000 feet in the air and came to her own conclusions. By the

time I landed, I had a dozen text messages from her, each one berating me for my impulsiveness and apparent irrationality.

Helen: Is this all a game, or are you actually leaving Andrew? I'm not going to start calling in favors for you if you're just going to quit and fly back to California in a week.

Seems cold, right? Well, here's the thing: Helen and I don't exactly see eye to eye. We never have. We're ten years apart in age, and our father left her mother for mine. In her eyes, I had the glorious, perfect childhood that was taken from her...and okay, sure, those first few years were pretty good. I got to go on family vacations and every year I had one big Christmas instead of two small ones, but then just like he'd done before, our dad got bored and moved on to the next woman. We should have bonded over our soap opera-worthy father figure, but she graduated and moved out the second she had the chance. Ever since, we've both basically been pretending the other sister doesn't exist.

When I made it outside the airport in Texas, I tried to call her. I dialed...scouted forward in the taxi line...dialed again. I wanted to explain the situation as quickly as possible, and I couldn't do that over text. It was a lot to explain, and well, my fingers were still shaking from what I'd done. Also, the sordid truth is best explained sans emojis.

When she didn't answer, I was forced to text her and keep it brief.

Meredith: I left Andrew for good. I need a job and a place to stay. If you can help, that would be wonderful. If you can't, that would be less wonderful.

Helen: Fine. I'll ask Jack if he needs a temp. I'll send you instructions for how to get to Blue Stone Ranch.

Meredith: You are wonderful.

Helen: Don't make me regret this.

So anyway, that's why I'm here, spending what little money I have on a road trip across Central Texas.

Blue Stone Ranch is where my sister has worked for the last six years. I can't begin to imagine what she does as the executive assistant to the owner. *Shine his spurs? Shear his sheep? Bale his hay?* It's all a little out of my realm, but I'll do it all and *more*—gladly.

My stomach growls again so loudly that I know the cashier manning the gas station counter can hear it. Thankfully, she seems too distracted with problems of her own.

I peek out the front window just as the taxi driver finishes up at the pump. No one knows the truth about my life except him. He's heard it all. In the few hours since he picked me up from the airport, he's acted as my chauffeur and silent therapist. Even better, there's no way he'll be repeating any of the details I dumped on him because I'm pretty sure he's had headphones in the entire time. All morning, he's responded with resigned grunts and sighs—the universal language of annoyance. I'm pretty sure he's tempted to get back into the taxi and leave me to fend for myself in the Texas badlands.

I need to get a move on.

Driven by a primal urge, I yank the can of peanuts off the shelf and carry them to the counter.

This feeling in the pit of my stomach is new, and I'm pretty sure it's not hunger-related. This is like nothing I've ever done before. I've never stood on my own two feet—I've never had to. I married Andrew right out of college. He was seven years older, already well on his way up the ladder at a big production company. I moved out of my college apartment straight into his multimillion-dollar house in Beverly Hills.

It's funny how much I used to fear what is now happening to me. I assumed it was a fate worse than death to end up alone, poor, and directionless. If Andrew taught me anything, it's that I was wrong.

I plunk the nuts on the checkout counter and the attendant meets my eye. She offers a weak smile, and I can see the strain

of life etched in the crow's feet around her eyes.

“How are you this morning?” I ask with a small, empathetic smile.

For a second, her mouth starts to form a generic answer, but she must see something she recognizes in my expression because she laughs quietly and shakes her head.

“Honestly? I've been better.”

I nod. “Same here.”

“Just this?”

She's pointing to the can of peanuts. I look down and the light catches brightly on my diamond wedding ring. It's my last tie to the life I'm trying to leave behind, the last vestige of a man who for five years covered me with shiny things while trying his damndest to dull my own sparkle. I could sell it and use the money as a cushion—Lord knows I need it—but I won't. I don't want any more of his money. Besides, soon, I'll have my own. I basically just got hired at Blue Stone Ranch. I can see it now: me in full denim overalls, bandana tied around my neck, wheat stalk between my teeth. I will be the best employee that ranch has ever seen, just as soon as I get there.

Without a shadow of hesitation, I slide the heavy jewel off my finger and drop it on the chipped linoleum counter with a clack.

“Get a good price for that,” I say, shaking the can of nuts. “I know I did.”

JACK

“**F**uckin’ hell. Who left the damn gate open!”

There are pigs everywhere: in the garden, the barn, down the gravel drive. I even found one in the house, a chunky little piglet rooting around in my kitchen, canvassing for crumbs. I snatched him up and walked out onto my porch to find half my ranch hands running low to the ground with arms outstretched, trying to catch as many pigs as they could before I noticed.

Pigs are squealing, ranch hands are tripping and cursing to high heaven, and the head gardener is over near the parsnips looking like an outmatched bouncer at a 21-and-up bar. It looks like a ridiculous rodeo sport that should involve elementary school-aged children, not grown-ass men.

“Max!” I shout, catching the attention of one of the younger guys as he runs in front of my porch. He stops pursuing a pig, whips off his baseball cap, and wipes sweat from his brow. “Weren’t you on hog duty today?”

His eyes go wide in fear. “I swear to God I closed the gate after the morning feed!”

“Might wanna take back that oath because it sure doesn’t look like you did.”

He frowns and looks away, swallowing slowly. His voice cracks with fear as he answers, “Damn sure I did, but I s’pose ___”

I step forward and drop the piglet in his hands. “You have ten minutes to fix this. If these pigs aren’t put up by then, I’m docking your pay.”

“Yes sir.” He tips his head in a nod and then he’s off again, running full speed with the piglet in hand.

On another day, I’d find this scene amusing. Today, I’ve reached my wit’s end. It’s Monday and I’ve nearly lost my mind. My executive assistant, Helen, is gallivanting halfway across the world. My housekeeper quit last week to move closer to her daughter, and now my ranch hands are recreating Three Stooges skits on the clock. I have too much on my plate and I feel overwhelmed. I don’t like it. I’ve run Blue Stone Ranch for a decade and I hate to think I’ve gone soft in the last few years and relied too much on Helen. She warned me I wouldn’t be able to function with her in Paris, and now I regret giving her time off. Is it too much to ask that she work every damn day from now until she croaks? What’s so great about France anyway? That place made Van Gogh so depressed he cut his own ear off.

I stomp up to my office on the second floor and slam the door. My grandmother is downstairs, standing at the living room window, thoroughly enjoying the pig debacle taking place outside. The old bird takes too much pleasure in my problems.

I take a seat at my desk and heave a deep breath. My ball cap gets tossed onto the desk and I drag a hand through my hair, no doubt making it stand every which way. I need a haircut. Normally, Helen would’ve scheduled something. I sigh and put the cap on backward, saving that problem for another day.

There are 32 emails waiting for my reply. I don’t answer a single one of them. Instead, I turn my attention to the blinking red light on my work phone. I have no doubt I have enough voicemails to occupy my entire morning. Once again, I curse Helen for leaving me to fend for myself.

Blue Stone Ranch used to be a 1000-acre cattle ranch. In the late 1960s, during a bad drought, my grandfather sold off

most of the cattle and started a restaurant, Blue Stone Farm. With its farm-to-table fare and world-class barbecue, it was an overnight success. My father expanded that endeavor with a winery, and since then, the company has grown tenfold. Now, families travel from all across the south to experience everything Blue Stone Ranch has to offer. We have a small luxury bed & breakfast, a vineyard, a restaurant, and a wedding venue. Some might call it being diversified; others might say it's a good way to get stretched too thin.

It's been ten years since I took the helm, and even with managers running each arm of the business, I still feel like I'm in over my head most days.

I start scrolling through voicemails, listening to a few seconds of each before I skip to the next one. When I get to one Helen left late last night, I try not to get my hopes up. *Please say France sucks and you're coming back to work.*

"Hey Jack, call me when you get this. It's urgent."

I call her back immediately and she answers after the second ring.

"Missed me too much? Understandable. So when's your flight home?" I ask in lieu of a greeting.

She sighs, annoyed. "Stop that. I'm not coming home."

"Aren't you sick of traveling yet?"

"We've only been here a week."

"Paris can't be that entertaining."

"Brent and I are really enjoying it."

"Seen the Mona Lisa yet? Starry Night? Stuff's all on Google, hi-res and everything."

"Jack—"

"Right, well, did you hear that Mary left two days after you did? Yeah, moved back to Houston to be closer to her daughter. I've lost my assistant and my housekeeper in one fell swoop, so I don't really have time to chat about how much

you're enjoying your vacation. I have enough on my plate as is."

"Well, that's why I'm calling—I have a solution for that. I found you a temp."

"I told you I don't need one."

"And *I* think you do." She trudges on before I can argue. "My sister will be there later today and she's going to fill in for me while I'm gone."

"*Sister?* I didn't know you had a sister."

I lean back in my chair, suddenly interested. I imagine Helen 2.0: an older, no-nonsense brunette with a tight bun. Picture your favorite elementary school teacher, the hard-ass who managed to wrangle a group of disobedient nine-year-olds *and* teach them long division—that's Helen.

"Yeah, well, I don't talk to her much, which is probably why you didn't know she existed. She's ten years younger and we didn't grow up together. In fact, I hardly know her. Still, she says she needs a job, and it's perfect timing since you sound like you're pulling your hair out without me running the show."

I can hardly believe my luck. I didn't think I'd survive three months without Helen, and here she is, fixing my problems from across the pond.

"Perfect. Send her my way. If she's anything like you, she'll save my ass."

Helen laughs. "Bad news: she and I couldn't be more different if we tried."

"Well if she has even half your work ethic, she'll still be a pretty damn good employee."

There's a pregnant silence that gives birth to a 10lb-4oz baby silence. Helen should be singing her sister's praises, but she isn't, and I'm suspicious.

"Helen, what aren't you telling me?"

“I don’t want to taint your image of her before she even arrives.”

“If you want me to hire her, you’d better start talking.”

“Well...I guess I just don’t want you to expect her to be like me. Meredith is...” She sighs. “Meredith is one of those lucky people who life comes a little easier for. She was spoiled rotten growing up. We have different moms, and she looks just like hers: petite, beautiful, you know the type. Our father and—hell, half the world always gave her more attention.”

“Is this leading somewhere?”

I can practically hear her roll her eyes.

“Anyway, she moved to California for college, married some rich movie producer right after graduation who dotes on her nonstop. All I’m saying is she’s used to a certain kind of life. Don’t expect too much...grit.”

“Now I’m confused. Why the hell does she need a job working for me?”

“Apparently she’s up and left her husband.”

“The dotting, rich movie producer? Makes sense.”

“Exactly. There’s no way she would have left him willingly. If you ask me, I bet Meredith got herself into some kind of trouble. Maybe she has a spending problem or a boxed wine habit and he threatened to cut her off. Rich people always find some way to fill up their time with vices. I wouldn’t be surprised. Like I said, she was spoiled when we were younger. This is what happens when you’ve never wanted for anything.”

As she drones on, I swear another ten emails pile up in my inbox. I have too much to do to be sitting on the phone listening to a story about some woman I have no plan to employ.

I sit up and sandwich the phone between my shoulder and ear so I can start replying to the first email. “Well, you’ve given quite the glowing recommendation for this suspected

overspending alcoholic. Good thing she's someone else's problem."

"Jack, I already promised her I'd get her a position with you."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"She's family. If I were there, I'd help her."

"Let's compromise: you get on a flight home, and I'll consider it. Deal?"

"*Jack.*"

She sounds exasperated, but then so am I.

"I gotta go. My *assistant* left me high and dry and I have emails to answer."

"She's my sister."

"And?"

"And I'm calling in a favor. I've worked for you for six years and have never once called in a favor."

"You're telling me you're going to waste that on some spoiled brat who's bound to go crawling back to California when she gets her first splinter?"

"Isn't that what you want? The sooner she leaves, the sooner you get your peace and quiet back."

She makes a good point.

"You owe me."

"I'll log in to your email remotely and answer those emails you have stacked up. How's that?"

"Let's see if the princess shows up first. Something tells me she'll take one look at the place and suddenly decide her valley girl life doesn't look quite so bad anymore."

MEREDITH

“I can’t go on,” the taxi driver says, pulling over to the side of the road and putting his car in park.

“Boy, do I know what you mean,” I agree ruefully.

“No, I mean, you gotta get out.”

“Oh, actually, I don’t think we’re there yet. We still have a while.”

I lean forward and point through the front windshield as if to prove my point. There’s nothing but trees and dirt road until the sky meets the horizon.

“Lady, this is it. Odometer says I’m officially losing money on you. I run a business, not a church shuttle.”

I officially regret my bold, symbolic gesture with the diamond ring.

“How about you give me your address and I’ll send more money after my first paycheck—”

“Yeah right, I’ve heard that one about a million times.”

I’m going to have to get creative.

“If only there was something I could do for you...” I say, making my eyebrows dance suggestively. “Non-sexually, of course. I could clip those hard-to-reach toenails, or—*or*, how about plucking back some of that unibrow you’ve got going on —”

“GET OUT,” he insists, and I know it’s hopeless.

The crabby old man kicks me to the curb—or rather, the edge of the dirt road. His tires stir up dust as he turns back for the main road. A sign back there claimed Blue Stone Ranch was only a few miles in this direction. *A few miles...shit.*

For the first time all morning, I'm grateful I don't have much with me, just my purse. Inside, hilariously, I have what used to be my life's essentials: a dead cell phone, a makeup bag for touchups, a bottle of perfume, my wallet, breath mints, a tub of La Mer moisturizer, and the wrapper of a protein bar I failed to ration properly.

No tennis shoes. No GPS tracking system. Hell, a compass would be much appreciated at this point.

As it is, I'm on my own, for real this time. I even left the last of my precious peanuts in the seat pocket of the taxi.

It's fine. I'll be fine. Everything is fine.

I hoist my purse higher on my shoulder and set off down the road. The soles of my loafers have such little padding that I feel every pebble. I'd walk in the grass beside the road, but it's thick and overgrown, and I fear snakes more than I fear pebbles digging into the soles of my feet. I have nothing but time as I trudge along in the dirt. I try to convince myself I only have a little bit longer, but truthfully, I have no way to gauge how far I've gone. I left the fancy watch that tracks my steps back in California.

I distract myself by trying to see the positive details of my current situation: I am alive and well, I've taken back control of my life, and I am on my way to building something new. I am at the start of a grand adventure. Sure, there will be bumps along the way, but anything is better than the direction I was headed with Andrew.

I think I hear the rumble of a car behind me. I whip around, half convinced I'm hallucinating from dehydration (should've opted for low sodium peanuts), and spot an old truck rumbling down the road. It's coming straight for me, and two things run through my mind at once. First: *Hallelujah! My salvation has arrived!* Second: *In what part of Texas did that chainsaw massacre take place?*

Honestly, I'm just happy to see another human being, even if he turns out to be a cannibal with power tools. The truck barrels closer and it's too late to escape detection, so I settle for a cheerful wave and one of my big, enchanting smiles. The gesture should say, *Hi there! Look at me, I'm too pleasant to murder!*

The truck pulls to a stop beside me and two older, tanned men with beat-up cowboy hats take up the entire bench seat. The one closer to me rolls down the window and props his elbow on the sill. I scan the front seat for killing implements but instead spot a tub of chewing tobacco and two matching Big Gulps.

“Lost, darlin’?”

DARLIN! I swoon and forget I'm supposed to be fearing for my life.

“As a matter of fact, I am.” I smile and explain confidently, “I'm looking for Blue Stone Ranch.”

The man near me frowns and tips his head, confused. “You mean Blue Stone Farm?”

I'm pretty sure Helen said Blue Stone Ranch in her email.

“Umm, now I'm not sure. Is there a difference?”

“Blue Stone Farm is the fancy restaurant a few miles that way.” He points back in the direction I've been walking and my heart sinks. *No. NO.* I am not turning back. “Blue Stone Ranch is...well, a ranch.”

“Where would I find Jack McNight?”

He nods. “Jack'll be at the ranch.”

“Okay then that's where I'm going.”

They exchange a glance, and then the one closer to me nods toward the bed of the truck. “We're going that way too. It ain't the smoothest ride, but you're welcome to hop in there if ya want.”

The driver thumps his friend on the head. “Karl, don't be an idiot—you get in the back and let the nice lady sit up here.”

Didn't your mama teach you jack shit?"

I leap into action before Karl can move. "No! No. It's all right. I insist on riding in the back. It'll remind me of hayrides when I was a kid. I'm very nostalgic."

My survival instincts have kicked in again: at least if I'm sitting back there, I can toss myself out of the truck if I get the feeling they've decided to kidnap me.

It takes me a few tries before I'm able to hoist myself into the bed of the truck using one of the back tires. I am a picture of grace and elegance as I take a seat near the tailgate, situate my purse on my lap, and then smack the bed twice to signal that I'm ready. The truck shifts into drive and away we go.

I spend the next ten minutes in hell as we trudge along the neglected country road. It's a bumpy ride, to say the least. I spit dirt out of my mouth and squeeze my eyes closed to keep dust out of them. Pebbles ping off the tires and somehow fling themselves at my head. I'm getting assaulted on all fronts, and that doesn't even include what the wind is doing to my hair. It takes me too long to realize it's much more pleasant to sit with my back against the cab of the truck rather than the tailgate. As we pull up to a tall, arched wrought iron gate that boldly announces that we've arrived at Blue Stone Ranch, I am convinced I look as if I've just stepped off the front line of a war. I think I even have some blood on my forehead from a particularly beefy bug.

My current physical condition aside, I'm shocked by the sight before me. I've never set foot on a ranch before, but I had concocted a pretty dismal picture in my head, preparing for the worst so I wouldn't be disappointed. Instead, it seems I've stumbled upon what can only be described as an adorable movie set. The main road we're on dead-ends into a circular gravel drive, smack-dab in the center of it all. On one side of the circle, there's a two-story white farmhouse with a metal roof and an inviting porch swing swaying in the wind. There are potted plants and flowers soaking up the sun on the rim of the porch. Beyond that, cows amble in a pasture beneath the shade of massive oak trees. I scan past a large chicken coop and a field with a few glistening horses, and beside that, a

massive red barn divides the animals from the largest garden I've ever seen.

There are people at work everywhere—scratch that, not people, *men*. There isn't a single female in sight, which is probably why I garner quite a few sideways stares as I ride up in the back of the truck like I'm the grand marshal of the saddest one-car parade in history.

The truck pulls up and parks beside the other ranch vehicles. I hop down from the bed and try my best to restore my battered appearance, dabbing tentatively at the blood on my forehead, patting my hair down, and then heaving a sigh of defeat. At this point, it is what it is, and it's gonna be what it's gonna be.

"He'll probably be up in the house," Karl says, pointing in the direction of the farmhouse I was just admiring. "Jack."

I tip my head in thanks and offer a limp wave before I set off to meet my new boss. All eyes are on me as I walk the few yards between the truck and the front porch. I stick out like a sore thumb in this setting, but instead of giving in to the sudden flood of nerves, I try to recall any details Helen might have mentioned about her job over the years.

Let's see, I know she's an executive assistant, and in that role she...assists. *Damn*. I know nothing. *Has she ever said anything about her boss?* I can't remember. I mean, she must enjoy her job if she's been here for almost six years...or maybe she's stayed so long because it's her only option? It's probably hard to find work in such a rural area—and I mean *RURAL*. The journey from San Antonio to Cedar Creek felt like I was going through some kind of time warp. With each passing mile, the countryside became less and less populated, the roads transitioned from concrete to asphalt to dirt, and I'm not sure they even get cell service out here. That's what I'm thinking about when I knock on the front door of the farmhouse and it's whipped open a second later.

A tall, thin woman stands on the threshold wearing jeans and a pearl snap shirt. Her white-gray hair is cropped short in a pixie style and her steel eyes seem to cut right through me.

She's not wearing a stitch of makeup. Still, she's beautiful, regal almost, with a few wrinkles rimming the corners of her eyes.

I open my mouth to introduce myself, but she beats me to the punch.

"Whatever you're sellin', we either don't want it or already got it."

Then she steps back and slams the door in my face.

I'm so shocked that it takes me a minute to gather my wits before I knock again. This time I hear her sigh on the other side of the door before she pulls it open.

"Oh, and we've all heard the story and found the Lord, and we don't need any more, thank you."

Another slam.

I don't knock again because I can see the woman watching to see if I'll leave.

"Don't you people ever listen? Do I need to go get my shotgun or are you gonna leave this porch without me having to chase you off it?"

My eyes are wide as saucers. Is she really going to shoot me if I don't get off her porch? What kind of place *is* Texas?

I put my hands up like she's a police officer and I'm under arrest, then I proceed with caution.

"I'm not selling anything. Please don't shoot me."

The door swings open again. She frowns and gives me a once-over before meeting my gaze again.

"What do you want then?"

"A job."

She finds that pretty hilarious, laughing so hard she has to reach out for the doorframe to steady herself. She slaps her knee with the other hand, looks up at me, and then folds back over in laughter.

“You came all the way out here lookin’ for a job? Oh man, that’s funny,” she says, drying her eyes. “Okay, what’ll it be, missy? Carpenter? Welder?”

“I—”

“Who put you up to this? Dotty? That old trickster. I’m gonna get her back so good, she won’t even see it coming—”

“I don’t know who Dotty is. I’m Helen’s sister, Meredith. She was supposed to call ahead and mention that I was on my way?”

With that announcement, her laughter finally dies. She inspects me with new eyes.

“You don’t look like Helen.”

“We have different moms.”

Her eyes thin in speculation. “Hmm. Well your daddy must’ve had broad tastes.”

I smile, unsure whether or not to take that as a joke.

“Right, well, if it’s a job you need, you’ll have to go talk to Jack. He’s over by the barn doin’ an all-hands.”

“An all-hands?” I ask, turning to see where she’s pointing.

There’s a group of men circled up outside the barn, their attention fixed on a tall figure who seems to be giving orders. From this distance, I can’t make out his features.

“It’s a meeting with all the ranch hands.”

“Ah, got it.” I turn back to her. “Maybe I can wait until he’s finished.”

I have nowhere to be.

She shakes her head. “Normally, I’d agree, but he’s got a lot on his plate today what with your sister gone. I doubt you’ll be able to catch him again.”

Perfect. Just *great*. I was hoping my day would continue down this path. Why would I get to meet with Jack one on one and plead my case when instead, I can slowly limp toward the

all-hands meeting, grinding my teeth together as my blisters start to get blisters?

In another life, my knees give out and I face-plant in the dirt, too damn weak and tired to get up. No one helps me. I perish. My Gucci loafers decompose.

But, in this life, I hobble closer to the group and one by one, every head in the circle turns in my direction. Jack's booming voice carries over the crowd.

I have no clue what he's talking about, but I like the sound of his voice. It's rough, almost gritty, and strong enough to command the attention of a dozen ranch hands—well, right up until *now*, when all eyes are on me.

“Looks like we have company,” someone says, and I finally work up the courage to peel my gaze from the ground. It's like I just walked onto the stage of a cowboy-themed Chippendales show. I'm surrounded by a dozen young, strong guys wearing jeans and sweating through their work shirts. I scan from one cute face to another, taking in the amused grins until I finally make it to their fearless leader and stop short.

My gut clenches as if my ovaries both lean in toward my uterus to say, *Hello! We're here and we like what we see!* My heart stops and then speeds up, confused about how to proceed. My eyes scan up and down him four times before I finally regain enough sense to break the cycle.

Don't get me wrong, this reaction is not about me being love-struck. Seeing as how I just left a pretty bad relationship, oh, I don't know...14 hours ago, I'm immune to the chiseled jaw thing he has going on. Really, I'm just surprised. Just like with the ranch, Jack is nothing like what I was expecting. He's young—mid-thirties, maybe—with a tall frame and wide shoulders. You know that calm confident look every NFL quarterback carries around, that gleam in their eyes that challenges you to try to screw with them? He's got it. On top of that, he has a wide-set jaw, strong cheekbones, and dark brows.

He's wearing a baseball cap backward, and the ends of his dark brown hair wing out from beneath it. These are all things

I don't *want* to notice, I just do. The fact that his black t-shirt stretches across his chest when he props his hands on his hips is a fact, not an opinion, and his steely gaze leveled on me? Yeah, that's also kind of hard to ignore, especially now that everything has gone silent.

What a strange turn of events to find out that my future boss is a very attractive man. Good for him. I don't care. I'm too focused on the fact that his chiseled features are locked in an annoyed scowl. Everyone else seemed amused by my interruption of the all-hands meeting, but not him. It's probably hard enough keeping control of these guys in normal circumstances, and I've just waltzed in and stolen their attention.

"Can I help you?" he asks with a hard tone. What he really means to say is, *Go away*, just like my taxi therapist and the old woman from the house.

I straighten my shoulders and dredge up every ounce of confidence I have left in me. It's not much, and my voice barely carries over the group.

"What was that?" he asks, impatient.

"Speak up!" someone shouts.

I clear my throat and try again. "I'm here for a job."

There's another round of laughter. These people seriously need a comedy club, or at least a few Adam Sandler movies on DVD. They find the most mundane things hilarious.

"Hey Jack, she could be your first manicured ranch hand."

The guys really crack up at that.

Jack, to his credit, doesn't laugh.

He shakes his head and steps forward. "You must be the princess."

"What?"

"I heard your story. I was hoping you wouldn't show."

My mouth drops open, but before I can come up with a fiery reply, he wraps his hand around my bicep and drags me

away from the group. There are catcalls and profane comments behind us. I scowl at the guys over my shoulder, but it only fuels the fire.

“What about the all-hands, Jack? Watch where you put yours!”

“She can help me out in the fields! I’ll train her quick!”

“This must be that fine southern hospitality you always hear about,” I hiss, trying to yank my arm out of his hold.

His sharp eyes cut to me as he continues leading me toward the house. “You’ll have to forgive our poor country folk manners,” he replies in an affected drawl filled with sarcasm. “We aren’t used to entertaining royalty.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He whips open the screen door and pushes me inside the house.

Without a doubt, it’s the worst introduction I’ve ever had.

JACK

“**Y**ou’re a little rough around the edges, aren’t you?” she says, no hint of amusement laced in her words.

I look up from my desk to see her studying me with an angry scowl. I’ve really pissed her off. *Good*. The sooner she starts to hate it here, the sooner she’ll leave.

I gesture to the chair in front of my desk.

“Have a seat.”

“I’d rather stand.”

“Suit yourself.”

She locks her arms across her chest, and we participate in what feels like the world’s longest staring contest. Smoke plumes from her ears. If she had a six-shooter, it’d be aimed at my heart.

I tip my head, studying her. “You’re really Helen’s sister?”

“We have the same eyes.”

No kidding—they’re light blue, rarest color I’ve ever seen—but the similarities start and stop there. I’ve never thought of Helen as attractive. She’s squared away safely in my mind as my matronly executive assistant; she doesn’t exist to attract or un-attract me. She’s my employee, and a damn good one at that. Meredith, though...she’s different.

“Helen said you need a job.”

Meredith nods. “Correct. I can start today.”

I chuckle at that. “Seems like you and I haven’t gotten off to a great start, and sometimes your gut knows something before the brain catches up. Maybe you oughta look for employment elsewhere.”

With that, something in her expression breaks. She’s still fuming, but her shoulders sag. Her attention darts past my shoulders, out the window. Her lip quivers. I’m not very good at reading women, but I’m damn near sure she’s about to cry. I thought I’d be happier getting to this point.

“You ever work on a ranch before?”

“I think you can probably guess the answer to that,” she snaps, blue eyes slicing back to me.

I resist the urge to smile at her fire. “You can put the claws away. We’re just talking.”

She sighs and steps forward, finally sagging down into the seat I offered her. Her purse drops to the floor at her feet as she relaxes back against the cushion, and I take advantage of the opportunity to study her. Her hair is the color of dark coffee, almost black, probably fake. Her nails are trimmed and manicured. Her features—though currently smudged with dirt and what looks to be a few drops of blood—are feminine and beautiful. I have no doubt she was a heartbreaker back in California. Her husband is probably missing her right about now.

Once she’s situated, she looks back up at me, waiting.

“So, no ranch experience. Have you ever had a job?”

She swallows and tips her chin up. It’s clear that what she lacks in experience, she makes up for in confidence. I doubt she’s ever let anyone walk over her.

“I’ve volunteered at a hospital for the last few years.”

“I’m talking about a real *job*, with a paycheck and a boss—accountability.”

Her lips purse and shakes her head. “My parents always wanted me to focus on school.”

Parents?

“How old are you?”

“28.” She guesses where my questions are leading. “After college...well, certain circumstances meant I didn’t work, but I assure you I will be a very good employee. I’m timely and dedicated.”

“Can you use QuickBooks?”

“I’m a *quick* learner!” she jokes. “Heh.”

“What about Outlook?”

“I always maintain a positive outlook.”

Jesus Christ.

“Your sister tells me you’re married to some millionaire. Why do you even need a job?”

My eyes narrow as I study her, looking for motive in that pretty face. I catch the subtle shift in the air at the mention of her husband.

“I *was* married,” she bites out with a locked jaw. “We’re separated.”

“As of?”

“Last night,” she announces confidently.

I finally lose the battle with myself and laugh. It’s all so ridiculous. I whip the hat off my head, smooth my hand over my hair, and then drop it back into place. She tracks my movements with careful attention.

“Don’t they make you wait 24 hours to report a missing person? Seems like you should give it 48 for ending a marriage. You might change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

“Excuse my French, but I don’t have time for this shit.”

Even now, problems are piling up outside the door of this office.

Anyone else would stand up and leave. I've been known to bring grown ass men to their knees, but she doesn't seem to care. In fact, she leans forward, props her hands on my desk, and locks her gaze with mine.

"I need this job."

"I disagree." My niceness is gone. My patience is all used up. "Look, you've made your dramatic gesture, now I think you should run back home to California. No doubt you've taught your husband a lesson. I'm sure he'll buy you whatever pretty thing he's been holding out on." I stand and start dialing my ranch manager's number so I can return the call he left earlier.

She reaches forward, picks up the phone from its holder, and slams it back down.

Damn. She's spoiled and crazy.

"I know Helen's gone, and you need somebody. Give me the job."

"You've never worked a day in your life. By the time I train you, Helen will be back."

"We're not talking rocket science—how hard could it be? I'll stay out of your way."

I level a steady gaze down her small frame. "Somehow, I doubt that."

"I'm not leaving this office until you give me a job—any job."

Just then, a light bulb flips on that illuminates the way out of this mess. It takes all my energy to keep my face neutral. She can't know it's a trap or she'll see right through my intentions. Meredith wants a job, I want her to get the hell off my property, and it seems we can kill two birds with one stone.

"Any job? That works for me. I need a housekeeper. Mine quit last week."

She arches a delicate brow. "Couldn't stand her boss?"

I grind my teeth. Isn't she supposed to be groveling? Ingratiating herself as best she can? Instead, it feels like she's calling the shots in *my* damn office. "She moved to be closer to her daughter. That's the only job I have for you. Take it or leave it."

She stands up, dragging her hands from my desk. "So I'd be your maid?"

"You'd also cook meals, do laundry, wash the dog—that sort of thing. Toilets need cleaning at least once a day—you saw the guys that'll be using 'em, and tonight is chili night."

I'm laying it on thick at this point. No way she's staying.

She glances away for a moment. "I don't—that is, I've never..."

I return my attention to my desk, writing her off. I've never had to fight a grin so hard in my life. I figured it wouldn't be hard to scare her away, but this was a little too easy. One mention of scrubbing toilets and her knees are quaking. She's a second from bolting. Once she's gone, I'll finally have a minute to catch up on work. I'll give my manager a call and shoot off an email to Helen, demanding she return early in exchange for putting me through the trouble of dealing with this brat.

It occurs to me that Meredith hasn't moved. *Oh, right.* She's stranded out here.

"Or"—I glance up at her from beneath my brows, speaking offhandedly—"I'll get one of the hands to give you a ride back into town."

She's looking at me like I've grown a second head. "What are you talking about? I'm not leaving. I'm taking the job—on one condition."

Oh good grief.

Apparently, her rich husband really has cut her off because Meredith requests room and board. No doubt she was planning on staying with her sister, but Helen's house is currently under

construction. Her only option is to stay here, but I'll be damned if I have her in the house with me. She's been here fifteen minutes and I already have a raging tension headache.

Adjacent to my house, there's a small shack tucked in the tree line of the property. Yes, I used the right word—it's a shack. I've lent it out to ranch hands in the past, resourceful guys who don't mind spending a month or two on a crappy twin bed so they can save up for rent. The slats in the floorboards have some gaps and there are a few cobwebs dangling in the corners, but it has a makeshift shower and a sink, more than Meredith probably deserves.

Just like with everything else, I expect her to take one look at the place and run screaming right back to California, but she steps into the small space and turns in a slow circle. I watch her carefully, waiting for a lone tear to roll down her porcelain cheek. I don't like watching women cry, but something tells she's very much in need of a dose of humility.

“Does that shower work?” she asks, pointing to the corner.

I smirk. “Only the finest 68-degree Texas well water.”

“And I'm assuming there's no A/C?”

Even though it's shaded by trees, it feels like a hundred degrees in here.

“There's a breeze at night if you open the windows.”

She nods and takes her lower lip between her teeth. She's thinking, probably contemplating how far she's willing to go to stick it to that husband of hers. Surely if she let him know about these living conditions, he'd give her enough cash to rent a room at the nice hotel down on First Street.

Her pale blue gaze shifts from the dingy bed to the bare floor and then finally, she faces me. The expression I see is one part resilience, one part defiance. It's fuel and flame.

She heaves a sigh and drops her purse at her feet, effectively setting up shop.

“Thank you. I'll take it.”

MEREDITH

I don't know which problem to address first—I'm drowning in them. Jack left me standing alone in the middle of my new apartment. I'm referring to it as an apartment and not a dilapidated lean-to because I believe in the power of delusion. If I look at this day and this *quaint country cottage* as an adventure, then it becomes fun and exciting (!) instead of bleak and depressing.

The place is tiny, about the size of my freshman dorm room...except my dorm was outfitted with Pottery Barn decor and a spunky roommate named Janine. This apartment is outfitted with permanently airborne dust and the unmistakable smell of mildew. My only companion is a tiny spider staring down at me from his web. I now know the true meaning of the word inhospitable is a place that might put you in the hospital. There's a rusty rake leaning against one wall, and a merry band of loose nails scattered about on the threadbare floor.

I feel sense and reason trying to creep back into my brain's control room, but I shut them out in favor of blind optimism. Sure, the structure should probably be condemned, but it's nothing I can't spruce up with a little imagination and a lot of elbow grease.

I decide to start small and turn my attention to the twin bed resting against one of the walls. With a nice place to fall asleep tonight, my entire perspective on life might brighten. *Look*, I tell myself, *it already has a blanket and a pillow. Jeez, is this a shack or the Ritz? I sure can't tell!*

I pick up the blanket and the pillow twitches. I furrow my brow and cock my head to the side, because my entire life thus far has led me to believe that inanimate pillows should not be capable of independent movement. Feeling as if I'm on the brink of a major scientific breakthrough, I slowly reach out and tug on the corner of the pillowcase until I see what's underneath it.

FUR. BEADY EYES. LONG, HAIRLESS TAILS.

I jump four feet into the air and shriek as a small field mouse followed by the largest rat I've ever seen both scurry out from underneath the pillow and through a jagged crack at the base of the wall.

BE OPTIMISTIC, BE OPTIMISTIC, I chant as my heart rate slowly returns to a survivable level.

I suppose it's sorta beautiful, I think. A mouse and a rat, driven by illicit passion and forbidden romance, risked it all to build a life together in this shack—ahem, apartment. If they can do it, so can I.

I'm smiling in a deranged reverie, thinking sweetly about rodent Romeo and Juliet, when I notice the impressive amount of droppings on the floor.

Just like that, my sunny disposition is doused by despair and an overwhelming desire to give up. Except, there is no giving up. With Helen gone, I have nowhere to go. My mom lives in a retirement community in Boca Raton. No one under the age of 60 is allowed to reside there, ostensibly because limber hips and full-frequency hearing would ignite jealousy amongst the osteoporotic masses. Besides, if I called her, she'd just try to convince me to reconcile with Andrew. Same goes for my dad. They're blinded by his wealth and reputation, and I haven't tried hard to convince them of his darker side. Truthfully, we're not very close, and they have a habit of hearing and believing whatever is most convenient for them.

With my parents and Helen off the table, I'm all out of options. Even more sad, I didn't really have friends back in California. When you slide right into a life of comfort and luxury when most of your college friends are still crushed

under the debt of student loans, you quickly find yourself alienated. Sure, I had women I went to lunch with and met for yoga a few times a week, but they were Andrew's friends more than mine, wives of his colleagues, and they—like my parents—firmly believe the sun shines out of his ass.

I'm truly on my own.

Everything in my possession sits in my purse on the floor of this dwelling.

I have nine wrinkled dollars.

I have a new boss who already thinks the worst of me.

I have a job that will put my face near men's toilets every day.

I have a sad little apartment—okay, NO, a sad little *shanty shack* with mice and spiders and a blanket with an odious yellow stain. At first I was going to overlook it, but it's like trying to overlook the damn sun.

Before I realize it, I'm marching back across the yard, toward the farmhouse. I'm sure Jack is already long gone, off taming wild mustangs or cutting cattle rustlers off at the pass, but I will sit outside his office and wait for him to return. I will demand that he see reason. Surely he's playfully hazing me and doesn't actually expect me to stay in that shack.

I yank open the back door of the house and immediately go on guard, tiptoeing with my shoulders up near my ears. He could be around any corner, sitting in any of the rooms I pass on my way upstairs, but the house is quiet and empty. My stealth is wasted.

On my second journey through, I discover that the farmhouse is extremely nice, new construction. There are hardwood floors, a pleasant pale gray color on the walls, and a lot of family photos and knickknacks. Somehow, it doesn't feel cluttered. It's warm and inviting—or at least it would be if there wasn't a soulless monster lurking somewhere inside.

I hear his voice behind his office door and am grateful I won't have to march all over the property hunting him down.

I shrug, roll out my neck, and prepare myself. Quickly, I run through my argument so I have all my points in order. I'll tell him the shack is an employee health hazard and point out that his house is huge—there have got to be at least six bedrooms. I passed a game room, living room, and breakfast nook, and I will happily sleep on the ground in any one of them. I'm not picky.

I know I have a winning defense, but I still can't work up the courage to knock on his door. My heart is beating so fast, no rhythm, just quick pulses. I've turned into a hummingbird. *Is this what desperation feels like?* It's wild, like a drug.

I try to remember why I'm here, why I left Andrew in the first place. For the last five years, I was the perfect wife. I studied the news and stayed abreast of current events. I was polite and witty and funny, and when necessary, I was demure and thoughtful. I ate well-portioned meals and worked out every day, lathered myself in night creams and face masks and consequently have the skin and the ass of an eighteen-year-old, and in the end, it wasn't enough. Nothing was enough.

My mental pep talk works—I'm out for blood. I pound on his office door with the side of my fist then let myself in. Poor Jack. He doesn't know what hit him. If he'd caught me last week, I would have been gentle and meek. I would have used a sweet tone, an "on-the-phone" voice when I spoke with him, just like Andrew preferred. Now, he gets the unfiltered version, the angry, wild hellion I've caged in for too long. I wouldn't be surprised to find streaks of black war paint under my eyes.

"By all means, barge in whenever you please."

His words drip with sarcasm. It's clear he's angry about the interruption as he glares at me from behind his desk. That look and his annoyed tone shift my perspective, and I remember I *don't* feel bad he's getting the unfiltered version. No, he started this mess by being rude to me: calling me a princess, dragging me away from the all-hands meeting, and then tossing me into that glorified lean-to that gives other respectable shacks a bad name. He thinks I'm a spoiled brat—no doubt the result of Helen's handiwork—and instead of giving me the benefit of

the doubt, he's done nothing but doubt my benefits. He's been nothing but brusque and unwelcoming, so *no, NO POOR JACK*.

He's still wearing that backward baseball hat, and he looks like the cool jock from high school all grown up. I try not to be intimidated. I give him what I can only hope is a serious, no-nonsense glare. My hands go to my hips. My elbows bow out. It's a power pose, it's Wonder Woman, and I'm nailing it.

"I'd like to propose an alternate living arrangement." His brown eyes try to sear through me. Still, I continue. "I passed a bunch of decent rooms on my way up here. There's a bedroom down the hall—"

"None of the rooms in this house are available to you. I'm not running a bed and breakfast."

Obviously. If he were, it would be called Bad Manners Manor, and the one-star Yelp reviews would read, *Surly owner scares would-be guests away*.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be able to rent a better place after your first paycheck—if you make it that long."

"Fine. When exactly is payday?"

He leans back in his chair and rubs the scruff along his jaw. "Payroll went out last Friday, so you'll get your first paycheck two weeks from now, just like everyone else."

Two weeks? I won't last that long. I have one pair of underwear.

"I could really use an advance."

I say this very calmly, like I've seen in movies, and I think he will respond in turn. He doesn't.

"That's too bad."

"Signing bonus?"

He really laughs at that, cracks up like I'm the stupidest person he's ever encountered. His laughter makes me feel a little sick, and my hands form little fists by my sides. If we were closer, I think I'd swing and try to give him a black eye,

just to see how it'd feel. He's at least twice my size, but I'm scrappy. He'd never see it coming.

“Why do you need the money? A new purse?”

The accusation wraps around my heart like talons and it *pops* like a balloon, deflating any courage I had left. God, he thinks so little of me. *He thinks I'd subject myself to this humiliation for something as frivolous as a new purse?*

I should tell him the truth, that I want the money so I can go into town and buy some essentials: a new pillow and a clean blanket. I need a pair of tennis shoes because my loafers have rubbed my feet raw. I have no clothes, nothing to change into. I am utterly destitute, and completely at his mercy. I came to Texas hoping to find some comfort from my sister and instead I found *him*—the rudest, most inconsiderate man west of the Mississippi.

I open my mouth, prepared to pour everything out, to make him feel terrible for the things he's said to me, but I quickly realize I can't. As soon as I speak, I'll sob. I'm one of those people who inexplicably cries when angry. It's annoying. Any time I want to shout at someone, it comes out as a teary mess. Anger and sadness comeingle in my brain, no hope of harnessing one without the other. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry; therefore, I have no choice.

Without another word, I turn on my heel and walk out of his office, slamming the door behind me. It's a strange thing to do considering we were in the middle of a conversation. I've just given him more reason to think I'm insane, but at least I still have my pride. *Do people with a single pair of underwear have pride?*

I limp away on my blistered feet, repeating a short mantra over and over in my head: *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.*

Amazingly, my brain listens. I don't shed a single tear as I make my way downstairs, through the kitchen, and into the laundry room that leads to the back door. I'm so laser-focused on making it out that I miss the bags piled up beside the doorframe until I trip over one of them. I've apparently met my quota of embarrassing moments for the day, because the

universe saves me from face-planting completely. I catch myself and check over my shoulder to make sure there was no audience for my little stumble—the coast is clear. I turn back for the door, prepared to whip it open and make my escape, but then I look down.

The trash bags aren't filled with garbage—they're filled with clothes, clothes that are undoubtedly waiting to be loaded up and taken to Goodwill for donation. I know this because there's a little sticky note on one of them that says, *DONATION! TAKE WHAT YOU WANT!*

I have half a mind to fall to my knees and weep. Instead, I turn one ear to the stairs, confirm that Jack hasn't followed me down, and then get to work rooting through the bags. I justify the fact that I'm stealing because the clothes are about to be donated to the less fortunate, and guess what? I'm currently the least fortunate I've ever been. These clothes are mine.

I find a few pair of worn but clean black socks folded into pairs. Maybe a few weeks ago, I would have balked at the idea of wearing a stranger's old socks. Today, right now, they are more valuable than gold. I even slip a pair on right then so they'll act as a buffer between my loafers and my blistered feet. I look like a mall walker headed to *Nifty After Fifty*.

Once I'm satisfied I have enough socks, I rummage through a collection of folded t-shirts and skim a few off the top. I unfold one to discover it's an XL and will undoubtedly drown me, but it doesn't matter; I'll manage. I dump the shirts on the ground beside me and keep rifling through the contents of the bags right up until a voice speaks behind me and I jump out of my skin.

“As I understand it, the point of having a housekeeper is so they'll clean up messes, not make new ones.”

I whip around, surprised to find the older woman from before, the one who answered the door when I first arrived at the ranch. She's standing in the doorway of the laundry room with her arms crossed over her chest.

“You're right. I swear I'll put everything back.”

I start shoving clothes in bags, but she shakes her head, holds up a finger, and then disappears back into the kitchen. She's gone for a moment before she reappears with a new black trash bag in hand. She whips it open then bends low beside me, starting to shovel clothes inside.

"Is that enough? You only have a few t-shirts here," she points out.

"Oh yes, it should be just fine. I can wash them."

"And you found some of the socks I put in there, that's good. What size shoe are you?"

I'm dumbfounded by this turn of events, but I have enough sense to reply quickly, "Seven and a half."

"Right, well, I'm a nine, so they'll be a little big, but I put a pair of tennis shoes in that bag over there."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I damn well know that, now shove over. You're sitting on one of the shirts."

I lean over so she can tug the t-shirt out from under me and then she stuffs it in the bag with all the others.

"Whose clothes are these?"

She scowls at me. "Silence is a virtue. Get virtuous."

If they're Jack's—and I suspect they are—will I toss them aside? No. In fact, he'll have to chop off my feet if he wants these socks back.

I'm surprised she's taken the time to collect the clothes for me, and I have enough good sense to accept her charity. Unless...

"Does he know you took this stuff out of his closet?"

Her mouth flattens in a thin line. "They say there's no such thing as a stupid question, but does that mean you have to try so hard to think of one? It's damn annoying."

I can't tell whether she loves me or hates me, so I play it safe and just keep my lips zipped after that, watching as she

continues going through the bags, taking things I wouldn't have had the courage to grab before. There's fresh white linen and towels. She gives me everything. My trash bag is bulging.

"I know this isn't enough. I don't have any shorts for you—you're too damn skinny to wear mine—but those jeans you're wearing should work until we can make it into town."

"I don't know what to say."

I'm surprised by how overwhelmed I feel.

"No. Stop. If you cry right now, I'm taking all this to the burn pile. If there's one thing I hate, it's blubbering. Now listen, my grandson is a tough cookie, an arrogant devil through and through. I tried to talk him into letting you stay in the house, but he's got his mind made up, something about teaching you a lesson. If you ask me, there's more likely a lesson in there *for him*, but this is his house and I won't disrespect him by sneaking you in here."

"Your grandson?" I ask, cutting in.

"Was that another question?" She pauses her work and glances over to me. From this proximity, there's no pretense between us. I can see every shade of blue in her hard eyes, every wrinkle etched in her tan skin. I have no doubt she can see the absolute despair reflected back at her. She can probably also smell the peanuts on my breath. "Oh, hell. All right. We haven't been properly introduced." Her hand darts out for mine. "Edith McKnight, the devil's grandma."

I take her hand and shake it, surprised by how strong her grip is.

"Meredith Wilchester—er, Avery. Meredith Avery," I say, catching myself and dusting off my maiden name, the one I'll be reverting back to from this day forward.

"Pleased to meet you, Meredith. I wish it were on better terms, but we'll make the best of this situation. Now here, take this. It's too heavy for me or I'd help you."

She hands me the bag and pushes to her feet. She brushes her hands on the back of her jeans then turns to walk away, just like that, as if she didn't just turn my entire day around.

“This doesn’t make sense,” I call after her. “Why are you helping me?”

Without bothering to turn around, she rambles off a string of countryisms. “My grandson is a good man, but he often thinks the sun comes up just to hear him crow. He could strut sittin’ down. I mean, I love him, but sometimes it’s like hugging a rose bush.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I’m helpin’ you because I know he can’t yet, but when you get to be my age, you learn that a wounded bird eventually needs a peaceful nest.”

It’s like she’s speaking a foreign language.

JACK

I've got big plans for today: I'm going to keep my temper simmering near a low boil, I'm going to avoid the princess, I'm not going to let my ranch hands pull any shit like they did yesterday with the pigs, and I will have my inbox empty by the end of the workday. This is the plan—at least, it was. My alarm clock is still due to go off in five minutes, but I'm already up on the edge of my bed in my boxer briefs, listening to Christine talk my ear off. Alfred is snoring at my feet. I think dogs sometimes like to rub it in.

“You *promised* you'd come to San Antonio later this week.”

I blink sleep out of my eyes and chance a glance at the clock beside my bed: 5:10 AM—too damn early for a fight.

“And I explained that it's just not possible. Helen left last week and—”

“You're kidding me. Jack, do you know the last time you made the effort to come here? To show me you care even the tiniest bit?”

I rest my elbows on my knees, squeeze my eyes closed, and pinch the bridge of my nose. I really could've used those last five minutes of sleep. “I'm sure I could come up with a good example if you hadn't called at the crack of dawn. I haven't even had my coffee.”

That response doesn't go over well.

“You are the most emotionally vacant man I’ve ever met. We’ve been together two years—*TWO YEARS*—and I get the feeling you wouldn’t care if I broke up with you right here and now.”

Has it really been that long?

“Chrissy, c’mon—”

“No. Don’t bother.” She pauses, inhales a deep breath. When she speaks again, her voice is softer, sweet. “I’m just... I’m upset. I miss you, that’s all. We hardly see each other.”

“You know I’d be there with you if I could.”

“Would you?”

Just then, my alarm clock starts blaring loudly. *BEEP BEEP BEEP*. My eyes pop open and I reach over to slam my hand down to turn it off. Alfred hops up and starts wagging his tail, flaunting the energy from his extra sleep.

“Chrissy, I gotta—”

“Yeah, I know, you gotta go. Going’s what you do best.”

Her words are meant to sting, but they don’t.

“Will I see you later this week?” I ask, trying to end the phone call on a good note.

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

We both know she’ll cave and make the drive out here. That’s how our relationship works. For two years, she’s lived in San Antonio and I’ve lived here. We see each other once or twice a month, when it’s convenient. It’s not nearly enough for her, but it’s all the time I have to give at the moment. With Helen gone, I’m not even sure I can swing that.

After we hang up, I get going, speeding through a shower before I tug on a worn pair of Wranglers and reach for one of my favorite Blue Stone Ranch t-shirts, except my hand comes back empty. There aren’t any shirts hanging where they should be—I guess that’s what happens when Mary isn’t here to do my laundry. I settle for a pearl snap button-down then reach

for my trusty ball cap. Until I make it into town for a haircut, it'll have to do.

Downstairs, I let Alfred out the back door. Edith is already by the coffee maker, filling up a mug.

“Hope you made it extra strong today.”

She hands it off to me with a trademark sneer.

“It’s somewhere between crude oil and jet fuel. I don’t know how you stand it.”

I take a big sip then tip the mug toward her in thanks. “It’s perfect.”

“I heard you upstairs on the phone. Little early for Christine to be callin’, isn’t it? Some of us would have appreciated sleeping in a little bit.”

“You haven’t slept past 5:00 in thirty years.”

“Not for lack of tryin’, and I’d still like the option.”

She pours some coffee into a mug for herself and cuts it with cream before proceeding to answer most of my questions with more questions.

“Christine was chewin’ my hide.”

“What’s new?”

“Maybe I should put in more of an effort with her.”

“Do you think she’s worth it?”

“I can’t remember the last time I drove out to see her. Must have been a couple months back.”

“You could ask her to move out here.”

“You think I should?”

“Do you love her?”

“I don’t know. She told me this morning we’ve been together for two years—do people usually love each other after two years?”

“It’s hard to say. Generally speaking, seeds don’t sprout in rocky soil.”

“Damn.”

She levels me with a thoughtful gaze. “I could have told you two years ago she wasn’t for you.”

I smirk. “You’re biased. You two never got along well.”

“Yeah? Well, whose fault is that? I get along with everyone.”

I quirk a brow, pointing out the obvious. “Half the town is too scared to love you. The other half is too scared not to love you.”

She chuckles and steps toward the window near the sink. “No, that’s *you* half the town’s scared of. I’m just standin’ next to you. Oh, look who’s ready for her first day of work.”

I follow her gaze out the window and find Meredith stepping out of the shack. Color me shocked. I didn’t figure her for an early bird, and I feel deprived—I thought I’d get the pleasure of performing a cowbell wake-up call.

She turns toward the horizon and shades her eyes with one hand, taking in the sunrise. I know exactly how beautiful it is from that angle—vivid yellow and orange. The view is made even better by the fact that there are no skyscrapers or high-rises obstructing it. After spending the night in that dreary shack, it’s probably a welcome sight. I’m surprised she stuck around.

I’m still watching her when her gaze snaps to the backyard. Her eyes widen in fear as she lets out a shriek. Her hands go up in defense. She takes a hesitant step back, then another, until her back hits the door.

Shit. Must be coyotes.

I move quickly, yanking the back door open and shouting for Edith to get the shotgun. There are coyotes and mountain lions in this part of the state, and while it’s uncommon for them to stalk too deep onto the property, it’s not unheard of.

“Don’t run!” I shout to Meredith as I step out into the backyard.

Edith isn't far behind me with the shotgun. She hands it off and I scan the area, trying to spy any animals that don't belong. When the coast looks clear, I check the tree line, narrowing my eyes and listening for the sound of snapping twigs or shuffling paws.

"Where are they?" I snap.

"Right there!"

I turn to where she's pointing and spot my golden retriever standing a few yards away from her.

"You mean Alfred?"

He trots closer to her and she unleashes a barrage of Hollywood-style karate kicks and chops at the air between them. "No, no—don't come any closer!"

Alfred doesn't listen.

"No!" she demands. "I said NO! Sit!"

Alfred sits.

Edith laughs, yanks the shotgun out of my hold, and tromps back inside, mumbling something under her breath.

"It's just a dog," I point out.

"Feral? Untamed?!"

Alfred hops back up and starts to stroll toward her again, tail wagging. He gets right to her and starts lapping at her legs in between flails.

"Nope—golden, as in retriever."

She squats and her hands cover her face. "Please don't eat me!"

I try to make myself feel bad for how amusing I find this situation. I really ought to do something, but Alfred is the most harmless animal in the world. He's beloved by everyone... except, I guess, Meredith.

"Are you afraid of dogs?"

"No!" she declares emphatically while trying to wiggle away from Alfred's licks.

“You sure seem like you are.”

“I’m afraid of strange shapeless forms charging toward me in the dark!” she explains before turning and pointing her finger at Alfred. “And you—can’t you take a hint?! I do not consent to this!”

I emit a short, high whistle and Alfred jerks to attention then trots toward me. Meredith coolly drops her hands and presses her hair back into its high ponytail. She’s trying to play it off like she didn’t just beg for her life, but when our gazes lock, I can tell she’s pissed.

“Did you order that attack? Is this more of your hazing?”

I try not to find her amusing. “I think you’ve spent too much time in that shack. Alfred was just happy to see you.”

“Well, he just—I just—wasn’t quite ready for that level of intimacy, but I forgive you, Alfred.”

I glance down to where Alfred is sitting politely at my feet. He is the picture of docile innocence, unlike the brunette Barbie standing a few yards away from me.

“My life just flashed before my eyes.”

“I bet that was a riveting little highlight reel.”

At that, her eyes narrow into two slits. It seems I’ve really pissed her off this time. Her arms cross over her chest. Her chin juts out. Her brows knit together. I should be shaking in my boots, but it feels like I’m staring at an angry kitten.

She takes a few steps closer to me to me and props her hands on her hips. That’s when I finally notice what she’s wearing: the same tight jeans as yesterday, but she’s traded in the white blouse for a t-shirt. It’s tied off in a knot at her midriff and the sleeves are rolled up as best as possible. It’s way too big for her, and well, it should be considering it’s *mine*.

“Where the hell did you get that shirt?”

Her eyes go wide and her cheeks flush, but she tries to cover the embarrassed reaction as best as possible.

“Edith gave it to me,” she says confidently.

“She had no right to do that.”

“It was in a bag of clothes meant for charity.”

Well that explains why all my t-shirts were missing this morning.

“Don’t you have enough fancy designer clothes to wear?”

“Not while I clean your toilet.”

It makes no sense. Her tone isn’t any softer than it was yesterday. I wonder if this is how she always acts—proud and pissy, even when she clearly has no right or reason to back it up. She’s the one who slept in a spider-infested shack, and yet she’s still walking around like she’s the Queen of England.

“I want my clothes back.”

She grits her teeth and reaches for the t-shirt as if to pull it over her head right here and now.

“You really want me to take the shirt off my back?”

I’m quiet. Her hands drop and there’s a tiny smirk at the corner of her lips. She’s pleased with herself for winning this round. Little does she know that if we were alone, I would have let her strip down as far as she wanted to go, but my ranch hands are starting to arrive for work and a few of them are watching our exchange from over by the barn. I’d have to replace the whole staff, because they’d never let me hear the end of it. If I’m just patient, she’ll break, and the problem will solve itself. She won’t be here for much longer.

Although, I’m less sure of that today than I was yesterday. Helen convinced me to hire Meredith with the assumption that she wouldn’t last very long, but here we are, day two, and I’m not getting the impression that Meredith is all that eager to head back to California.

In fact, she’s up early and dressed (in my clothes), seemingly ready to get to work. I decide to test the boundaries of her resolve.

“Follow me.”

MEREDITH

You know those California tourism commercials? The ones where they show celebrities sunbathing or doing yoga or teeing off or parasailing or shopping on Rodeo Drive? That was my life—well, minus the parasailing. I don't have many rules in life, but a nonnegotiable one is to never entrust my safety to a high schooler tying knots in a rope for minimum wage. I know, it's a very specific rule.

Everything else in the commercial, though, was eerily similar. I had a maid, a gardener, and a house manager. I drove a pearl white Range Rover and carried the last name of a man who mattered. I was invited to glamorous parties and exclusive red carpet events. I schmoozed with movie stars (I would never name names, but let's just say Jennifer Janiston actually does have incredible skin in person) and they hung on my every word, assuming if they cozied up to me, Andrew would want to work with them on his next project.

To the world, I had it all.

That's how it works when you build a life from the outside in—it ends up hollow.

Strangely enough, Andrew and I were happy once, riiiiight in the very beginning. We were so happy, in fact, I was blind to the subtle changes taking place between us. When we first met, Andrew was a fledgling associate producer at a production company. He made okay money, worked semi-normal hours, and acted the part of the doting husband. We

were that couple with a standing date night every Wednesday. *Mexican food this week, babe? How about Italian, babe?* He brought me flowers once a week. *Yellow roses, my favorite!* He was older, handsome, successful. Enough people, including my parents and Helen, told me he was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I believed them.

The problems began once Andrew started the corporate climb. The more impressive his job title became, the more stress he carried on his shoulders. The execs were tough on him. All day he'd absorb their poison like a sponge, and at night, he'd wring it all out on me.

I still remember the first time he snapped. I'd just returned from a yoga class and was in the kitchen making us dinner when he walked in the door. My sweaty appearance set off something in him.

"You sit around all day and you can't even look presentable when I come home?"

I stood frozen in place, absolutely shocked that he'd have the audacity to say something so hurtful. It wasn't like him to act that way and he apologized right after, said he was out of line, it was the stress talking, but a few weeks later, it happened again. This time it was because I didn't feel up to going out to a Hollywood party with him.

"Thousands of women would give anything to be invited, to be with me. You don't know what you have anymore."

When I called him out for being unreasonable, he went for blood.

"You might be a pretty face, but in this town, there are a million women who look just like you. You're nothing without me—remember that."

After he spewed that venom, he still went to the party. I stayed home and replayed his words until I started believing them. Obviously now, I can see those are the words of a deeply insecure and troubled human being, but over time, I feared he was right. I know that's sick, but Andrew was my husband, my supposed soul mate, *the best thing that had ever*

happened to me. We'd been together for a while, and I trusted him implicitly. If he was upset with me, my first instinct was to figure out what I'd done wrong.

So, I tried to be better. From then on, I always made sure I was dressed and made up when he got home from work. I never turned down an invitation to attend a party with him and while we were together, I made sure to be a sweet, doting wife. In return, our marriage stayed the course. Andrew continued to bring home flowers (*Yellow roses, my favorite!*) even though I suspected he'd delegated the task of retrieving them to his secretary. We continued going on a date every Wednesday night, but more often than not I shared the time with his phone, which was never on silent.

Andrew kept climbing higher at his company, closer and closer to the American dream. His stress filled the empty space beneath our thinly constructed veneer, until there were too many cracks to control. It became impossible for me to differentiate between normal marital blowups and insidious emotional abuse.

"Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with you!?" he yelled at me one night after he'd lost his erection in the middle of sex. It was an impossible situation to navigate. If I consoled and reassured him, he would lash out defensively. So, I said nothing at all, and he seized the silence like a weapon. *"I can get it up just fine—guess you just don't turn me on anymore."*

In case you're wondering, I'm a fucking *excellent* lover, I'd just reached the point where I couldn't stand his touch, and he must've felt it. Of course, now I can look back and spot the abuse and manipulation like a vandalized copy of an *I Spy* book. *Oh yup, there it is—circled right in front of you.* But, when I was in it, I didn't realize I was *in it*, living it—a complacent participant. The incidents were so spaced out that during the peaceful periods in between, I'd convince myself he'd changed, that he'd learned to cope better with his stress and wouldn't say another hurtful thing to me. Even worse than that, I started to expect the abuse. I'd grown calluses. When he said I was pathetic, dumb, and worthless, I believed him because he coupled each insult with a dose of gaslighting.

“Who else would want to be with you? If you left me, no one else would have you. You’re a boring wife and a boring fuck. Be glad I’m with you.”

Be glad I’m with you.

Be glad I’m with you.

He was holding my head under water, and I didn’t drown, didn’t break. I grew gills.

Four years into our marriage, it looked like Andrew was perfect. Everyone agreed, and I was glad.

I hadn’t spoken a word about his behavior to anyone around me, and that was an intentional choice on both of our parts. After the first few arguments, he’d hold me in bed and rub my back and tell me our personal life was ours. *“We’re stars, babe, and stars burn hot. People won’t understand.”* Of course, I wholeheartedly agreed. In the beginning, I still believed the best of him. I didn’t want to betray his trust and spew our dirty laundry to the world, especially since I was so sure each bad time was the last. Somewhere in the middle though, denial that it would continue dissolved into shame and embarrassment that it had and would.

I turned inward, pushing my family and everyone else away even more, and Andrew capitalized on that. He kept in touch with our friends when I didn’t. He put on a warm, friendly facade when we were out at parties. He was such a clever puppeteer, especially when you consider the fact that you can’t file a police report for words like you can for punches, and Andrew knew that. He never once hit me.

I did finally work up the courage to talk about it with Rebecca. She was the closest thing I had to a friend back in Los Angeles. We’d get lunch a few times a month and meet up for yoga here and there.

I broached the subject in a whisper, after a scripted answer about being annoyed with his adorable quirks.

“Actually, I don’t think I’m happy...with Andrew.”

She looked up from her salad, confused. “What do you mean? Is he working a lot?”

“Yes, but it’s not about that,” I said, talking in a stream-of-consciousness confession I was piecing together in real time. “I feel like I’ve told myself I’m happy so many times I’ve totally forgotten what the word means.”

She waved her hand as if to say, Nonsense. “That’s just life. God, Jeff has been in the office more than ever. I swear he’s screwing his receptionist.”

She laughed and continued eating her salad like, chomp, chomp, chomp, my husband is cheating on me, can you pass the salt?

I focused on my untouched pasta. “I’m thinking about leaving Andrew. I’m really considering it, actually.”

“Because he’s working a lot?”

“No.” I was annoyed we weren’t on the same page. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot, trying to objectively say whether or not I’m happy.” I shook my head, trying to make my point clear. “I don’t think it’s something you can measure. It’s just—when I wake up in the morning, my first thought is to run, to get away.” I leaned closer and lowered my voice. “He’s not who everyone thinks he is.”

She rolled her eyes, sat back in her chair, and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “Listen, Andrew might not be the best husband in the world, but your marriage seems pretty perfect to me. Didn’t he just buy you that bracelet last week? The last thing Jeff bought me was an air freshener for my car.”

I looked down at the diamonds shimmering on my wrist. It was true, he’d bought the bracelet for me out of the blue, but we both knew it was an apology for the hurtful things he’d said. The night before that lunch, I hadn’t been wearing it, and he’d told me I was ungrateful. I’d learned my lesson: it would never leave my wrist so long as he was around.

Rebecca took my silence as an admission of guilt. “Listen, if you’re trying to get some kind of settlement from him after the divorce, you’d better be careful. I have a friend who went down that path, and she ended up with nothing. Now her

husband is married to some woman half her age and she's waiting tables in Santa Monica."

It was pointless. I was getting nowhere. She didn't want to hear the truth any more than I wanted to speak it. I knew then that if I was ever going to leave, I'd have to do it on my own, so I did. That diamond bracelet is sitting in some pawn shop in Beverly Hills and here I am, the new housekeeper for Blue Stone Ranch.

It feels pretty good, though technically, I haven't started yet. I'm still working out where to begin. Jack spent all of two minutes pointing me in the direction of the cleaning closet, all the while reminding me of my duties.

"Clean the house, do the laundry, make sure the fridge and pantry are stocked. Cook lunch for Edith and me, sweep, vacuum, that sort of thing."

"Sounds good."

My go-getter attitude seemed to poke at him. "Right, and of course, I'll need you to feed and bathe your new furry friend, too."

I swear his eyes held an evil gleam.

I wasn't kidding earlier when I said my life flashed before my eyes as Alfred ran for me. Dogs just aren't my thing, not since one latched onto my butt when I was a kid. I still have a tiny scar on my right cheek.

Of all my duties, I'm most excited about cooking, but Jack mentioned he and Edith were planning on eating leftovers from last night for lunch. So, that leaves cleaning and dog duties. *Cleaning it is! No problem. Awesome.* I root through the closet then make my way through the house, collecting any supplies I think I'll need to complete my tasks. I'm going to start with the bathrooms, mostly so I can prove Jack wrong.

I saw how gleeful he looked at the concept of me on all fours, scrubbing toilets. He thinks I'm going to cave and leave, or beg for another job, something a little more glamorous. Little does he know, I'm done with glamour. It's not what it's cracked up to be.

Once I'm properly outfitted, I get to work in his bathroom. It's not as dirty as I anticipated, probably because his housekeeper didn't quit all that long ago. I'm disappointed he isn't a total slob, but then, maybe it's a good thing considering I'm the one who now has to clean up after him.

I can only imagine what my "friends" from my old life would say if they saw me now, scrubbing a toilet seat with enthusiasm. It's really not so bad. I hum an upbeat tune, spritz a little more cleaner, flush. A droplet from the spray gets in my eye and I don't even break character. I am Meredith Avery, maid extraordinaire.

I'm still bent over his toilet when Jack walks in. I didn't expect to see him again so soon, especially considering how eager he was to be rid of me earlier.

I pause my scrubbing and sit back on my heels. From my angle on the floor, he seems even more large than usual, looming there like a demon and blocking the light from the bathroom window.

He takes in the sight of me with my rubber gloves up to my elbows and a mask stretched across the lower half of my face. His mouth twitches like he's fighting a smile.

"A little overkill, don't you think?"

I tip my head to the side and stay silent, hoping he'll take the hint and leave.

He doesn't.

"Have you ever cleaned a toilet before?"

I sigh and yank the mask down. "Well, I've used toilets before—how hard could it be to do the *opposite*?"

He points out my first failure of the day. "Pretty sure the sponges are for the kitchen sink."

Right.

"Well now they're for the toilet."

"There's a toilet scrubber in the corner there."

Truthfully, I thought that was for the shower. I'm glad I don't say so.

"I was under the impression that you were a real busy guy. Do you plan on micromanaging me the whole day?"

He opens his mouth, thinks better of whatever he was about to say, and then turns to leave. *Ha. Victory.* I listen to him walk toward his office and once I'm sure he's really gone, I reach for the toilet scrubber. It's a lot easier to use than the sponge. I'd thank him for the tip, but alas, I would rather stick this entire toilet sponge in my mouth.

Jack and I have definitely started out on the wrong foot. Though rare, I have given and received bad first impressions before. This takes the cake, and it's unsettling. I'm not used to having problems with people. I pride myself on being easygoing and gregarious. In fact, back in California, I'm sure all my acquaintances would corroborate my genuine social proficiency. My whole life wasn't just an act to please Andrew. I'm nice, dammit!

But for some reason, around Jack, I play defense. I get angry and snappy. He rubs me the wrong way, gets under my skin. It's his arrogance, his utter lack of sympathy for somebody clearly down on their luck. I can't stand him, which is a problem considering he's my new boss.

If he hadn't assumed the worst of me right off the bat, we might've even become friends, but the word didn't take long to form on his lips: *princess*. If he ever calls me that again I'll grab that thick head of hair and give him a swirly in this toilet. That stupid baseball cap would clog the pipes and he'd have to clean it up himself.

I finish up in his bathroom and move on to the next one, all the while thinking about the conundrum I've found myself in. It's interesting to think I might've just swapped cards, a Drew for a Jack. One is arguably just as arrogant as the other. Not only that, they're both good-looking and confident too, but the similarities end there. Andrew is smooth edges and refinement. He's sly and cunning. In two days, I've already seen that Jack is rough around the edges, crass, and

opinionated. Yesterday, he dragged me away from that meeting in front of all his ranch hands. Andrew would have never done that; he would have bottled his anger until we were behind closed doors.

Most curiously, I almost never had the courage to fight back or speak up with Andrew. He sapped my confidence down to the point that by the end, I was little more than a Stepford wife, subservient in every respect. Yet, with Jack, I can't help but speak my mind. My voice is back and ten times louder than I remember.

JACK

Edith didn't save me any coffee this morning. Not only that, she poured the excess down the sink while I watched. *Oh, were you not finished?* She's upset with me, thinks I'm being too hard on Meredith, but she doesn't know the whole truth. Meredith isn't here as some destitute damsel seeking sanctuary; she's here to stall until her husband begs her to come home, a sheep in sheep's clothing. Helen confirmed as much when we spoke last night. I called her, surprised Meredith had lasted her whole first day.

"You know she hasn't even bothered to call home?" Helen said. "I bet Andrew is worried sick."

"Maybe she really is planning on leaving him."

"No way. Meredith is anything but independent—spoiled by parents, doted on by boyfriends, and then completely provided for by Andrew. Remember when you were a kid and you'd get mad, run away, then be back home in time for supper? My guess is whatever this little tiff is about will be forgotten by Friday, and she'll be in your rearview mirror."

The phone call left a bad taste in my mouth. What kind of petulant woman just up and leaves her husband like that? He's probably really worried about her while she's off playing hide-and-seek a few states over. It doesn't make sense. Then again, Helen hasn't exactly painted Meredith in the best light, and I trust Helen's judgment. She's been a good employee for years while I've only known Meredith for 48 hours.

All day yesterday I kept waiting for her to fold, to feed into the impression Helen gave me, but she didn't. She cleaned the whole day and only took a quick break for lunch—I know this because Edith said she felt bad seeing her eat out on the porch by herself. A few times throughout the day, I heard things crash to the ground followed by a loud curse, but the house was clean, nothing was broken (that I could see), and better yet, she didn't bother me once.

I think over my conversation with Helen while I make a new pot of coffee. I wonder how well Helen really knows Meredith. If she never once mentioned that she had a sister, they can't be all that close.

The back door opens and I turn to find the subject of my thoughts scurrying into the adjacent laundry room and yanking the door closed behind her. She presses her back against the door and her hand to her chest. Her eyes are closed. Her breathing is erratic. It looks like she was just running for her life.

“Was Alfred out there?”

Her eyes pop open and her light blue gaze locks with mine as her cheeks turn a rosy shade of red. She clearly thought she was alone.

“I found that if I throw a rock at the barn, I can distract him long enough to sprint from the shack to the house.”

“Whatever works.” I chuckle, turning back to the coffee maker so she can compose herself without me watching. “But the more you try to avoid him, the harder he's going to try to win you over. He's smart, and he likes a challenge.”

“Can't you just train him to avoid me?”

It sounds like she really thinks that's an option.

I glance back at her out of the corner of my eyes. “I don't really keep an org chart with all my employees' ranks, but it's safe to say that Alfred is your superior. Besides, I doubt you'll be here long enough to bother.”

Her brows furrow and her gaze drops to the floor. If Edith were watching, she'd jab me in the ribs with her elbow.

I sigh. “Are you actually scared of him? He’s a giant teddy bear.”

“No. Of course not,” she says haughtily, pushing off the door and lifting her chin as she steps into the kitchen. “I just... don’t reciprocate his enthusiasm.”

“You sure about that?”

“Positive.”

Her pride will be her downfall. If she’d just admit she was scared, I’d make an effort to keep Alfred away from her. Since she swears she’s not, I won’t bother.

I flip the switch on the coffee machine and it starts percolating right away. The smell is better than sex.

“When the coffee’s done, bring a mug up to my office, will you?”

She quirks a brow. “Is that part of my job description? Waiting on you hand and foot?”

“It’s a cup of coffee, not a seven-course meal.”

“Okay...” She hesitates, her gaze turning toward the coffee pot like it’s her salvation. “Am I allowed to get some for myself?”

The question, delivered in a gentle tone, catches me so off guard that I turn to look at her, *really* look at her. Obviously, I’m aware she’s beautiful—that’s the minimum working requirement for trophy wives—but even with her dark hair twisted up in a bun and a fresh face, she’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen. I ignore the thought and focus on the fact that today she’s wearing another one of my Blue Stone t-shirts. It’s tied just like the one yesterday so it doesn’t completely drown her. She’s wearing her same pair of jeans, but they’re stained now, and there’s a hole just above the left knee. I don’t think she’d be wearing them again if she had any other clothes. The thought is unsettling.

“Stop sizing me up like that,” she accuses suddenly.

My gaze jerks up to her face. “Are you kidding me? I wasn’t sizing you up.”

She props her hands on her hips. “Oh yeah? What were you doing then?”

Her ice blue eyes dare me to tell the truth.

“I was feeling sorry for you.”

I should’ve known my reply wouldn’t go over well. Her hands ball into tiny little fists. Her lips tug into a thin, angry line.

“Why? I don’t want the coffee that badly.”

I wave my hand, gesturing to her appearance. “No, because you’re obviously a very unstable person.”

“*What?*”

“You pack up and leave your life behind, and you don’t even bring a change of clothes. You’re either crazy, or you didn’t think you’d be gone this long,” I point out with a flat, disinterested tone.

“Oh, *braaaavo*, Dr. Phil,” she shoots back, temper flaring. “Excellent psychoanalysis. Don’t you have your own business to mind? Like, literally?”

Jesus Christ. This woman is going to be the death of me.

I tug a hand through my hair and make a move to step around her. “Just bring the coffee when it’s done.”

“Fine,” she snaps.

“And go to the grocery store. We’re out of damn food.”

I stomp up the stairs.

“Sure thing, boss!” she shouts after me.

“And cook something for lunch!”

“*With pleasure!*”

“I’ll know if you spit in it!”

At that, I slam my office door closed.

I’m fuming and pissed, more so with myself than with her. I had every intention of keeping my cool, but she pushed me, just like she has since she first arrived. I’ve never in my life

talked to a woman the way I talk to her. I should march right back downstairs and fire her on the spot.

I stay seated, seething.

A few minutes later, there's a soft knock and then Meredith opens my office door. My blood spikes with adrenaline as if we're about to pick up right where we left off. My hands grip the edges of my desk. Her gaze hits mine, and I'm surprised to see that it's softer than it was down in the kitchen. Her lips are trained into a small, absent smile.

In her hand is a steaming cup of coffee—the coffee I'd completely forgotten about.

I watch her as she carries it carefully toward my desk, where I'm currently on the phone with the general manager over at Blue Stone Farm. He's talking my ear off about a few improvements he wants to make at the restaurant. I motion for Meredith to set the coffee down by the phone, and she listens. Then she reaches over and gently sticks a note onto my computer monitor.

In girly, scrolling script she wrote: *I didn't mean to snap at you. You're right, I am a little crazy.*

That's it. No apology, just a joke.

Still, it's something. Without waiting for a reply, she turns, and I watch her saunter out of the room, dragging my gaze from the strands of dark hair that have fallen from her bun to the curve of her ass in the only pair of jeans she owns. My stomach tightens and my heart pounds. A heat creeps up my neck.

When she's gone, I stare at her note, trying to refocus my attention on the phone call. In reality, I'm only half listening, too damn focused on the princess.

MEREDITH

Jack has shown his face once all morning, and it was so he could come down to make another pot of coffee. When I heard him walking down the stairs, I made sure to look extra busy. I was already vacuuming, but I vacuumed harder, heaving the thing back and forth as fast as I could. I looked like I was racing against an imaginary clock. He completely ignored me.

When he walked back by with his new cup of coffee, I'd moved on to the hallway. He had to walk right by me to get to the stairs and I held my breath, quietly praying he would trip on the vacuum cord. His spilled coffee would be my mess to clean, but I'd do it with a half-hidden grin.

Sadly, he stepped purposefully over the cord without acknowledging me then trotted right back up the stairs.

His quiet indifference is a silent weapon I can't fend off. I'm jumpy and on edge, listening for every little sound and jerking my attention to the stairs each time I think I hear him walking down them.

He hasn't made another appearance, but that hasn't stopped him from hanging around in my thoughts. I can't get the image of him from this morning out of my head. When I walked into his office, he was sitting behind his desk, phone pressed to his ear, gaze straight on me. His hatred plumed off him like smoke. He had a sharp stare and cool confidence, and I took one good look at him then nearly spilled his coffee all over the floor.

It's bad enough that I don't like his personality, but his appearance isn't exactly helping matters. I really want to find him unattractive, but I don't. He might be rougher around the edges than the men back in California, but with his chiseled jaw and piercing gaze, it's impossible to call him anything less than handsome. I try to tell myself his hair needs a trim and he's too sun-kissed. He could use a shave—his face would feel all scratchy. *Wait, what? Pull it together Meredith. There will be no feeling his face.*

I'm not a fool. If his personality weren't so unyielding, I have no doubt there'd be a different woman warming his sheets every night. Even so, I bet he isn't lacking for female attention. I shiver at the thought of having to wash sweaty sheets or empty condoms from his trashcan.

Ugh! Okay, enough, brain. You've had your fun.

I snip that line of thinking and decide it's time for me to get out of this house. I think Jack's proximity is tainting my thoughts. Some fresh air will do me some good.

It's time for a grocery store run.

I jot down a list of everything I want to make for meals then survey the pantry and fridge. Edith and Jack have enough barbecue sauce and baked beans to last them well into an apocalypse. Veggies and fruits are nowhere to be found, unless you count the dusty jars of pickled okra labeled *Edith - July 2002*. Yum. That will change once I make it back with the groceries. I grab the envelope with the grocery money from the counter then find Edith out on the porch throwing the ball for Alfred. Fortunately, the activity seems to be holding his attention so well that he doesn't care to acknowledge me. Still, I aim to make my time near him as brief as possible.

“Hey Edith, is there a car I can borrow to drive to the grocery store?”

She turns and holds up her hand to shield the sun from her eyes. “Yeah, go ask one of the hands, they'll set you up with a truck.”

I turn toward the barn and spot a half-dozen ranch hands at work. There are varying shades of cowboy hats and an ample amount of denim. I can smell the testosterone from way over here.

“Umm...is there one in particular I should aim for?”
Perhaps the weakest one in the herd?

“Don’t think it’ll matter really. I’m sure they’ll all be dying to help you as soon as you make your way over there.”

She’s right, of course. After I skirt around the house as stealthily as possible to avoid Alfred’s interest, I don’t even make it halfway to the barn before the first cowboy catches up with me. He falls in line right beside me and holds out his hand. “Hey there, name’s Chris.”

He doesn’t look a day over eighteen, especially with the sunshine glinting off his blond hair. With a goofy lopsided grin and sunburned cheeks, he seems relatively harmless.

“Nice to meet you, Chris. I’m Meredith.”

“I saw you at the meeting the other day. I’ve gotta say, I’m surprised to see you around after that. You workin’ up in the house now?”

“Started on Monday.”

We continue heading toward the row of vehicles beside the barn.

“What do you think so far?”

I squint one eye to study him. I don’t know how loyal Chris is to Jack, but something about his gentle manner makes me want to give him an honest answer.

“Let’s just say I’ve had an interesting start.”

“That bad, huh?” He chuckles and shakes his head. “He gets better, I promise. When I first started working here, I couldn’t even look him in the eye.”

“Really?”

“He sure can be a mean son of a gun.”

I'm still deciding if I actually heard him correctly—*what exactly is a son of a gun?*—when another ranch hand joins us.

“Chris! Why are you bothering this nice lady?”

“David, Meredith,” Chris says. “Meredith, David.”

We shake hands and David flanks me on the other side as we keep walking. Suddenly I'm surrounded by boots and twangs on all sides. David looks a little older than Chris, tall and lanky with a beard so long and thick my chin gets itchy just looking at it. I notice then that they're both wearing matching work shirts with BLUE STONE RANCH monogrammed just beneath the left lapel. I wonder if Jack would have offered me the same uniform if I hadn't already stolen his t-shirts.

“Meredith was just saying how Jack's been a real asshole to her,” Chris informs David matter-of-factly.

Jesus! Keep your voice down. The guy probably has the place mic'd up or something. Just to be sure, I loudly and clearly enunciate, “I have not!”

David bumps his shoulder with mine. “It's okay. You'll get used to it—everyone does. He's a good boss, just can be a real mean sonuvab—”

“Gun?” I finish for him.

He winks. “Sure.”

“Where you stayin'?” David asks. “Downtown? Not much to rent around here unless you can afford the motel down off 173.”

“No, I'm staying on the ranch.”

They exchange a confused glance, and then Chris asks, “*Here?* You mean he has you up in the house with him and Edith?”

“No no no. He's letting me stay there.” I turn and point toward my shack-sweet-shack nestled in the tree line behind the farmhouse. The distance has not softened its appearance. The last of the ancient window shutters—barely hanging on by

one rusty hinge—finally breaks and falls to the ground as if on cue.

“*Lettin’ you?*” echoes David, laughing as he keels over. “You’re kidding! Where ya really staying?”

It takes a bit more convincing on my part before they actually believe me. Apparently even they wouldn’t deign to sleep there, and it makes me hate Jack even more than before. He made it sound like I should have been grateful for the provided accommodations.

“That ain’t right,” David says, shaking his head. “Does it even have a kitchen?”

“It’s really not so bad. I’ve been making do.”

Yesterday, for dinner, I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while hovering over the sink. I would have sat on the bed, but the mice and spiders were embroiled in a vicious turf war.

“Last time I went in there, I saw holes in the floorboards.”

I nod. “Yeah, those are still there.”

One of them is so big my foot nearly fell through.

“Miss Meredith,” Chris says solemnly, taking his hat off and holding it over his heart. A look of deep concern is etched across his baby face. “As good Christian men, we can’t let you keep livin’ like that.”

My brows arch. “Do either of you have a better solution?”

He thinks hard about it. “Well, David here’s getting married soon, so he can’t have you movin’ in with him, and well, I still live with my parents or I’d invite you to stay with us. My mom got pretty mad the last time I brought a stray woman home.”

He says it like I’m a flea-infested mutt he found on the side of the road. *Please Mom, can we keep her? She’s housetrained and everything!* I don’t take any offense. Other than Edith, Chris and David are the two nicest people I’ve met so far in Texas.

“Well guys, I appreciate your concern, but I won’t be staying in that shack long. I’m saving up so I can move somewhere else.” We finally make it to the row of mud-splattered farm vehicles ranging from ATVs to trucks. “Now, can either of you get me the keys for one of these? I need to run down to the grocery store.”

David tips his cowboy hat. “You stay right here.”

While he’s gone, Chris gives me detailed directions for how to get to the grocery store. “Take the third left after the Lutheran church, and then the next right after First Baptist, and, now, if you see St. Mary’s, you’ve gone too far.” By the time I hop up behind the wheel of an old Ford truck, I think I’ll just let Jesus take the wheel.

Chris shuts the door for me and puts his hat back on his shaking head. “Godspeed Miss Meredith. We’ll figure something out for ya.”

I turn to the dashboard to see what I’m working with and try not to show my concern. The truck is from an era when designers figured getting impaled by a steel steering column was as good a safety feature as any. The seatbelt, which is draped loosely over my lap, has a few knots tying the pieces together.

“Are there any other trucks available? Maybe an automatic? It’s been a while since I’ve driven a manual.”

David frowns. “That’s all we’ve got. I’d give you a quick refresher, but Chris and I really gotta get back to work.”

Right, of course. I’ll have to make do. I will not march back into the house and announce to Jack that I’ve had yet another failure. He probably keeps a list of them stowed in his top desk drawer. It’s laminated, and he pulls it out from time to time just to make himself smile. Sometime soon, he’ll splurge and have it framed.

To my credit, I manage to peel out onto the main road before I stall for the first time. The truck is old—it belongs beside a horse and buggy—and its lower gears are proving

ornery. With every grind of the transmission, it's like the vehicle is saying, *Please just kill me.*

I restart the truck and continue down the winding country road, trying to glance down at the directions from Chris while also remaining in my designated lane. I'm chugging along at 15 mph, because third gear seems to be the most cooperative. It's slow going, but I try to enjoy the ride. I roll the window down, and the summer breeze carries the scent of honeysuckle and jasmine. Every now and then a car comes up behind me and I wave them past. They offer fun little greetings as they swerve around me: "Lady! The speed limit's 40!" and "GET OFF THE ROAD!" I smile and wave, because I'm taking a summer cruise, and summer cruises are meant to be slow. Unfortunately, there's a hill up ahead and I'll need to speed up or move to a lower gear if I have any hope of actually cresting it.

I take a deep breath, let off the gas, push in the clutch, and try shifting into second gear. *Wait, is second gear up or down?* Before I know it, the hill has slowed me to a complete stop in the middle of the road. I plop my head down on the steering wheel before I register the feeling of backward motion.

"No, no, no!" I shout, stomping on the brake pedal.

A truck blasts its horn behind me so loudly I jump out of my skin.

"Go around!" I shout out the window and they listen, whipping past me at a million miles per hour.

After that, I'm left alone again, just me and the hill. I restart the truck yet again, make several attempts at forward progress, but the backward rolling freaks me out every time, causing me to stall out. Finally, I reach the bottom of the hill—*actual rock bottom.*

I'm no longer just grumbling under my breath; I'm shouting curse words at the top of my lungs (for every nearby church to hear) as I stare at the insurmountable hill. I'm smack-dab in the middle of a children's fable, *The Little Meredith That Could*, except I'm pretty sure I can't.

I catch another truck coming up the road in my rearview mirror and prep myself for another blaring horn, but it never comes. The driver pulls up behind me, flips on the hazards, and then opens the door. I'm prepared to see a farmer or another ranch hand, not a handsome golden-haired man dressed in a suit. I think he's a figment of my overactive imagination, but I'm so desperate, I'll take any help I can get, even in the form of a hallucination. I blink. He's still there. His tie is a dark blue, and I focus on it in my rearview mirror as he rounds the back of the truck and comes up to the driver's side window.

"Are you having car trouble, ma'am?"

He leans on the windowsill. I should warn him that the rust will probably rub off on his suit, but I'm too focused on *ma'am*. If that's not the cutest thing in the world, I don't know what is.

I smile gently. "Not exactly. More like driver trouble. It's, uhh...well, it's been a while since I've driven stick."

I nod toward the hill and he finally gets it. "Keep stallin'?"

"Unfortunately."

Here is where he could either say, *Well, good luck*, and head back to his truck or offer to help me out of my bind. Instead, he takes a minute to survey me. I imagine what he's seeing: wild ponytail, oversized t-shirt, ripped jeans. If he sniffs, he'll catch the scent of my perfume of choice lately: eau de Lemon Pledge.

"You're not from around here."

No question, all statement.

I quirk a brow. "How could you tell?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Question is, what are you doing driving one of Blue Stone's trucks?"

Of course. I'm sure there's a massive logo somewhere that I overlooked—or maybe this truck is so old, it's legendary.

"I'm their newest employee."

I'm all smiles, proud of my new job. *Job. Jobjobjob.* It stills sounds funny in my head.

His light brown eyes widen. "You're kidding. Don't tell me they have you working at the new vineyard."

"No." I didn't even realize there was a vineyard.

"Are you at the restaurant then?"

"The ranch," I answer simply.

"Ranch hand, huh?" he teases.

"Something like that."

"Since when?"

"Three days ago."

He nods. "What do you think of the guy who runs the place?"

"Jack? Is he a friend of yours?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "Not exactly. He and I went to high school together. Never could quite get along."

An enemy of my enemy? This just got interesting.

"We've had a rocky start," I admit sheepishly.

A gleam of interest sparks in his light brown gaze. "I can't imagine why. You seem sweet enough to me."

I KNOW, RIGHT! Finally someone gets it.

"I don't think I'm the problem..."

His handsome smile stretches wider. "No, I doubt you are."

We are definitely flirting and he is definitely good-looking, a welcome sight in the middle of an eligible-men desert. I know it seems crazy, thinking about men like this so soon after leaving my husband, but it's been so long since I've *flirted* and not just *appeased*. It feels good, like scratching a leg that's been buried under a plaster cast for months.

This guy's clothes are nice. His face is nicer. He's cleanly shaven. His hair is trimmed short and he has one of those

classic, pearly smiles. I bet he gets along with most everyone, unlike a certain dark-haired, darker-eyed devil waiting for me back at the ranch. I know he didn't give me the keys to this clunker, but he's still to blame for my current predicament. I don't have any proof, but I have a gut feeling he's somehow the reason I got the flu before my seventh grade trip to Disney and couldn't go.

"I'll make you a deal: you scoot over on this seat, and I'll get you over this hill. Where are you headed?"

I start to slide across the bench seat, and he pulls open the door to take my place behind the wheel. "The grocery store." I hold up my piece of paper. "According to my incredibly detailed directions, I'm nearly there."

"Yeah." He nods before he starts the truck and maneuvers it like a pro. "You should be good. The store's just around the bend up ahead, and don't worry, there aren't any more hills after this one. I'd drive you the rest of the way myself, but I have to be in court in fifteen minutes."

"Court, huh? Are you the law breaker or the law upholder?"

He laughs. "You'll be happy to know I have a clean record, ma'am. Good thing considering you just let me hop into this truck with you."

My eyes widen. How stupid could I be?

"Oh god. I did, didn't I?!" I drop my face in my palm. "You could've been a—a highwayman or something!"

"Aren't too many of those still around this century." He smiles. "I just wouldn't recommend doing it again in the future. Cedar Creek is pretty safe, but you never know when a few bad apples might be passing through."

It's kind of fun that small towns have a rosy euphemism for everything. In big cities they're hardened criminals. Here, they're just spoiled fruit.

"I'll remember that for next time," I promise.

“Maybe I could give you my number and you can call me if you ever find yourself in a bind again, roadside or otherwise.”

I swear he’s blushing a little bit.

If I were in the market for love, he’d be the perfect candidate: handsome but sweet, gentle and kind. He’s a golden retriever, anxious to please in hopes of a treat.

I think it’s best that I don’t lead him on though, so I offer the truth: “I don’t keep a cell phone on me.”

“You’re kidding.”

I pat my jean pockets for proof. “Nope. I’m not Amish or anything, it’s just—well, it’s complicated.”

I keep it back at the ranch on my bedside table. I hardly check it, and I would get rid of it completely but I’m scared Helen or my parents will need to reach me. Most of the time I just keep it turned off.

He puts the truck in park. “So I guess that means I’ll have to settle for the ol’ fashioned way: maybe I’ll see you around sometime.”

I smile and shrug. “I’m sure I’ll stall out again soon, or maybe I’ll commit a crime and need a lawyer to defend me?”

He brushes his hand across his chin, brows furrowed. “Won’t work. I’m a prosecutor.”

“Wow, so you really are a hero. Slaying dragons and rescuing damsels—all you need is a suit of armor.” He can’t meet my eyes, as if he’s embarrassed by the attention. I smile and reach over to extend my hand. “I’m Meredith, by the way.”

He smiles as his warm palm meets mine. “Tucker.”

After that, we part ways. Tucker dashes off to court, and I’m left chugging along the last mile or two to the grocery store with a dopey smile on my face. I take my time perusing the aisles, pleasantly surprised by the turn my day has taken. Jack might have started it off with a bang, but thanks to Chris, David, and Tucker, I’m starting to think people in Texas are

just as friendly as rumor has it. I check off every item on my grocery list and manage to stay under budget. Food is so much cheaper here than in California, and I even find a section of the store full of organic, local produce from a few of the surrounding farms.

By the time I make it back to the ranch—after only stalling once on the way home, thank you very much—I carry all the groceries in and get to work making lunch. It’s already 12:45 PM and Jack and Edith are hungry. Edith won’t leave the kitchen. She’s taken up residence on one of the bar stools and is watching me work.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“Garlic-infused olive oil.”

“And that?”

“Panko.”

“Pank-what?”

“PANK-OH. Breadcrumbs to you. I like it on salmon.”

“Jack isn’t a big fan of fish.”

I purse my lips. “You don’t say.”

“Yeah, we’re more a meat-and-potatoes kind of family.”

Just then, Jack’s booming voice carries down from the top floor. “Is Meredith back from the store yet? I just got a call from Marty, said he saw a brunette stalled out on the side of the road in one of our trucks.”

“Yes I’m back!” I shout back, annoyed with this Marty person for being such a narc. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about! I got to the store and back just fine, no thanks to that rust bucket your ranch hands lent me!”

“That truck runs just fine when I drive it!”

“Yeah, the engine’s probably running from you like everyone else around here!”

Edith throws her hands in the air. “That’s enough shouting! Jack either come down here and talk to Meredith like a normal

human being or get back to work. Lunch won't be ready for another thirty minutes!"

"Forty," I whisper.

"Forty minutes!" she corrects.

Jack's footsteps clomp back into his office, and Edith and I exchange a conspiratorial smile.

Forty minutes later on the dot, Jack and his grandmother sit down for a lunch of summer kale salad, cauliflower rice, and baked salmon.

I stand at the end of the table, twisting a towel in my hand and waiting for them to take their first bites. They both stare at the food like it's some kind of alien sustenance.

"There's not a potato on this plate," Jack points out.

"I think you'll like the cauliflower. It's rich and garlicky."

"Is this the first course?" he asks, peering up at me from beneath his dark brows.

"Jack, don't be so rude," Edith scolds. "Meredith, sit down and eat with us."

"Oh, I've been eating this whole time—y'know, checking the seasoning levels."

"Eat s'more then," she demands. "You're too skinny."

I laugh. "Where I come from, that's a compliment."

Truthfully, I *could* eat. I'm starving, but I'm aware of the fact that Jack hasn't asked me to join them. In fact, his body language sends the exact opposite message. If we were in elementary school, he'd drop his backpack on the empty seat beside him and proclaim loudly, *Seat's taken*.

I take the hint and leave them to it. "If you'll excuse me, I need to finish organizing the groceries."

"Thank you for lunch," Edith says. "It looks very... *exotic*."

I shake my head as I walk back into the kitchen.

There's silence for a few minutes as forks and knives meet plates. I start to organize the groceries in the pantry, but my ears are trained on the dining room, listening for feedback.

"The salmon's really good," Edith says.

Jack grunts.

"I notice you've nearly cleared your plate there," she points out.

"A man's gotta eat."

"Uh-huh. You've about licked it clean—I'm sure Meredith would give you seconds if you asked."

I can't hear any conversation after that, and then a few minutes later, Jack walks into the kitchen with both of their plates. There's not a speck of food left on either.

I hold out my hands to take them from him, but he steps around me.

My brows jump to my hairline, but I keep my lips zipped.

He opens the dishwasher and bends down to load their plates and silverware. I don't stare at his butt in his worn Wranglers, and I definitely don't snap my gaze away before he stands and turns to face me. He drops his hands onto the counter and leans forward. I busy myself by folding a towel and hanging it over the side of the sink. I pick at a speck of dirt on the counter. I open a cabinet, look inside, and then close it again. It's clear he wants me to stop what I'm doing and give him my attention, but I can't do it. Everything inside of me wants to fight him tooth and nail, even for something as simple as this.

"So the truck gave you some trouble?"

His tone is the same one my parents used when they knew I'd done something wrong but they wanted me to fess up to it myself. *Meredith, do you know what could've happened to the entire sleeve of Oreos?*

No clue, I'd mumble through pursed lips, cheeks bursting at the seams, teeth looking like an active coal mine.

“Nope. No trouble at all.”

“That’s strange, because Marty—a trusted friend—asked me if I’d had any trucks stolen by a raven-haired woman.”

I suppose Marty, with his level of observational detail, must be the sketch artist at the local police department. I have no choice but to adjust my current strategy of denial.

“Ohhh, he must’ve seen me when I pulled over to admire the wildflowers.”

“What kind?”

“Sunflowers.”

“I haven’t seen any yet this year.”

“They were massive, big as your head.” I spot the obvious flaw in my plan and sidestep it masterfully. “Somebody was out mowing though, so they’re probably all gone now.”

“Y’know, it’s an old truck. It could have given anyone a hard time.”

He’s playing good cop, trying to bait me into an easy confession. I turn and give him a blank, innocent stare.

He tips his head to the side.

I mimic him.

He puts his hands on his hips, and so do I.

He narrows his eyes, and I mirror the gesture.

Finally, he cracks. When he’s gone, I’ll pump my fist in the air in victory.

“Next time come get the keys for my truck.”

His truck?

“Is it from the Stone Age or the Bronze Age?”

He heaves a heavy sigh like he’s lost all his patience with me—that, or he’s trying not to laugh.

“It’s brand new.”

“And you’d trust me with it?”

“Do I have a reason not to?”

His gaze is so warm, and yet so cold all at once. Meeting it makes me feel like a tiny fist is punching me repeatedly in the gut. I’m surprised I still sound normal as I ask, “What’d you think of lunch?”

He shrugs, glancing down at the shirt I have knotted off at my waist, yet another of his hand-me-downs. His eyes narrow almost imperceptibly before his gaze finds mine again. “I don’t usually like salmon.”

There’s a compliment in there somewhere, but I’d have to use a pickaxe to find it.

“Right, well, I saved the skin. It’s good for dogs.”

His brows rise as if he’s impressed. “Going to give it to Alfred?”

“Give it, drop it out back through the cracked door—tomato-tomahto.”

He shakes his head and pushes off the counter. “We really gotta work on that fear of yours.”

“Total avoidance is working out pretty well,” I quip. “I’ll just continue that forever.”

“Forever, huh? Strong words for someone on their second day.”

I try not to smile. “That’s how long I plan to stay—either that or until we’re so sick of each other that you fire me.”

“That’s how you think this is gonna end?”

Now we’re both fighting smiles. “I won’t be quitting, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He rubs the back of his neck as he turns for the back door. “We’ll see.”

It’s a cheeky little sendoff, and just like with everything else concerning Jack, it digs under my skin. *We’ll see*, I mouth snarkily to his back like a snotty grade-schooler, all the while watching him walk away. He reaches for his baseball cap on

the hook by the door, slips it on over his chestnut brown hair, and then he's gone.

Later that evening, after I'm done working for the day, I find an envelope tucked halfway underneath the door of the shack. Inside, there's a small advance: \$500 in cash.

Jack's jagged handwriting adorns the front of the envelope:
Stop wearing my clothes.

JACK

With summer in full swing, we're right in the middle of our busy season for Blue Stone, and the restaurant is more popular than ever. This morning I went over there to meet with the head chef and the GM, and I approved a new seating layout so we can fit a few more tables out on the back porch.

Our vineyard and winery have been expanding for the last few years as well. I've been working on opening up a distribution channel between us and a few regional grocery store chains, but we're still working out the terms. The dry weather last year hit us hard, and we weren't sure we'd be able to keep up with supply. Funny enough, the shortage sparked more interest than usual, and what wine we were able to stock sold out as soon as it hit shelves. I've hired a few more growers to ensure that this season fares better than the last.

The manager for our wedding venue assures me we have more events booked than ever, says brides are having to inquire a year in advance to secure their desired dates, and even then, most of the highly coveted weekends are already double-booked with a wedding in the morning and another in the evening.

The fact is, with everything going on with the various Blue Stone businesses, I rarely find time to step out from behind my desk. It's a shame considering how much I enjoy working outside, so I take advantage of every opportunity I can get—like right now, I'm in the middle of an all-hands meeting,

checking in with the guys about the progress on a few projects around the ranch.

Too bad not a single one of them is listening to me. A few yards away, Meredith is stealing the show.

She's out on the front porch with Alfred, attempting to conquer her fear by treating him to some of the salmon skin from yesterday's lunch.

"Sit!"

Alfred sits for two seconds, gets overwhelmed with self-pride for obeying, and then leaps excitedly at her outstretched hand.

"I said sit! Sit!"

The problem is she's holding the treat way over her head to keep it out of his reach, but he thinks she's giving him a challenge: *Oh! You want me to jump higher?!*

"Very bad!" she admonishes, wagging her finger as if he's fluent in sign language. "I'll feed it to you as soon as you can hold a sit for more than a blink!"

He jumps up again and she squeals and flings the salmon skin away like it's a hot potato. Alfred makes it disappear in two seconds.

It's pitiful. None of us can look away.

"Where'd you find her, anyway?" Garrett, my ranch manager, asks. "They got mail-order California brides now?"

"She's his new housekeeper," Chris, my youngest ranch hand, interjects. "She just started a few days ago."

He's wearing a proud smile I find confusing.

Garrett wags his thumb toward her. "Why's she wearing your shirt?"

Yes, why *is* she wearing my shirt? I groan thinking of the note I left on her doorstep yesterday afternoon. Apparently she decided to disregard it. Even worse, it looks like she's actually cut the sleeves off of this one. Now I don't even want it back.

“So is she a Russian bride or is she single?” someone else asks, inciting a round of snickers.

All heads spin to me as if they’ve been waiting for the answer to that question all day. A few of them rub their necks from whiplash.

I answer swiftly, tacking on my most gruff tone, the one that makes them pee their pants. “She is nobody’s goddamn business. Show her some respect and get back to work.”

I catch Chris smiling, seemingly happy with me for sticking up for her. What the hell is wrong with him?

I get my answer when he and David catch up to me as I’m walking back toward the farmhouse.

“Hey boss, is there any lumber we could use to fix up that shack you’ve tucked Miss Meredith away in? I figure we could patch up the floor pretty quick, shouldn’t take longer than a day or two.”

“First of all, why are you calling her Miss Meredith like she’s your mommy’s friend? Second, what are you talking about?”

They exchange a glance like, *here we go again*, and then David speaks up. “Which part are you confused about? The lumber or the—”

“Who said anything about fixing up the shack?”

Chris’ eyes go wide. “Haven’t you been inside there lately? There are gaps in the floorboards this far apart.” He stretches his arms out as wide as they’ll go. It’s an exaggeration...I think. “A snake could crawl in sideways.”

David nods. “Not to mention, it’s about to get hot as hell. Once we fix the floors, we could drop in a window unit from the hardware store. They’re pretty cheap these days—”

I hold up my hand so they’ll both shut their yaps. “Why do you two care? You don’t even know her.”

Chris frowns, clearly offended. “We met her yesterday.”

“Oh yeah? Now y’all are buddies?”

He shrugs. “I gave her directions to the grocery store.”

“And now she has y’all running around working for her?”

He stops walking and props his hands on his hips. David follows suit. “Oh no, she didn’t ask—just seems like the right thing to do. You know she made us muffins this morning, brought ’em out to all the guys, still warm from the oven, just like Gammy used to make.”

*What is going on? When did all my ranch hands go soft?
And why didn’t I get any of these muffins?*

“So what do you think?” Chris asks, his eyes comically large and brimming with hope.

“We’ll do it on our own time if that’s the problem,” David adds.

“I’ll think about it.”

They beam, and I leave them there like two little love-struck schoolboys.

Meredith is sitting on the porch steps, soaking up the sun and watching me approach. When I get within earshot, she holds up her hands. “Before you accuse me of slacking on the job, I’m taking my fifteen-minute break. I asked around and all the guys said we’re allowed two a day.”

I tip my head down to hide my amusement. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Oh sure.”

I reach the stairs and crouch down to pet Alfred, who’s lounging on the grass there. “I’m surprised you’re sitting so close to him.”

“It’s intentional. I’m trying immersion therapy.”

I peer up at her and squint to keep the sun out of my eyes.

“How’s that working out for you?”

She shrugs and scoots a smidge away from him, trying to play it off like she was just readjusting her seat. “It’s not so bad now that his attention is on you.”

I make a point to scratch his belly so he'll roll onto his back. His tongue lolls out of the side of his mouth and his hind leg starts to kick the air.

“Well now you're just showing off,” she says in a clipped tone.

“I promise you, he's a lover, not a fighter.”

“That's odd.”

“Why?”

“Well, they say pets are a reflection of their owners, but I guess there must be some exceptions.”

I turn to see her lean back on the stairs, a coy smile hinting that she was teasing, not trying to land a punch. I should push to stand and get back to work, but I'm stuck focusing on the sprinkling of freckles across the brim her nose. Were they there when she first showed up?

“The guys said you brought them muffins this morning.”

She tips her head to the side and her smile fades. “If I say I did, will I get in trouble?”

“Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“I don't know, you sounded kind of annoyed just then.”

I frown. “I think that's just my default tone.”

She laughs at that—a rich, warm laugh that stops me in my tracks. My gaze hitches on the deep dimple dotting the left side of her smile. When she notices me staring, she clears her throat and motions back to the house.

“I saved one for you, though it wasn't easy—Edith already sniffed out the two I hid behind the breadbox.” I don't think she can tell how shocked I am by the gesture because she continues nonchalantly. “I could bring it up to your office with some coffee.”

“I thought you were resisting the notion of waiting on me hand and foot?”

She looks away, eyes narrowing. “If you don’t want it, just say so.”

That hurt expression twists my insides, and my first instinct is to fall to my knees and beg for that damn muffin, but I catch myself. What the hell am I doing, standing here and chatting? I shouldn’t be warming up to Meredith. I shouldn’t be letting my guard down with her at all. She’s a heartbreaker. She’s spoiled and flighty. If Helen is to be believed, she left her husband to teach him some kind of bratty lesson. I’d be wise to keep my distance, even if that means hurting her feelings to do it.

I push to stand. “Yeah, I had a big breakfast. You can give it to Edith.”

Later at lunch, Meredith sets down another one of her healthy meals. This time there’s baked chicken, asparagus, and some kind of tiny grain that looks like it should be sprinkled into a fish tank.

“Couscous,” she announces softly.

I feel my mouth turn down with disdain and have to fight against it.

Still, she senses my reluctance. “It’s wheat, country boy. Give it a try. I promise you’ll like it.”

Edith pats the empty place setting beside her. “Take a seat and eat with us.”

If she wasn’t my grandmother, I’d kick her shin under the table. What is it with her and Meredith? Edith never tried this hard to be friendly with our old housekeeper.

I aim daggers at her, but she’s too busy making googly eyes at Meredith to notice, so I have no choice but to speak up. “Mary never used to eat lunch with us.”

Meredith bristles at the comment and spins on her heel to head back into the kitchen.

There. Problem solved.

Edith sends me a scathing look from across the table. When I was younger, that look would have made me recoil in fear. I'm surprised it hasn't completely lost its effect.

"That's because Mary used to prefer watching Jerry Springer up in her room during lunch."

I shrug and scoop a pile of couscous onto my spoon. *Here goes nothing.* "It's better this way. I'm still pretty sure she'll be gone in a week anyway. There's no sense in getting friendly with her."

She rolls her eyes. "Believe me, you're in no danger of that."

I straighten my shoulders, fish food forgotten. "You think I'm being too hard on her?"

"Well she's scared shitless of Alfred, yet I still think she prefers his company to yours."

I grind my teeth, and for the rest of the meal, we don't bother with conversation. There's no use. She's angry with me for the way I'm treating Meredith, and I'm angry with her for not seeing my side. If she'd heard the way Helen spoke about her sister, she wouldn't be so welcoming either.

I'm focused pretty hard on stewing, but not so much that I don't notice how good Meredith's food is. I've never willingly eaten asparagus, but she roasted it so well I'm a little disappointed when my plate's clean.

I scoot my chair back from the table and carry our dishes into the kitchen. Meredith is in there cleaning, and she makes a point to completely ignore my presence. Not only that, she turns and angles herself away from me. Her shoulders are hunched over and her head is tilted down as she scrubs hard, cleaning the stove.

All right. Okay. I've had enough. This is what it must feel like to be the mean, responsible parent. It sucks. Why do I have to be the bad guy? So what? I didn't want her eating with us and getting cozy, but I can't stand her moping like this. Not to mention, the sooner she and I are back on semi-decent terms, the sooner Edith will come around as well.

“Food was good. Two for two.”

She hums and keeps her back to me.

“I’d never tried kooz-kooz before.”

She makes a little bored noise, unimpressed, and then I’m left with nothing else to say.

My temper starts to boil up inside of me, though not at her—at myself. I hate this. I hate that I can’t decide how I should handle her. One minute I want her out of my house. The next, I want to play nice and get on her good side. I can’t help but wonder what that would be like: fresh baked muffins with my morning coffee, sweet smiles, the returned love and affection of my grandmother. I could get used to that real quick.

And that right there is the problem.

MEREDITH

“I feel compelled to defend my grandson.”
I shake my head. “There’s no need, really.”

Edith comes around me and turns off the faucet for the kitchen sink. I’m elbow-deep in suds, but apparently this conversation is more important than the dishes from lunch. I reach for a towel and dry my hands before turning toward her.

She’s eyeing me with unveiled curiosity. “He thinks you’re using us as a stepping stone.”

“Oh yeah?” I cross my arms. “Who’s to say he’s not right?”

She nods, running with it. “Who indeed?” After a brief silence, she plunks me in the forehead with her pointer finger. “You are, dummy! So are you or are you not headin’ back to California as soon as that rich husband of yours figures out where you ran off to?”

My jaw ticks with anger.

“Whatever you think you know about me, go ahead and believe it. It’s all true.”

I’m so sick of everyone shoving their nose in my business. If this were a normal job with normal hours, she wouldn’t be asking about my personal life, but this hasn’t been a normal setup from the beginning. She and Jack know Helen, and therefore they feel like they know me. They don’t. It’s like looking out a single window and thinking you know what the whole world looks like. Whatever snippets I told Helen about

my life back in California were only half-truths. My life back there wasn't complete hell, but it wasn't all rainbows and cotton candy either.

“Maybe I do come from a cushy life, but there's a lot more to it. All you need to know is that I'm not going back. End of story. Now if you're done, I need to get back to these dishes.”

“Was it ever good? Your marriage?”

Her question is so jarring that a sharp memory hits me like a bird smacking into a clean window. The last time Andrew and I were intimate, I was lying face down on our bed with him on top of me, letting it happen, trying to think of anything other than how revolting it was to have him touch me. I turned and my gaze caught on the framed picture on my nightstand: us, on our wedding day...me, smiling up at Andrew like he was my shining prince.

“Yes, we were happy once.”

“Well, marriage is hard. You gotta work at it to keep the love alive.”

I think back to all my desperate attempts to change him. In the end, I only succeeded in changing myself.

I pretend like her advice is blowing my mind. “Wow, *really*? Guess I just didn't try hard enough. Any more sage advice? Maybe I should have spiced it up in the bedroom to keep him interested? Maybe I should have been a little more attentive? More dotting? Funny? Aloof? Mysterious? Please tell me how I could have saved a marriage you know nothing about.”

My explosion misses her completely. She hums with confirmation then turns for the back door. “Yep, that's what I thought.”

I frown. “What?”

She keeps on walking. “Nothing. You can go back to your dishes now.”

“Edith!”

The back door slams behind her, and I throw up my hands in defeat. *Jesus, what is with this family?*

It's early evening and I've quarantined myself in the shack. It's just me and the local wildlife I've yet to evict. I have a hardback cracked open on my lap, a brand-new thriller I found Edith reading yesterday. Apparently we share the same literary tastes—we sat in the game room chatting about books for a good thirty minutes. When I heard Jack's office door open, I leapt to my feet. I didn't want him to catch me slacking on the job; I won't gift him any ammunition against me. Other than our little blowups, I want to be the best employee he's ever had. I want my likeness framed above a small plaque that reads: *Employee of the Year!* That way he won't have any grounds to fire me.

He didn't see me lounging there with his grandmother, and she insisted it didn't matter anyway. Still, I didn't want to abuse his trust, so I got back to work, and Edith must have finished the rest of the novel because it was waiting for me on my doorstep earlier.

It's great so far, lots of murder and blood—everything a girl needs—but I'm having trouble focusing on it because it's so damn hot in here. The sun is on its way down for the day, but the air is still humid and stifling. I took an ice-cold shower after work then put on one of Jack's t-shirts, and instead of knotting it, I'm wearing it like a dress while my jeans hang up to dry. I finally got around to washing them, but this weekend I have plans to go into town and spend a little bit of my advance on some shorts. I can hardly wait.

I push the window open and stick my face out, hoping for some cool wind, but instead, I'm greeted with stale, warm air. A bead of sweat rolls slowly down my forehead. This is ridiculous. Texas is a sauna. In California, it's probably a breezy 70 degrees. At this moment, a woman is out with her boyfriend and begging him for his jacket. He's annoyed she didn't bring one of her own. *I didn't realize it'd be so cold!* Boyfriends in Texas must not have this problem.

Without another thought, I rip my book off my bed and fling the shack's door open. I'm aware that Jack's t-shirt cuts off pretty high on my thighs, but I don't care. The idea of shoving my legs into wet jeans makes me want to dry heave. Besides, no one's going to see me in this ensemble anyway. The guys are already gone for the day since ranch work starts early and ends early, and I'm pretty sure I saw Jack's truck drive off an hour or two ago, so there's no reason to suffocate myself in the hot tub I call home.

If there was a pool on the property, I'd jump into it head first. I'd stay there, floating on my back until the sun burns out. As it is, I'm aiming for a hammock nestled under two oak trees behind the house. I spotted it my first day on the ranch, but I haven't seen anyone use it. It might be a little dirty, but I don't mind. My hope is that if I really get it swinging, I'll generate a little air flow to cool me down. If not, I'm marching into Jack's house and Tetrising my entire body into the freezer. I'll happily perish beside the frozen peas—just the thought sends a shiver of pleasure down my spine.

I relish the feel of the soft grass beneath my bare feet as I make my way across the yard. I decide this is already infinitely better than the shack, right up until I hear a low whistle that says, *Hey there, pretty lady.*

My attention snaps to the left, toward the barn, and I freeze mid-step.

A group of ranch hands are circled around the front of the ancient truck I drove to the grocery store the other day, apparently working on it. Two of them are already staring in my direction—Chris and another boy about his age that I haven't met yet. Chris' eyes go wide and then he quickly averts his gaze as if I'm tiptoeing around outside in lingerie instead of a loose t-shirt. The other ranch hand doesn't look away, and I'd bet money the whistle came from him. He's focused on my bare legs like they're two juicy cheeseburgers and he's starving. The third ranch hand—the one with his head tucked under the hood of the truck—finally steps back and pauses his work. With a start, I realize it's Jack. He wipes the grease from his hands with a rag and mutters something I can't

hear. Neither of the guys respond. He looks up to find them distracted then follows the gaze of the second man right...to...me. When he finds me standing in the middle of the lawn, my knees nearly buckle.

I do the only thing I can think of: hold up my book as if to say, *Hello kind fellow, nothing to see here, just doing a bit of light reading.*

He scowls, and just like that, the look is completed. It's the perfect cowboy fantasy I never knew I had: he's over there working on a farm truck with grease-stained hands, the beginnings of a five o'clock shadow on his chiseled jaw, his dark hair winging out from beneath his backward baseball hat. His t-shirt is stretched tight over his chest and his dark jeans are so worn in, I bet they're perfectly molded to his thighs. His dark eyes warn me away. In fact, they do more than that. They're a visual growl, rumbling in the waning light, but I can't seem to take heed because in that moment, he's the hottest man I've ever seen, and that's a problem.

A major problem.

He catches the ranch hand still focused on me and smacks him in the back of the head, knocking his cowboy hat off. The boy scurries to pick it up and make his apologies, and I use the opportunity to turn tail back toward the shack as fast as possible. My legs move so quick, I break the sound barrier and a random window four miles away shatters as a result.

Once I'm there, I throw the door closed behind me and start pacing. I get it; it doesn't look good. He already thinks so little of me—hell, he probably thinks I'm some kind of west coast nudist, forcing my liberalism on these good Christian people.

There's a heavy knock on the door a second later, and I curse and squeeze my eyes closed.

"Meredith," Jack says, pounding again. "Open up."

"No!" I shout back. "I'm busy."

"I just saw for a fact that you are not busy."

"I'm busy not dealing with this right now!"

“Bullshit. We need to talk.”

“Fine!” I groan. “Okay!”

I reach for the jeans, which are still hanging up to dry, and try to yank them on. I get them up to my knees, but they won't go any higher; they're too wet and tight. *DID I HAVE TO LEAVE MY HUSBAND IN A PAIR OF SKINNY JEANS!?* I hop around, yanking as hard as I can. I'm Ross Geller trying to stuff his sweaty gams into those leather pants, but it's no use. The jeans won't budge, and Jack is growing more impatient outside.

“Meredith!”

“Just hold on a minute!”

I lie back on my bed and tug with all my might, and finally the denim starts to work with me. *YES YES YES*. I zip and button them, leap off the bed, and fling the door open with an angry huff.

Jack breezes right past me and stomps into the shack so heavily that the fragile walls quake. It'll be a fitting end, both of us suffocating under the rubble. Just as we're gasping for our last breaths, I'll offer to make peace, and very quietly, he'll whisper back, *Go to hell*.

“Yes please,” I mock rudely. “Invite yourself in and make yourself at home.”

He turns to face me.

“What the hell was that?” he asks, flinging his arm toward the yard.

I scowl. “*That* was an accident. I thought I was alone.”

“Alone!?” He shakes his head like I'm a certifiable idiot then takes two deliberate steps closer to me. I'm made aware of how small I am by comparison. I have to tip my head back to meet his brown eyes. I'm a child standing at the feet of a giant. “Let me make something perfectly clear: this is a working ranch. You'll never be alone on this property. Also, you're a young female employee—correction: *the* young

female employee. It's hard enough trying to keep the guys in line, and then you go out there dressed like that!"

I fist my hands in my damp hair, resisting the urge to scream as I shout up to him. "I get it, okay?! I'm not an idiot. It was an honest mistake and it won't happen again." I walk to the door, yank it open, and motion for him to get out. "Now if you're done yelling at me, I'd like to try to salvage the rest of my evening."

He doesn't budge, and his angry scowl only deepens. His gaze is on his t-shirt. "I thought I told you to stop wearing my clothes."

"I plan on it, as soon as I get some of my own."

"When's that gonna be?"

"This weekend."

For a few seconds, neither one of us speaks. In fact, we don't even breathe. We stand there, staring each other down. His hands are on his hips. There's a deep line etched between his dark eyebrows, and that line says, *You're more trouble than you're worth.*

I'm staring up, memorizing every tan contour, when he suddenly breaks. He puffs out a heavy sigh and pinches the front of his shirt so he can tug on it and get a little air down his collar.

"Shit, it's hot in here."

"See?!"

I want to wrap my hands around his neck and shake him like a doll, but it would only annoy me more when he wouldn't budge. *Maybe if I throw my whole weight into it like I'm trying to break down a door...*

"That's why you weren't wearing any clothes?"

I purse my lips, unimpressed with his hyperbole. "I was wearing clothes."

"Not enough."

I roll my eyes and resist the urge to plunk him on the forehead. “I feel like we’re going in circles.”

He shakes his head and slowly spins, taking in the shack with fresh eyes. I wonder what he thinks of it now that I’ve been here for a few days. My clothes are hanging on a line near the window. My cream-colored lacy bra flutters beside his t-shirts and I blush, resisting the urge to yank it down. If he notices it, he doesn’t say anything. His gaze sweeps over to the twin bed and then down to the floor.

It’s no Taj Mahal, but all things considered, it’s a hell of a lot cleaner than it was when I found it. I have plans to purchase a few necessities, like a lamp and a rug, this weekend—that is, if my budget extends that far. I’m hoarding most of my advance, so unless the going rate for a rug is a few dollars and a winning smile, chances are I’ll be going without.

“I’m getting you an A/C unit this weekend,” he declares suddenly.

My face is a mask of indifference. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing my excitement before he breaks and admits he’s kidding.

He doesn’t notice my resolve, too busy staring down at the floor. “And I’ll have Chris and Daniel come in here and repair these floorboards. Could have them do it Monday while you’re working so they aren’t in your hair.”

I nod very, *very* slowly. My mouth is hanging open so wide at this point that I’m bound to catch a fly.

“After that, we’ll see about fixing the walls.”

At that, he turns for the open door, apparently finished with me for the time being.

Wait...

“Was that all a joke?!” I burst out after him. “Honestly, if this is another one of your weird mind games, I don’t want any part of it!”

He doesn’t even bother acknowledging me, just keeps on walking, which I *think* means he was serious.

I can hardly believe it.

Soon, I will have cold, air-conditioned air blasting my face like I'm some kind of queen. I think I could cry. On second thought, it's still too hot to cry—I have to stay as hydrated as possible until I get that A/C unit.

Friday flies by and before I know it, it's close to quitting time. I'm about to experience my very first weekend of freedom here in Cedar Creek. I'm so excited, I don't even get annoyed when Jack tells me he has a girl coming into town for a visit. *Christine*. He gives me zero details about her. In fact, I'm pretty sure he only brought her up so he could make sure I put extra towels in the master bathroom. I'm disappointed in his lack of gossip. Are they dating? Friends? Lovers? *More?* Luckily, Edith has no qualms about filling me in. We sit at the kitchen table during my break, sipping coffee and talking while Jack is out with the ranch hands doing all manner of manly things, I'm sure. (Earlier in the morning, I saw him carrying a rope—an actual ROPE! I always thought those were more for show. Anyway, at the sight of it, my recently kindled cowboy fantasies may or may not have ramped up tenfold.)

I get the following information about Christine from Edith: she's a "city girl" like me, though she used to live in Cedar Creek and went to the same high school as Jack. They didn't date back then—I asked. Also of note, Jack was valedictorian of his graduating class. I didn't ask about this, Edith just offers the tidbit up like any proud grandmother would. She also offers up the fact that he had a dozen girls chasing after him on any given day. Also, he was the starting pitcher for varsity baseball. She'd probably keep on rambling about him all day, but I pull her back to the topic at hand.

"But are they dating *now*?"

"Right, yeah...well," she continues, "Christine lives out in San Antonio and has some fancy fashion job."

This piques my interest, but when I ask for details, Edith drops the ball.

“I don’t know what she does,” she replies, waving away my question like it bores her. “Looks at clothes, dresses mannequins—something like that.”

She goes on to say that Christine used to be sort of sweet, but in the last few years, she’s changed. Edith’s direct quote is that Christine’s “got her nose so high in the air, she’d drown in a rainstorm.” I’d ask her what that means, but she leans in close and whispers, “I think she’s overcompensating for growing up in the trailer park across town with her mama.”

My stomach twists and suddenly, I feel bad for contributing to gossip about this woman I don’t even know. “Edith!”

“It’s the truth!”

I shake my head. “She might be ‘high falutin’, as you called her, but if she makes Jack happy—”

“She doesn’t.”

“Well if she’s good for him—”

“She isn’t.”

“Sheesh, remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Where do you think Jack gets his?”

She stands up and carries both of our coffee cups over to the sink even though I was only half finished with mine.

“I’m not trying to be mean,” Edith says, clearly hurt.

“I know. It’s just...I know how it feels to be the subject of...rumors.”

She turns then and smiles warmly, her blue eyes twinkling. “See that? You try not to see the bad in people. You’re already nicer than she is. Prettier too.”

I throw my hands up and get back to work, though I can’t help but think about Christine. It’s not my business what (or who) Jack does in his spare time, and I definitely don’t care about the type of women he invites to sleep over. Who cares if she’s stuck up or hoity toity? You know what I care about? Whether or not she cleans up after herself. That’s all. I hope

she puts the used towels in the dirty clothes hamper and loads her dishes in the dishwasher when she's done with them. She can be as mean as she wants as long as she doesn't make my job harder come Monday morning.

Still, I am a little bit curious about her. Call it boredom, but I've been imagining what she'll be like all day, and I nearly jump for joy when I hear a car pull up out on the gravel drive.

"Christine's here!" Edith calls from the living room.

I'm moving clothes from the washer to the dryer when the front door opens and she strolls in. I'm so anxious to see her that I stuff everything in as quick as I can and dash into the kitchen just as Jack greets her in the front hall. They hug instead of kiss, which I find interesting. Christine seems distant, offering Edith a polite nod, but nothing more. They obviously have bad blood.

She's beautiful—though, I obviously expected nothing less. Her light blonde hair is cropped short near her chin. She's wearing a white dress and sandals that tie up around her ankles. Dainty gold necklaces are layered around her neck, and I'm immediately envious of how put-together she looks. It's been easy to forget about comparing myself to other women when the only one I've seen for a week is more than twice my age.

I'm still staring at her outfit when she rolls her suitcase into the room, bringing a trail of mud along with it. *Dammit.* I just mopped that floor this morning. The farther into the house she goes, the messier it gets.

"Oh, *oh!* Hold on, looks like you have something on your wheels."

I rush forward with a rag I grabbed from the kitchen counter and make quick work of the mud. When I finish, I push off my knees to stand and smile. *There, no more mud streaking my wood floors.*

All three of them are staring at me like I'm crazy.

"Meredith, aren't you off the clock?" Edith quips.

I point back to the kitchen. “I was just finishing up some laundry, didn’t want to leave it in the washer all weekend.”

“Laundry?” Christine frowns, glancing from me to Jack and then back again. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

She’s looking at me like I don’t belong. It’s the exact same look I give the fauna in the shack, but it doesn’t faze them. If anything, they’ve invited even *more* of their friends. *Come on! Tell Jerry and the other spiders we’re throwing a barbecue later! Yup, havin’ flies again!*

“Meredith is helping out around the house for a little while,” Jack explains simply.

Christine isn’t satisfied, so I smile and hold out my clean hand. “I’m the new housekeeper. Pleased to meet you.”

In a flash, her expression softens. Apparently, my job as Jack’s housekeeper immediately whisks away whatever jealousy might have been building inside her. It’s as if I held up a sign that read, *Don’t worry, you’re better than me—on the inside and out.*

Still, she can’t help but size me up. Her gaze scans over me quickly, clearly assessing as she goes. I wish I’d put on a little more makeup this morning. She’s decked out like a blogger at fashion week. Meanwhile, I look like I’ve been hauled out of the ocean after a year alone on a deserted island. I should be the least threatening female she’s ever met. Still, when she scans down to my jeans, her eyes go wide with wonder. “Are those the new distressed skinnies from J Brand?”

I glance down. “Oh, umm...I don’t—”

She walks around me so she can see the back pockets. “They are!” She jerks back around to face me, gripping my shoulders in her hands, shaking me gently. My brain rattles in my head. “Where did *you* get these?! They’ve been on backorder on every website I search.”

I laugh, slightly embarrassed, slightly aware of the emphasis she put on the “you” of that question. “I got them back in California, actually.” Truthfully, they were just one of

a dozen designer pairs hanging in my closet. I didn't think much of them and now I feel slightly guilty that I wore them all week while scrubbing toilets. She's so impressed, I think she'd rip them off me if she could. "I'd let you have them, but they're kind of all I have at the moment."

She laughs and finally releases me. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"I know what you mean," she says while flipping her hair. "When you find the perfect pair of jeans, it feels like you can't wear anything else."

Edith opens her mouth to inform her she misunderstood, to tell her these are actually the only pair of pants I own, but I beat her to it.

"Preach it, sister."

She beams and I smile back.

"California, huh?" she asks. "What are you doing in this hellhole?"

Jack scowls behind her, but I do my best to ignore him.

"It's kind of a long story."

Her manicured brows arch with interest. "Well, I'm dying to hear it."

JACK

Christine won't stop talking about Meredith. We left the ranch thirty minutes ago and we're supposed to be on a date, talking about us and our future. Instead, she's going on and on about my new housekeeper. Don't get me wrong, I love most any excuse to avoid talking about our relationship, just not this one.

"Is it weird that I have a girl crush on her?"

Not that weird considering every ranch hand on my property has an *actual* crush on her.

"She's really pretty," she continues, a little too airily.

"Hadn't noticed."

I swing my truck into the first available parking spot outside of Hill Top Vineyards and kill the engine.

She laughs as she unbuckles her seatbelt. "Thank you for that, but it's not necessary. I'm not accusing you of wanting her, so there's no sense in pretending you're blind."

I know a trap when I see one.

"She's my employee, and Helen's sister," I point out, hoping that will force her to drop the issue.

It does. We walk in silence up to the tasting room at the top of the hill. Hill Top Vineyards—aptly named for its location—has been around for a few years. They're a leader in Central Texas vino, and I've been meaning to drive out and experience the place myself for a while.

“It’s annoying, really. That whole fresh face, no makeup thing only works for like five percent of women.”

So I guess we’re back to talking about Meredith. I want to groan.

“I always say you don’t need that crap,” I tell her.

She laughs and pats my shoulder. “That’s sweet of you to say, but you’ve never actually seen me without a full face of makeup.”

I narrow my eyes, racking my brain. *Surely...* “How’s that possible? We’ve been together for two years.”

She shrugs. “That’s what happens when you see someone once a month. We might have been together for a while, but in some ways it still feels like we just started dating.”

I know what she means. There have been door-to-door salesmen I feel like I know better than I know Christine. It’s an unsettling thought, but I shake it off and usher her inside the winery.

Since it’s a Friday evening, the place is packed, but I planned ahead. We have reservations for a tour and tasting, and we arrive just in time to go with the next group.

My dad started the vineyard at Blue Stone Ranch nearly 20 years ago, and even though I have someone else heading the day-to-day operations, I try to stay as educated on the industry as possible. It’s not like I’ll glean any trade secrets from a public tour at Hill Top (unless I’m lucky), but that’s not my aim. I like tasting the wine, talking to the employees, checking out the atmosphere. It’s important to see how we stack up against our competition.

I’m enthralled through the entire tour. Most people are there to get shitfaced while feeling superior to poorer people with Bud Light. The level of pretense and false interest is high, but by the time we’re out in the vineyard, we’ve lost half the group. Meanwhile, I’m glued to the tour guide’s side as if there’s a written exam at the end. The guy hates me, wasting my time with fluff. “And did you know one vine produces roughly ten bottles of wine?” No one cares.

I chime in. “Are you guys administering the fertilizer after the vine has blossomed or closer to when the grapes are about a quarter inch?”

He doesn’t know the answer and we move along to the outdoor receiving area where the growers deposit the freshly harvested grapes. From there, we head inside to see the fermentation vessels: the huge, stainless steel tanks that house the pulp while it turns into wine. They have a larger facility than we do (I ask the tour guide the exact square footage, but he doesn’t know), and I’m especially impressed by their aging rooms. We age our red wine in oak barrels as well, but from the looks of it, they produce nearly twice as much volume as we do. After that, I grab Christine and skip the part of the tour that leads through the bottling room—we just paid a branding company an arm and a leg to design our packaging. Besides, I’m getting hungry.

Finally, I’ve found a weakness: their food is shit. I know it’s common to have light fare like fruit and nuts in tasting rooms, but at Blue Stone, we make sure there are better, more filling options available. After all, these people eventually need to drive home.

While we’re sampling various white wines, the owner—a man about my age, named Vince Davies—comes to find me. He claps me on the shoulder and I turn to greet him.

“My tour guide says you were harassing him,” he teases.

“Just getting my money’s worth.”

“You know I would have taken you around the place myself if I’d known you were coming.”

I wave away his offer. “How am I supposed to steal all your secrets with you shadowing me?”

His eyes sweep over to Christine and I introduce them.

Vince smiles. “Ah, now I see the real reason why you didn’t want me around.”

I laugh good-naturedly then go back to shoveling birdseed into my mouth. I’m starving.

“Oh stop,” Christine says with a subtle blush. She’s obviously impressed with Vince, and I’m actually glad she’s so eager to talk to him for a while because I’m happier taking a back seat in social settings like this.

“You have a beautiful winery,” she says with a flirtatious smile. “I think we’ll head out and watch the sunset in a little while.”

“To be honest, the view is probably 90% of why people come out here,” Vince admits. “The wine is just the cherry on top.”

“It really is breathtaking!” Christine continues, reaching out to touch his arm.

That’s one of the things Hill Top has over us: location. From their large back patio, guests can look out over a deep valley where all the grapes are grown. The view extends for miles, and it’s the reason their sunset tastings sell out months ahead of time.

Vince motions to the patio. “I actually keep one of the best tables in the house reserved out there. I’d be happy to offer it up to you guys for the night.”

It’s tempting, but I don’t think I’ll last through the sunset. My plan was to take the tour, speed through the tasting, and then find a place to eat with Christine on the way back to the ranch, preferably somewhere with a drive-through.

“I appreciate the offer, but—”

“Yes! Please, that would be great.” Christine cuts me off. “But you must join us!”

Vince chuckles and glances over to see what I want to do. I swallow a sigh. “Sure, yeah. Sounds great.”

For the next hour, the three of us sit outside while the Texas sun paints the sky pink and orange as it disappears behind the horizon. Christine does most of the talking. Vince tries to keep up, and I mostly stay quiet, sipping my wine, ignoring the loud grumbles coming from my stomach, and trying to figure out why I’m not having a better time.

It's not the people I'm with. Vince is a great guy—we'd be better friends if I had the time for it—and Christine is always good company. They aren't the problem. No, I feel uneasy, like I'm sitting here missing out on something.

Yeah, something like a double cheeseburger with bacon.

As soon as Vince excuses himself to get back to work, I sigh with relief and start to stand.

“Christine, you about ready to go?”

She jerks her gaze to me, and I get stabbed by a million tiny daggers. *Oof.* She's pissed.

“We haven't even been here an hour!”

“I'm starving.”

“Then eat some nuts.” She shoves the nearly empty bowl toward me. “Jesus, do you even know how to relax? You've been sitting over there jiggling your leg under the table for the last hour.”

I frown. “I can relax.”

“Prove it.”

“I will—*at home.* I'm hungry and ready to go.”

She bites back a response, grabs for her purse, and storms off ahead of me. I have no clue what I've done to piss her off, and truthfully, I can't muster the energy to care. I'm working on an empty stomach here. I just hope she's not so mad that she'll object to stopping for fast food on the way home.

Tense silence fills the truck as we start the drive. She's sitting over on the passenger side as far away from me as she can get, arms crossed and attention laser-focused out the window. I ask her if she likes this radio station, but she doesn't respond. I ask her if she's hungry, and she shifts more of her back to me. If we weren't currently flying down the highway, I think she'd open the door and fling herself out.

Okay then.

Silence it is.

We drive another thirty minutes like that, and while I don't mind the quiet, I have enough sense not to pull into any of the restaurants we pass. The only thing worse than being inattentive to her needs would be attending to mine—and I don't really want a milkshake dumped over my head.

When we finally make it back to the farmhouse, I park my truck and turn to her, prepared to say whatever it is she needs me to say so we can continue on with our night.

“Listen, I know I haven't been the perfect boyfriend.”

“*Boyfriend?!*” she snaps, throwing her hands in the air and finally turning in my direction. “We're hardly *acquaintances* at this point, Jack!”

“You don't mean that.”

Her eyes turn into angry slits, and I realize she's way more worked up than I thought she was. On a scale of one to ten, she's a twenty-five, and I'm hovering somewhere near a two.

“It doesn't matter what I mean. You've been checked out of this relationship from the very beginning, and I've been too in love with you to do anything about it!”

My stomach tightens at the L word.

Her face crumbles. “Do you know what it feels like to want someone who can't even make time for you?”

Shit. Now I feel bad. “I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you.”

“Yeah?” she prods. “How are you going to do that? Say you love me? Move to San Antonio? Buy me a ring?”

Sure... those are some really good options, but I know I won't do any of them. I'm sitting here with a woman I've been involved with for two years. She's crying and shouting and there's still 40% of me that's focused on getting some dinner. What the hell is wrong with me? She's called me emotionless before, and maybe it's true. Maybe I'm made of stone. Maybe when I lost my parents when I was younger, something inside me shriveled up and died.

My silence is louder than any response she's waiting to hear.

She huffs out an angry sigh and turns to stare out the front windshield.

“I drove three hours in Friday after-work traffic to see you, and you dragged me to a winery.” I open my mouth to defend my actions, but she doesn’t give me the chance. “You realize the last four times I’ve come up here, we’ve done the exact same thing? You aren’t taking me on dates—you’re dragging me around wine country on research trips.”

That’s not *entirely* true.

“What about a few months back when we went out to Fredericksburg? I took you to that little bed and breakfast.”

“Conveniently connected to a vineyard.”

Is that what that was?

“To make matters worse,” she continues, “I sat there tonight, openly flirting with Vince, trying to work up some fire in you, and in the end, I got nothin’. Nada. Squat.”

I shrug. That was a waste of her time. “I’m not the jealous type.”

She laughs acerbically and shakes her head. “Of course you aren’t. To get jealous, you have to actually *value* something. You have to be scared of someone else having what you want. You’re not scared of losing me.”

“C’mon, that’s not true. I know I’d be a damn fool if I let you go.”

“Be that as it may,” she says, her gaze falling to her lap, “you know you’re doing it anyway. You’re just too comfortable to break things off with me for good.”

“You’re a catch, Christine.”

She pinches her eyes closed. “You say that like you’re a robot.”

Do I sound cold? I don’t mean to. I don’t know how else to be, how else to sound. I don’t know what to say or how to act. I’m walking a tightrope here. I don’t want to lie to her and feed her more bullshit just to keep her, but I also don’t want

her to leave this truck thinking less of herself. Objectively, she *is* a catch. I *am* a fool if I let her go.

“You’re a great guy, Jack, but it’s time for me to move on.”

“So you’re breaking up with me? Just like that?”

She turns and offers me a wistful smile. There are tears in her eyes, and I reach out to take her hand and squeeze it once before she pulls it away.

“Tell Edith bye for me.”

“You don’t want to tell her yourself?”

She shakes her head and pushes open her door to hop out of the truck. “Nah. She never did like me. Honestly, I’d rather just head home.”

“Why don’t you stay the night? I don’t want you driving in the dark. You can stay in a guest room or have my bed if you prefer it. I can sleep on the couch.”

She declines and we take our time getting out of the truck.

She buries her face in her hands. “God, this is the weirdest breakup ever. We’re supposed to be shouting at one another.”

I frown. “I’ve never shouted at you.”

“I know.” She drops her hands and levels a steady gaze at me. “That’s exactly why we’re breaking up.”

No amount of urging can get Christine to stay the night, but she promises to text me when she gets home to let me know she got there safely. I watch her drive off, turn for the house, and promptly decide to get back in my truck. I don’t want to go in there and face Edith. Besides, there are practical considerations at play: I’m still very hungry.

I drive to the closest Whataburger, order my favorite combo, sit in the parking lot, and eat by myself. The food tastes so good, it makes up for the fact that Christine’s words have made a mess of my psyche.

I’ve never shouted at you.

I know. That's exactly why we're breaking up.

I'm clever enough to read between the lines. Christine didn't want me abusing her, she wanted me to give a shit. It was a running theme in all of our arguments, and ultimately it was the reason she broke up with me earlier tonight. Love, jealousy, fear, anger—those are all emotions she would have gladly dealt with from me, yet for some reason I just couldn't give them to her. For two years, I was gentle and levelheaded, logical and distant. It's the way I've always preferred it. A wiser man would take the problem to a therapist, but maybe I'm not ready to admit I need help.

Besides, I *do* have emotions.

I've experienced anger. Jesus, I've shouted at Meredith so much this week my throat should be sore.

I've experienced love. It's the feeling I get every morning when Alfred props his head up on my pillow and licks my cheek until I wake up.

I've even experienced fear and loss, and maybe I'm not so eager to relive that pain any time soon.

So, I process my breakup with Christine over a double cheeseburger and fries, and by the time I drive out of the parking lot, I've already come to terms with it, just like that.

Damn, I *am* heartless.

Maybe Christine really is better off without me.

MEREDITH

I'm not *spying*, per se, when I hear Jack and Christine get back from their date. I just have the windows open because I'm still living without A/C (so far I've lost four pounds in water weight, and I've only had *several* hallucinations!). I hear them pull up on the gravel drive because there are no other noises in the country. None. I mean, there are cicadas and the occasional moo from a cow, an oink from a pig, but all in all, I'm shocked at how quiet it is out here in the evenings. I'm not quite used to it, and that's why I get so excited when Jack and Christine pull up the gravel drive. It's not that I think they will ask me to hang out with them. I mean, Jack definitely won't want to, but Christine seemed really nice and she liked my jeans, and *OH MY GOD I AM GETTING SO BORED IN THIS SHACK I'LL DISCUSS AMNESTY WITH THE SPIDERS IF THEY'LL JUST BE MY FRIENDS!*

The first few nights here were great, like an LA detox. I was satisfied letting the last few loose threads of my old life fall away in the balmy air, but now I need some companionship. I'd bother Edith, but she's out with friends. She has more of those than I do even though she's 104. Meanwhile, I'm here, alone, pretending to do yoga—which, by the way, is extremely difficult to do considering I have no yoga mat. Not only are there a few gaps in the floorboards, there are splinters too. It's hard enough convincing myself to work out on a Friday night without having to worry about being impaled by a jagged piece of timber.

So, yes, I'm very eager to run out and become a third wheel on their date, but then I remind myself that they probably want their alone time. Christine drove in to visit him, and more than likely they're going to head up to Jack's room and have wild, haven't-seen-you-in-weeks sex. *Oh god, what if I can hear them?* I don't even have a TV or radio I can blast to drown it out. I'll have to sing hymns to myself. *Oh please no.*

I'm still in the middle of yoga, wondering if it's worth risking another drive in the clunker-mobile just to escape the imminent sounds of sweaty copulation, when I catch their voices and realize something is off. They aren't laughing and teasing. They just sound...sad.

For the record, I want to be a good person. I want to close the windows and let them argue privately, but it's hot, and I'm bored, and as long as I angle myself against the side of the window just so and keep most of my face hidden, they should never even realize I'm here. I feel like a child with one eye open, watching TV during naptime.

I spot Christine as she steps out of his truck and shakes her head.

"God, this is the weirdest breakup ever," she says. "We're supposed to be shouting at one another."

Say whaa?

And then Jack says, "I've never shouted at you."

My mouth drops open. Is that a joke? *How is that possible?!* I've been here a week and he's shouted at me so much I'm not even sure he can speak at a socially acceptable volume.

She dabs at her eyes, wiping away tears, and Jack pulls her into a hug.

Oh wow, this is sad. I lean forward. *Poor, poor Christine.* I wish I had binoculars.

It's such an awkward exchange, and still, I can't look away. Mostly, I'm amazed at how gentle he's being with her. He's rubbing her hair! It's like the moment you bump into

your teacher at the grocery store—all of a sudden, he seems like a normal guy.

After a little more back and forth I can't really hear—I think it's boring logistics about the breakup—they hug again and then he opens her door for her. I have never in my life witnessed such maturity, such restraint! They're smiling, for crying out loud! Christine is *laughing*, and Jack makes her promise she'll text him when she gets home safe! This must be one of those “truly mutual” breakups I've only heard about in books. I wouldn't know how that feels. I left my husband in the middle of the night and didn't even have the sense to pack two pair of underwear. Compared to them, I'm a petulant child running from her problems.

Christine drives off after that and then Jack stands outside of his farmhouse, momentarily frozen. I have no clue what he's thinking. I have no clue if he initiated the split or if he was just dumped out of the blue. All I know is that in this moment, my heart goes out to him. I stand by the window watching him for a few seconds, waiting to see what he'll do. Then, without thinking of the consequences, I decide I'm going to go make sure he's okay. I was just talking to myself about how I needed to make some friends, and consolation is what friends do best!

I change into my jeans and the white blouse I haven't worn since first arriving on the farm. I check my reflection in the mirror over the sink and am pleasantly surprised by what I find. My tan skin is even and slightly flushed from yoga, my hair is up in a high ponytail, and a few wisps soften the look. I check my teeth: straight, white, and mostly free of the food I had for dinner. I could probably use some mascara or something, but there's no way I'm dolling myself up just to go check on Jack.

I turn, heart racing. I have no clue what I'll say when I see him. Do I act oblivious about his breakup? Or do I cut to the chase, admit I heard it all, and offer my condolences? It's not like it really matters what I decide to say—chances are, I won't even have time to get any words out before he storms off and slams the door in my face.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans then head outside, surprised by the little pep in my step. The world always seems so much more pleasant after spending time in the shack. I'm excited to see Jack, and maybe he'll actually be friendly for once. I glance to the spot where he was frozen a few minutes ago, but he isn't there anymore. Then I hear gravel pinging off metal and jerk my gaze in the direction of the main road. He's in his truck, heading back down the gravel drive. His red tail lights fade in the distance, and then he's gone.

Shit.

I wonder if he's going after her. Maybe. At the very least, he's leaving here. He probably has other places to be on a Friday night, a local drinking hole or something. I am back to square one, alone and bored, and worse, I am now fully dressed. Thank God I didn't fuss with my hair or do my makeup.

I laugh it off and look around, cheeks burning. It's one thing to know I almost put myself out there, quite another to do it in front of anyone else. My gaze snags on a cow standing near the pasture fence, staring at me, probably embarrassed to be near me.

"No worries! I didn't really want to talk to him anyway!" I shout over to it. "False alarm."

It doesn't move, just keeps slowly munching on some grass, judging me.

"Oh, because your Friday night is so much better. Pfff. Yeah, okay," I taunt.

The cow turns then and walks away, as if it, too, cannot wait to get away from me.

"Good talk!"

Okay, now I'm just shouting into the void. No one, not even the cow, is listening.

Get a grip, Meredith!

I march right back into the shack and lock the door. *Good.* This is better—a night of no distractions. I have a ton to do. I

need to roll up my pretend yoga mat and fold that t-shirt over there. Really, it'll take me all night to decide if I like the twin bed where it is or if maybe I want to switch it up. I could put the bed against that wall, or that wall, or that wall. The possibilities are endless. *Phew*. Honestly, I'm booked. *If that cow could see me now*.

Thank God I made plans with Edith for Saturday morning. We're going into town to shop at a thrift store, and then she's going to take me to her favorite lunch spot. I'm so excited, I'm ready and waiting for her out in front of the farmhouse fifteen minutes before we're due to leave. I spent all morning getting ready as if we were going to the Oscars. I showered and gave myself a blowout with the Cold War-era blow dryer Edith lent me (I needed a break from the ponytails) then I applied a little bit of makeup from the bag I had stashed in my purse for on-the-go touchups.

I put my jeans and white blouse back on since no one saw me in the outfit last night (cow not included), and then I slip on the loafers I've been avoiding for the last week. Thankfully, my blisters have morphed into calluses. In the end, I look nearly like I used to back in California: poised and polished. Who cares that I'm wearing the only outfit I actually own, or that I put it on in a dingy shack? By the time I get back from the thrift store, I'll have a few more options for clothing, and hopefully a few things to soften this place up.

I have all of my cash on me, safely stashed in my wallet. I don't plan on spending all \$500, instead capping today's purchases at \$75. A week ago, I wouldn't have blinked at spending that amount. Now, it makes my stomach ache. It's nearly one-fifth of my entire savings. Too bad I really don't have a choice. I need some more clothes, and while Edith's sneakers have worked so far, I need a pair that actually fit.

The rest of the cash is going straight to the bank. I'm opening up my own account today—one Andrew has no claim to. \$425 might not be much, but it's better than nothing, and more importantly, it's all mine.

The farmhouse's screen door swings open and I glance up with a smile, expecting to see Edith. Jack strolls out instead. He has a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and a to-go cup in the other. I'm surprised to see he's still wearing his pajamas: loose gray sweats and a white cotton t-shirt. Usually by this time, he's already been working for a few hours, and this weekend version of my boss is an intriguing sight. His hair is slightly ruffled. His expression is soft, almost as if the effects of sleep haven't totally worn off yet. He almost looks sweet, but I know better.

He stands there, squinting to keep the morning sun from blinding him while he surveys me.

I check for signs of a broken heart: puffy eyes, downcast gaze, slumped posture.

I see chiseled features, broad shoulders, and a face that looks well rested and tan. He looks like he's never slept better.

"Edith told me to get you coffee," he says by way of greeting.

Oh. I was planning on getting some in town, but now that I think about it, that's not really an option. A \$5 cup of joe is now a luxury, not a necessity.

I meet him halfway and reach for the to-go cup.

"That was nice of you," I say, holding it up in thanks. Even if it was Edith's idea, it was still a nice gesture.

He shrugs and brushes me off. "Probably put too much creamer in."

The coffee is the exact shade of light brown that I prefer.

"Looks good. I can't even tell you spit in it," I tease.

"Your hair looks different."

I jerk my gaze back up to find him staring down at me with a confused expression. His head is tipped to the side, and from this angle, the morning light is sparkling in his eyes so they look more golden than brown. I've seen that exact shade once before, on a lion at the San Diego Zoo. He had his face pressed right up to the viewing glass and I forced myself not to look

away. Looking at Jack from this perspective feels eerily similar.

“Did you cut it?” he asks.

I resist a smile. “No, I’m just wearing it down for a change. I finally had time to style it this morning.”

“Oh.” He nods and averts his gaze, turning toward the pasture and sipping his coffee. It’s probably the closest thing to a compliment I’ll ever get from Jack. “Been meaning to get mine cut.”

“I think it’d look good a little shorter.”

He takes another sip of coffee, and I catch myself staring at his profile...not just staring at it, totally transfixed. It’s the strong jawline and the scruff—he’s a type of handsome I’m not quite used to. Andrew was good-looking in a pretty way. Jack’s sort of handsome makes my stomach twist tight and my hands get a little clammy. He notices me staring out of the corner of his eye and I jerk my gaze away quickly, narrowing my attention on a meadow in the distance. *Yup, flowers—thought that was what those were.*

Edith—bless her heart (as she’s taught me to say)—chooses that moment to join us outside. She pushes open the screen door with Alfred hot on her heels. The golden retriever gets one look at me and bounds down the stairs for a greeting. *Oh god, I’m about to be trampled to death. Goodbye, cruel world.* I brace myself, holding the to-go cup out in front of me to keep hot coffee from spilling all over my white blouse, and then I pinch my eyes closed, thinking it’s best not to look death straight in the eye.

Jack must foresee the incident a moment before it happens, because he emits a loud, sharp whistle. I peek just as Alfred’s attention jerks to him and in a flash, he sits and stays, happy to obey his owner.

“Good boy,” Jack says, patting his head.

Damn. “I really need to learn how to do that whistle.”

“Jack, please tell me you’re going to get a haircut today,” Edith interrupts with a disdainful shake of her head. “You look

like a damn hipster.”

Hipster? Edith is full of surprises.

“Plannin’ on it,” he says as she waves me over to her truck.

“Let’s go,” Edith says briskly. “If we don’t get there early, the thrift store’ll be overtaken with old biddies, and we still need to stop by the bank on the way.”

Edith seems to be oblivious to the fact that she is technically a bidy herself, but I sure as hell don’t point that fact out to her. I just keep my lips zipped and dutifully hop into the passenger side of her truck. Jack waves us off from the porch before he pats his thigh to summon Alfred and they both turn back for the house.

We stop at the bank and somehow turn a task that should take 20 minutes into an hour-long affair. Edith knows everyone. Every employee inside the branch stops to chat with her, which inevitably leads to an introduction with me, “Helen’s little sister”. As a newcomer in a small town, they want to know it all: where I’m from, why I’m here, blood type, SAT score. I get it, and while I’m careful to sidestep their personal questions, I’m still happy to chat. I’ve had very little in the way of human interaction for the last few days, so I will happily accept the company of Lisa, the rambling teller, and Dotty, the elderly manager, with their bouffant hair and southern accents and nosy niceties. By the time we leave, I feel like I’ve made a whole group of new friends. This must be what it feels like to have a girl squad.

When we arrive at the thrift store, I expect the same kind of greeting, but other than the short white-haired man with the coke-bottle glasses behind the counter, we have the place to ourselves, and boy, do I clean up. I was expecting California prices, but these tags have me feeling like I can walk out and buy a Coke for a nickel.

“EDITH! THESE SHORTS ARE FIVE DOLLARS!”

She yanks them down from where I’m hoisting them over my head, looks at the fabric, and shakes her head. “We can

talk him down to three.”

Am I dreaming? How is everything so cheap?!

I find a few fitted t-shirts I can wear while working and snag two pairs of denim shorts. I even toss in some pajama shorts and two sundresses, one of which is a little fancy. I have zero places to wear a dress like that, but it’s too pretty to leave on the rack. After that, I stumble into a section of the store filled with bras and unopened packages of underwear, and I’m shaking with excitement. Sure, they’re Fruit of the Loom tighty-whities, but the entire pack costs \$3.50, and if I buy them, I won’t have to wash the same freaking pair over and over again.

I basically acquire an entire wardrobe for \$18.25, and then we head to the back corner where home goods and knickknacks are piled up, one on top of another.

I crack my knuckles, accepting the challenge. By this point, I am a scary good negotiator.

“Hey Robert! Robbie! There’s a little stain on the corner of this rug. I’ll take it off your hands for \$5!”

Between you and me, the stain is minimal and nothing I can’t scrub out once I get home.

“How bad is it?” he hollers back, too lazy to get up from behind the counter.

“I think it’s blood! It’s probably evidence from some horrible crime—”

“Fine! I’ll give ya half off.”

I turn to Edith, eyes wide. “Edith,” I hiss. “That’s six bucks!”

I add the blue Moroccan-style rug to my growing pile of purchases, along with a little antique lamp and a worn wooden stool I want to use as a bedside table. It looks artfully distressed, which makes me laugh. I know people back in Beverly Hills who pay interior designers thousands of dollars for furniture like the stuff I’m finding in this hole-in-the-wall shop.

When I happen upon an antique mirror that looks straight out of an Anthropologie catalogue, I bring out the big guns. It was originally marked at \$25, and I wear Robert down to \$10 (“Think of it as a new-in-town discount!”). Edith throws me a conspiratorial thumbs-up, and I decide to call it a day. I feel like I’m basically robbing the place at this point. Besides, the cute picture frames (4 for \$1) we pass on the way to the register aren’t necessary. Edith tries to convince me to get them, but I tell her we have enough stuff as is. In reality, I’m just too embarrassed to tell her I have no one I’d want to fill them with. My parents? Hard pass. A ripped-down-the-middle photo from my wedding? Yeah, I’m good. I seriously consider just keeping the generic stock photo of a family enjoying a beach day. It’s tempting, but too sad even for me. Plus, the kid’s eyes follow me wherever I move—no thanks.

We load up my purchases in the truck and then I hop in, ready for lunch.

“What are you doing?” Edith asks, standing out on the sidewalk with her hands on her hips.

I pause in buckling my seatbelt. “Aren’t we going to eat now?”

We better be. All that deal-making really worked up my appetite.

“Yeah”—she points across the street—“the diner’s right over there.”

I chuckle and hop out of the truck. Small towns, man. It’s crazy. Every place we’ve gone to this morning has been located in the town square—a sight I haven’t really admired until now. It’s another adorable movie set, just like the ranch. There’s no other way to describe how old-world and quaint everything is. The buildings are historic and stately, but they’re filled with antique shops and clothing stores, a bakery, a coffee shop, a dentist, and a handful of boutiques that are probably more hobbies than businesses. I spot an independent bookstore and make a mental note to stop there after lunch. We pass a bustling restaurant, but Edith shakes her head.

“Love that bistro—best chicken salad in town—but I’m in the mood for something greasy.”

We continue around the square toward the diner, passing a gourmet cookware store and a wine tasting room. People are everywhere, strolling through the shops and enjoying the late-morning weather before the blazing sun hits full force. Quite a few of them are gathered in the center of the square, where a well-manicured park surrounds a gleaming limestone courthouse. There are kites in the air and adorable children running around giggling. Parents are smiling. In one corner of the park, beneath a shady oak tree, an ice cream vendor sells chocolate-dipped cones as fast as he can make them. It’s all so cute, it feels slightly like the start of a thriller. Any minute now, we’ll all look up to the sky as a meteor or UFO spells our doom, or a horde of zombies will rush in and start gnawing through cowboy boots.

“Is there a festival going on this weekend or something?”

Edith shakes her head. “There’s a barbecue cook-off in a few weeks. Don’t think there’s anything special going on today though.”

“So the town square’s always this packed on a Saturday?”

She follows my gaze, not as impressed as I am. “People drive down from around the hills looking for a weekend getaway. It’s the way it’s always been—country folk make a big to-do out of going into the city, while city slickers look for an escape out here.”

She says slickers like it’s a bad word, and I can’t help but smile.

“Blue Stone has a hotel of its own, right?”

She nods. “It’s nestled beside the vineyard, booked up a year in advance these days thanks to all the weddings.”

There’s a short wait at the diner, and as we’re seated in a booth by the window, I’m still thinking about the scene I saw outside and considering whether or not I could ever live in Cedar Creek permanently. There’s no mall or movie theater within 50 miles. I haven’t seen a yoga studio, and Edith

confirms there isn't one. If I stayed here, I'd probably miss the amenities of living in a place like Los Angeles, but I still can't help but think that people here might have figured something out. Small town life looks pretty great.

With that thought, I glance up at the adorable blonde teenager waiting to take my order.

Edith and I both order All-American Scrambles then pass off our menus.

I sit back against the cushioned booth and meet Edith's studying gaze.

"So, you survived your first week," she comments.

I smile. "Sure did."

"Any scars?"

"From Jack?" I laugh. "No. He's nothing I can't handle."

"He wasn't always like this."

"Like what?" I feign innocence.

She scowls and pours some creamer in her coffee. "Don't bother sparing my feelings. We both know my grandson is stubborn as a mule and kicks like one too. Won't listen to a damn thing I tell him these days—"

"What changed?"

She looks up at me, confused. "Huh?"

"You said he didn't used to be like this."

"Ah." She nods thoughtfully and sips her coffee before replying. "You probably ought to be hearing this from Jack, but he'll never tell you, so I'll just have to do it. When he was a junior in college, his parents passed away in a car accident out on I-38. He was only 20, and I know that might not seem all that young to you, but we were a close-knit family and he didn't have any brothers or sisters. Still a kid, really. He should have been worrying about tests and goofing off with his friends. Instead, he had to cope with their passing while struggling with the newfound responsibility he wasn't quite ready for: running Blue Stone. I tried to do my best to soften

the blow, but the fact is, the day they died, the ranch and everything that went with it became his responsibility to bear.”

“How’d he handle it?”

Her focus is on her coffee as she continues, as if she can’t look me in the eye while she divulges details about Jack’s life. “He buckled down in school, graduated a year early. He was damn near ready to drop out and move home, but I made him finish. I knew he’d regret it otherwise.”

“Was he in over his head when he got here?”

She moves her gaze out the window as if recalling that time. “You know, as crazy as it sounds, that boy hit the ground running and never looked back. It had never been the plan for him to enter the family business so young, but he’d worked with his dad enough over the summers to know how the business worked. Not to mention, his grandpa and dad never went to college, so he was actually more prepared to take up the reins than he realized.”

I’m impressed. Even at twenty-eight, I don’t think I’d be able to do what he’s done.

“It’s come at a cost though,” she continues, guilt laced in her tone. “He’s not that same lighthearted kid he used to be. I think that part of him died with his parents on the highway that day.”

I cast my eyes down to the table. “I’m sure. There’s no way that kind of loss doesn’t change a person.”

“It’s not all bad, but I don’t think he gives himself enough time off from work. It’s like he’s constantly trying to make his parents proud, but they’ll never get another chance to say so, to tell him he’s allowed to take a break. Plus, living on the ranch offers no separation from work and life.”

“It’s just all work.”

She nods, agreeing. “It doesn’t help that ever since the accident, he pushes people away—friends, acquaintances, relatives. Arm’s length isn’t good enough for Jack. He wants a couple feet between him and everyone else, and he gets it...

except for me, of course. It takes more than a little shoving around to shake me.”

“What about Alfred?”

She smiles, recalling the memory. “I brought Alfred home a couple years back without Jack’s consent. Boy was he pissed, and he didn’t give in easy, either. For weeks, the dog followed him around the house, just a little orphan fluff-ball who knew nothing but love.” She holds her hands out to cradle her palms, showing me how small he was back then. “Jack wanted nothing to do with him in the beginning, and he succeeded in keeping his distance there for a while.”

I laugh, thinking of the way the two are now. “Clearly you won in the end.”

She beams proudly. “That’s because I know Jack. I know deep down, he still wants love and affection. He just won’t open himself up to that vulnerability. It’s logical in his mind: he’ll never have to deal with another loss like that if he doesn’t let anyone get too close.”

I lean forward, more interested in the topic than I should be. “How’d you convince him to give Alfred a chance?”

She slaps her knee, laughing. “Convince him?! Haven’t you been listening? There is no convincing Jack. I used dirty tricks. I pushed Alfred into Jack’s room every night. That puppy would sleep on the foot of his bed and lick his face to wake him up every morning. Jack took to locking his door after a while, so I had to get creative. I trained Alfred and made sure he was the best dog anyone could ever ask for. I made sure Jack was around him as much as possible. I even complained about an ache in my shoulder so Jack would have to step in and throw the tennis ball for him a couple times a week.” She winks. “I’m just a frail old lady, y’know.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t done the same thing with a woman.”

Her eyes alight with mischief, but I don’t get the chance to dig deeper. Just then, a deep male voice interrupts our conversation.

“Meredith? Is that you?”

I jerk my attention toward the speaker, stunned by the man
I see standing there.

JACK

“**A**nd do you know who surprised us at lunch?”
“Oh, I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

Edith is unmoved by my obvious indifference.

“Tucker Carroway!”

“Makes sense, considering he works in the courthouse across the street. He probably eats there all the time. Will you hand me that wrench? No, not that one. To your left—that one.”

Edith slaps the tool impatiently into my open palm then continues. “Yes, obviously he eats there all the time—that’s not the weird part! The weird part is that he already knew Meredith! Did you know they were friends?”

Huh. I grip the wrench a little tighter.

“Had no clue.”

While that’s an interesting piece of information, I’m hoping this conversation will end soon. Edith found me as soon as she and Meredith returned from town. I’ve been out in the barn most of the morning, working on an old tractor, trying to see if I can get it to run again. It’s probably futile, but some part of me thinks the rusty beast still has a little life left in it. It belonged to my dad, and he took pretty good care of things when he could.

“Apparently the other day, when Meredith drove that old Chevy to the grocery store, Tucker helped her when it stalled

on the side of the road. How sweet is that?”

I focus my attention on the tractor, trying to figure out why the carburetor’s flooding. The needle and seat could be dirty. There could be too much fuel pressure, and I’d just need to test the fuel pump—

“*Jack.*”

“Yeah, sure. Nice of him.”

“Anyway, Tucker didn’t just come over to say hello and dash off. He asked Meredith out on a date right in front of me.”

“*What?*”

I jerk up so fast, I knock over my workbench and tools go scattering to the ground. Edith smirks, having hit her mark. Now that I’ve given her a reaction, there’s no stopping her. She starts circling around me, sizing me up. If she had a pocketknife, she’d be flipping it open and closed menacingly.

“Oh, what with my old age, it’s been so long since I’ve seen romance like that.”

“What’d she say?”

“She tried to politely decline, but I wouldn’t let her. The attraction was obvious, so I invited him to sit down and stay for a cup of coffee. They talked the whole time—I couldn’t even get a word in edgewise. He’s such a nice man, and easy on the eyes too.”

“You are aware she’s *married*,” I point out caustically.

Edith rolls her eyes. “Something in her eyes tells me she’s been checked out of that relationship for a long time. Now that they’re separated, what is she supposed to do, shrivel up into an old maid at 28?”

“It’s only been a *week!*”

Her eyes go wide. “Boy, what’s got your panties in a twist?”

I bend down and start yanking tools off the ground. “It just says a lot about her sense of loyalty if she’s willing to jump

ship like that. I'm not sure that trait makes for the best employee either."

Edith's brows arch with interest and her tone takes a sharp left turn. "Well she seems like a *fine* housekeeper so far, so you needn't worry about that, and you've made yourself very clear about thinking she's the scum of the earth. We'll see what Tucker thinks."

I furrow my brows and murmur, "She's not the scum of the earth."

I jerk up, having realized my mistake, and find Edith grinning like the cat that caught the canary.

I point an accusing finger straight at her. "I see what you're doing."

She ignores me and goes right back to telling me about lunch. "Anyway, Tucker couldn't stay long—had to run back to the courthouse, I'm sure to a very important case—but long story short, he's going to take her to David's wedding!"

"David, my hand David?"

She beams. "One and the same."

"Bullshit. She better've turned him down," I say before explaining why I care. "I don't want everyone pissed at me when she disappears back to California."

Edith bats away my anger like it's a wiffle ball, too accustomed to it by now. "She tried to, but I agreed for her, told her most of the town would be there and seeing as how she already has so many friends here, it'd be weird if she *didn't* go."

"You aren't making any sense. Meredith has lived here for a week—ONE week. There's no way she has that many friends."

I'm wrong, of course. Meredith has more friends than I do, and this becomes painfully obvious when I'm in town on Sunday morning. I'm down at the hardware store bright and

early, checking out their selection of window air conditioners for the shack, when Chris and David show up unannounced.

“Hey boss!”

Apparently, they *also* had plans to come down here and get a window unit for Meredith. *Isn't that thoughtful of them?* The pair hardly has two nickels to rub together between them, but they were about to fork over two hundred bucks so Meredith could have a little cool air blowing on her face.

“We were maybe gonna ask you to reimburse us,” David explains with a proud smile.

And if I said no?

Something tells me they would have just put it on the credit card and hoped the Lord would provide.

What the hell did she put in those muffins?

I expect them to leave once they see I'm going to take care of it, but instead, they hang around and offer up unsolicited advice about which model I should buy—they seem to think she deserves the most expensive unit the store has to offer. Once we're done with that, they bring up the wood floors again. I've already made up my mind to repair them, but they lay it on thick with prepared monologues about how quick they'd fix it up, and “how little trouble it'd be, *really*.” I agree, but I'm going to help them, because while they're decent ranch hands, I'd bet money they're shitty carpenters. We spend a few minutes grabbing those supplies, and then I think better of it. *While I'm doing the floors, I might as well fix a few other things around the place.*

By the time we check out, I've racked up over a thousand dollars in construction supplies for Miss California, though David and Chris are quick to point out that the shack is on *my* property, so really I'm fixing it up for *myself*. “You're really making money on this whole thing.” *Right*.

We're headed out of the hardware store to go load everything in my truck when I spot Dotty bee-lining down the sidewalk toward me. She's the manager of the First National Bank, and she's been there since I was a little kid.

“Jack! Yoo-hoo! Hold on there for a second.”

I motion for the guys to keep on loading the supplies then turn to greet her. “What can I do for you, Dotty?”

“Brought you a Dum Dum!”

I like Dotty—she helped me open my first bank account—but apparently, she’s another one of Meredith’s new friends.

“Oh, also, I was just hoping you could pass these along to Meredith for me?”

She’s holding out a Tupperware full of cookies, homemade from the looks of it.

“She came in yesterday to open an account, and she tried one of these,” Dotty explains, patting the lid. “I had them out for the patrons—open more accounts with cookies than with sales pitches, y’know. Anyway, she said they were the best cookies she’d ever had and she asked me for the recipe.”

“So you decided to bake her a batch?” I ask, amused.

She bats my arm playfully. “Well, I just felt so bad for forgetting to give her the recipe. She really was such a dear and went on and on about how good they were. Plus, we got a new teller down at the bank, young girl—Patrick Smith’s daughter? Anyway, it was her first day and Meredith was real patient with her. Mr. Rogers had come in just before and was so snippy, so her nerves were jumbled. He nearly made her cry —”

“I’ll make sure Meredith gets the cookies,” I say, cutting her off so I don’t get trapped here talking to her for God knows how long.

“Oh, okay, I’ll let you get to it. Just remember that the recipe card is right there on top. Make sure she gets that.”

I nod. “Will do.”

“It’s real nice seeing you. Oh! And my business card is there too in case she has any questions about the baking...or banking!”

“Got it.”

“We’ll make sure she gets the cookies, Miss Dotty!” Chris calls from behind me.

“Thanks boys. I’m sure y’all have a big day ahead of you,” she says, waving and backing away. Then she thinks better of it and steps toward me, holding her hand up like she’s just thought of one more thing. “You know what? Just have her call me. It’ll be easier to walk her through the steps. My handwriting probably isn’t all that good.”

I tip my head, tell her approximately twenty times I’ll have Meredith call her, and then make a break for it. In Texas, people have a knack for turning a simple goodbye into an all-day affair.

When I make it back to the ranch, I pull my truck up right over near the shack so unloading won’t take so long. David and Chris offered to come back and help, but I turned them down. I’m not planning on doing any work today other than installing the air conditioner, and that’ll take me five minutes to set up on my own. I pop the tailgate and start unloading building supplies. Normally, I’d store everything in the barn, but the weather should hold and it’ll be more convenient to have everything at my fingertips when we get started tomorrow.

I expect Meredith to step outside to check on all the commotion, but I’m nearly finished unloading before the door opens.

I peer over at her from beneath the brim of my hat, jarred by her appearance. She’s still in her pajamas—one of my t-shirts with sleeping shorts creeping out from underneath. I open my mouth to demand—*yet again*—that she return my ill-gotten clothes, but then I glance up at her face. Normally, she’s glowing, one of those women with tan skin and a healthy complexion, like she just got back from a tropical vacation. This morning, however, her cheeks are splotchy and her eyes are a little red and puffy. She sniffs and crosses her arms over her chest.

“What are you doing out here?” she asks, her tone somewhere between annoyed and angry.

“Did I interrupt a call?” She’s clutching her cell phone in her right hand. It’s the first time I’ve seen her with the thing since she moved in. “I didn’t even know you had one of those.”

Even Edith carries hers around all day. She claims it’s so she can call me when she falls and breaks a hip, but we both know she’s addicted to Candy Crush. She’s the highest scorer among all her friends, and she can’t let the title slide. Also, she’s already had two hip replacements. At this point, if she falls, she’s liable to break whatever it is she lands on.

Meredith glances down as if just remembering the phone was in her hand. “Oh, no. It was Helen. She—” She pauses and shakes her head. “Anyway, no. You didn’t interrupt.”

I wonder if she’s upset because she had a bad phone call with Helen or if maybe she’s starting to have regrets about leaving her old life. Helen said it would only take a week or two before she realized her mistake and fled back home.

Either way, it’s not really my business.

I nod toward the stack of supplies. “I’m just unloading a few things. Got you—the shack—an A/C unit this morning.” Her gaze follows to where I’m pointing. “It’s the best one they had.”

“You can take it out of my paycheck,” she says quickly, her words clipped and hard.

I bristle at the response. It’s not exactly the thank you I was looking for. In fact, it sounds like she’s angry with me for helping her out.

“No. I said I’d get you one, so here it is.”

“I hope you didn’t go through any trouble. That thing looks heavy.”

“I can lift a box on my own.”

I don’t know why we’re doing this—why she and I mix like oil and water, why she’s not cheery and upbeat with me like she is with everyone else, why we flare up over stupid

shit. We aren't fighting, but we aren't exactly playing nice either.

“What's all that other stuff for?” she asks, pointing to the supplies stacked up neatly beside the shack. “Please don't say you're adding on to the farmhouse—that place doesn't need any more floors to mop.”

A second ago, I'd been excited to tell her my plans for the place. Now, I don't think I'd be able to stand her reaction. Hell, a part of me wants to load everything back into my truck and drive it right back to the store.

“It's just building supplies,” I say after clearing my throat, eager to change the subject. “Mind if I install this A/C now? I have other things I need to get to today.”

She nods and steps aside to usher me through the door. I pause on the threshold, shocked to see what it looks like inside. Sure, the shack is still in need of some renovations—there are still gaps in the floorboards and the walls really need new drywall and paint—but she's done her best to make it a home. There's a blue rug on the ground that covers most of the floor, and a wooden stool stands beside the twin bed with a delicate antique lamp on top of it. A paperback I saw Edith reading the other day sits face down beside it.

“Did you buy all this with the advance I gave you?”

“Yes,” she answers hesitantly.

I frown, confused.

“Why waste your money?”

What I mean to say is, *What's the point in sprucing up a place you have no plans of living in for much longer?* but my words come out twisted and meaner than I intended.

“I found some very good deals, thank you very much.” Then she brushes past, knocking her shoulder into me accidentally (or probably on purpose). She grabs for her sneakers and heads back for the door at an angry pace. “Now if you're going to get started, I'll go take a walk.”

I turn to stop her, to smooth over the situation, but the right words fail me. I'm not surprised; that seems to be a running theme with Meredith. Every time I think I'm making headway with her, I end up putting my foot in my mouth one way or another. Part of it has to do with my prejudices, but I see no way around them. Meredith isn't here for good. One morning I'll wake up and find her gone just like her husband did, and I see no reason to soften my heart or give her the benefit of the doubt. She might have convinced everyone else in this town to love her, but not me.

MEREDITH

There is no way around it: I am truly on my own. My sister has officially taken up forces with the dark side (A.K.A. Andrew) and there's no talking her out of it. I don't have the strength to keep trying. Not only does it feel like a dagger in my heart every time she sides with him over me, it feels like I'm fighting a losing battle.

Apparently, over the last week, Helen and Brent have been brainstorming ways to get me back to California. That's why Helen called me this morning. I was expecting her to ask me how I was doing, possibly inquire about my mental health, but the conversation felt like a politician stumping on a pro-Andrew platform.

"Have you tried calling him and working this out?"

I heaved an annoyed sigh. "I've been busy working. Besides, this isn't a workable issue. It's over." *Unless Andrew's had a lobotomy in the last few days.*

"Has he reached out to you?" she asked, sounding like she already knew the answer.

"Some. We're playing phone tag. I'm not avoiding him on purpose."

It's true. He's left two voicemails, both of which were eerily sedated and thoughtful. He went on about how much he misses me and implored me to come home to California so we could work things out. I listened to them in the hopes that he'd break and speak to me over the phone the way he did in

private—then I could play the messages for Helen and say, *See? This is the monster you want to send me back to.*

I should've known he would never be that stupid.

A few minutes later, our conversation took a turn for the worse.

“I stuck my neck out for you, Meredith. You need to start being honest with me.”

My eyes narrowed in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn't tell me you've done this before. Andrew gave me his side of things earlier this week. He told me last year you disappeared out of the blue just like this.”

WHAT?!

“*No.* I went to stay in a hotel for a few days to clear my head.”

It was a Best Western down the street. There were roaches in the bathroom, and the man staying next door definitely resembled a MOST WANTED poster I'd seen on the news—that's how badly I didn't want to go home.

“According to him, you left then had a change of heart and went crawling back.”

Her tone sounded so accusatory, I had to grit my teeth to keep from screaming.

“Well, he's *lying*. He knew I went to get some space. He and I had just had a bad fight and I needed time away from him to think.”

“That's not the way he made it sound.”

“Then he's lying!” My arms were flailing at that point. “Jesus, Helen, I'm your sister—why is it so hard for you to just take my word on something?”

“Because whether you like it or not, Andrew is your husband and my brother-in-law, and I'm having a little bit of trouble assuming the worst of him when you're the one who randomly boarded a plane in the middle of the night!”

“So instead you’ll assume the worst about *me*?”

She sighed, clearly exhausted by the entire thing. “That’s not what I’m doing. I’m trying to be the voice of reason in all this. Listen, obviously if Andrew is the monster you say he is, I don’t want you to be with him, but you can see how this seems from my side, right? You’ve been with a man for years and up until recently, I’ve heard nothing but good things. On Facebook, your life looks amazing—it’s hard to believe it could have all been a lie.”

“Well it was,” I insisted, angry with myself for how close I was to tears.

We both took a few clearing breaths. I was half convinced we’d turned some kind of corner, but then she just had to keep going.

“Meredith, I need you to calm down and assess the situation with a level head. The easiest way forward is reconciliation. Divorces are messy and expensive and you—”

“You think I care about that? You think I’ll stay married to someone like him because I’m scared of what it will cost to leave him?”

The phone call didn’t last much longer after that. I was crying and hiccupping and feeling stupid for losing control of my emotions. I could tell my sister wasn’t sure how to handle me, not to mention I knew anything I said would be used against me if she decided to call Andrew again. In my head, I cursed her for her disloyalty before I realized she *was* being loyal, just to a version of me that doesn’t exist anymore.

I had just finished the phone call and was vigorously wiping tears and snot from my face when I heard Jack unloading stuff outside the shack. He caught me at the wrong time, and per usual, he took a bad situation and made it even worse.

Why waste your money? he’d asked dismissively when he saw the new decorations inside the shack.

You know what, buddy?! Maybe it’s because living in this dingy shack is making me miserable! Maybe it’s because I’ve

had to pry four splinters from my foot in the last week! Maybe it's TO SPITE YOU FOR INTENTIONALLY MAKING ME SUFFER SO I'D WANT TO LEAVE!

Obviously I didn't shout any of those things at him. I stormed off, and now I'm out walking his property in my pajamas and sneakers. I have no idea where I'm going or how far his land extends. *How close are we to Mexico?* I've been angrily stomping my way in one direction for a few minutes and there's still no end in sight. I didn't have time to put on a bra or socks or deodorant, and all my blubbering on the phone and that angry getaway have really worked up a sweat.

I should definitely just turn around and head back, but I know he'll still be there, installing that window unit. I felt so guilty when I saw it, thanks in part to my phone call with Helen. Before launching into her lecture about my marriage, she inquired about Jack.

"So, he gave you a job?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Where are you staying?"

"On the premises." I was hesitant to admit I'm living in the run-down shack.

"Yeah? What about rent and food?"

"It's included."

Her tone turned cold then. "You better not be taking advantage of him, Meredith. It sounds like he's going out of his way to help you, a complete stranger, and if you're just going to run right back to Andrew in a few weeks—"

"I'm not!"

She wasn't convinced.

"This is a mess. I asked him to give you a job, not to roll out the red carpet. I'll need to figure out some way to pay him back. Maybe I should cut our trip short. We'd still have to pay for the hotels but—"

“No, Helen, don’t do that. It’s not like I’m just mooching off him. I’ve been working hard—”

She cut me off, annoyed. “Listen, this is my livelihood, Meredith. I don’t expect you to understand, but Brent and I depend on my income a lot, especially with this trip and renovation.” I could hear the stress in her voice. “Please don’t do anything to screw up my relationship with Jack while I’m gone. Keep your head down, work, and try to make yourself as useful as possible.”

I realize now that I’ve done the exact opposite. I’ve been nothing but a hassle for Jack since my arrival. He spent his entire morning buying building supplies to fix up the shack for me, and I know I never asked him to do it, but I still feel responsible. There was a lot of stuff in the bed of his truck and I have no idea what it cost him, much less how long it will take him to do the repairs. I want to be more help than hassle, and I cringe thinking of how Helen would react if she saw him unloading supplies like that. She would be *livid*.

I have no clue what to do...demand he take it all back? Decline the repairs? I don’t want to be rude, but I also don’t want to use up all the goodwill Helen has built up for herself.

If I had money, I’d consider trying to find another place to live; at least then I’d only be depending on him for a job. I could leave the ranch at quitting time like the rest of the employees and be out of his hair. Unfortunately, with the paltry amount of money in my new checking account, that just isn’t an option right now, and probably won’t be for a while.

I have no choice but to march right back to the shack and stop him before he gets started. I’ll convince him I don’t need any repairs. With the rug there, I almost forget there are gaps in the floor, and plenty of people lived in Texas before the advent of air conditioning. It’s kind of nice living in a sauna, and the spiders don’t bother me in bed because enough sweat pools around me to form a moat.

I knock on the open door when I make it back, as if I’m encroaching on his space instead of mine. He’s over at the window near my bed, using a power drill to anchor the air

conditioner. His baseball hat is gone and I see now what I didn't notice before: he got a haircut. The dark strands are trimmed short, sharpening his features. He's the grown-up man version of a boy who was already intimidating to begin with. My stomach squeezes tight as I fight back the words that are spilling into my thoughts: kissing, touching, wanting, *yearning*.

"Not a very long walk," he notes, oblivious to the fact that my mouth is open and there is drool dribbling onto the floor at my feet.

I've forgotten my agenda, my name, the year. *The president? What's a president?*

He stops what he's doing and turns to look at me. The profile—which was already killing me—changes to the full-frontal view, and I'm hit with the realization that I was married to Andrew for five years and never once felt weak in the knees like I do now, but that can't be right. Maybe I'm just exhausted from my walk—all four minutes of it.

"Meredith?"

"You got a haircut." I sound like English is my second language.

"Yeah."

"You look different." I'm a three-year-old, stringing beginner words together to form my first sentence.

His brow arches and he shakes his head. "What's up with you?"

I force my attention to something else and my gaze lands on the air conditioner. *Box thing make cold? Very brr-brr-freezy-freezy?*

Oh, right.

I have a purpose for rushing back here, and it's not to swoon.

"I don't want you to do any repairs in the shack," I declare confidently. "I do appreciate the thought."

“Thanks boss,” he retorts sarcastically, “but last time I checked, I don’t need your permission to work on my own property.”

Then he turns and gets back to work.

I pinch my eyes closed for a second. It’s so hard to be nice to a dick. “No, I just mean...you’re not doing them on my account, right?”

There’s no pause before he replies, “Right.”

I step forward, trying to angle myself so I can see his expression. Spoiler: it’s not happy.

“So you’d be willing to go on record that you’ve been wanting to fix the place up for a while?”

“Uhh...sure?”

I exhale.

“Okay, because it’s just that I don’t need you to do anything on my account. I won’t be living here that long.”

“You’re leaving?”

“No, I just mean after payday I should be able to get my own place, get out of your hair.”

I can’t help but notice that, in the confusion over my departure, he looked disappointed rather than jubilant, but he regains his composure in an instant.

He goes back to installing the air conditioner, and I’m left standing there aimlessly. I turn on my heel and then pivot back. I have nowhere to go. I need deodorant and a bra, but I’d die before I put a bra on in front of him.

I try to make myself useful by picking up a wrench off the ground (at least I think that’s what it is). “Err...do you want my help or—”

“Yeah, can you not touch anything?”

I drop it quickly then declare I’m going to take another walk, though it’s the last thing I want to do. I’m still sweaty from the first one.

This time, while I stroll around his property, I think about my conversation with Edith at the diner. She really let it spill about Jack. It's like she opened up his case file, pushed it toward me, and said, *Here, catch up*. All those secrets, all those emotions were foisted on me, and now I don't know what to do with them. Up until yesterday, I saw Jack as two-dimensional. He was an angry, hotheaded cowboy. His main tasks in life included barking orders and wearing tight denim. Given the choice, he wanted me off his property and out of his life. He'd made that abundantly clear, and I was okay with that, but then Edith had to change things. She had to take a man I generally disliked and stuff him full of explanatory emotions.

Up until then, I could almost believe Jack had spontaneously sprouted up from the underworld one day just the way he is: jeans, hair, smoldering gaze. Edith disproved that theory. She turned him into a scared twenty-year-old kid, grieving the loss of his parents and learning to carry the weight of his newfound responsibility with the ranch. Of course he's angry! Of course he's stressed and short-tempered! No one's a happy-go-lucky person after going through an experience like that.

I hate this. I hate Edith for telling me his secrets. We could have gone right on bumping heads and throwing jabs, but it's not fun anymore. I can't look at him the same way. I can't go back into that shack without apologies spilling out of me. *I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry you had to live through that.* Then I'd probably try to offer him a hug, and I know how that would go: he'd shoot his hand out, smack me on the forehead, and stiff-arm me so I'd be left swinging my arms in vain.

Therein lies the problem: just because I know *why* Jack is the way he is doesn't mean he's going to stop being that way. He still wants me off his property and out of his life. He still finds me to be a general nuisance, and I'm pretty sure he still thinks I'm a spoiled brat from California who's never worked a day in her life. *Well, guess what, buddy boy? I've worked FIVE DAYS NOW! So ha!*

All this...this *knowledge* about Jack paired with Helen's warnings about not taking advantage of him has left me feeling like things have to change between us.

I'm just not sure how.

MEREDITH

I start the week with one clear goal: to be the most productive, useful employee Jack has ever had, like if Mary Poppins and Monica Geller had a love child. On Monday, I wake up at the crack of dawn, toss my thin sheet aside, and get to work. I clear everything out of the shack so Jack can have easy access to the floors for his repairs. Then, I make sure to stay out of his way by cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. By the end of the day, the farmhouse is gleaming, and I'm confident Jack could lick any surface and come away with the lemony taste of Pledge on his tongue. *Yum!*

My efforts are thwarted when I see that Jack has half a dozen ranch hands working on the shack all day. By the evening, they've not only fixed the floors, they also repaired the drywall and moved all my stuff back inside, *plus* there's a new pendant light hanging in the center of the ceiling. It doesn't even look like a shack anymore, more like one of those adorable tiny houses from HGTV.

With the A/C on, it is—dare I say—*chilly* inside. I lie awake that night with TWO soft blankets tucked around my body, worried sick about Jack having gone to all this trouble.

Helen's words keep reverberating in my mind, leaving bruises.

You better not be taking advantage of him, Meredith.

Keep your head down, work, and try to make yourself as useful as possible.

My only choice is to redouble my efforts on Tuesday. Jack sends a few guys in to retile the shower in the shack-turned-tiny-house, so I decide to draft a list of menu options for him. I've seen the way he scowls when I put down a plate of salmon or try to pass off baked asparagus as a carb. No more! If he wants burgers with mac and cheese by the boatload, by golly he's going to get it! The list I compile includes everything I'm comfortable making (or attempting to make) for his lunches, that way he can cross off anything that doesn't sound appetizing.

Later that morning, when I'm sure he's not too busy, I tap, tap, tap on the door of his office and let myself in after he gives me the go-ahead.

"Good morning!" I chirp like a songbird.

"What do you need?" he asks gruffly, skeptical of my cheer.

I pass him the menu across his desk.

"What's this?" he asks, not even looking up at me.

"I thought I'd get your taste preferences so I can avoid making anything you don't want to eat for lunch. I've separated things into categories for you. There are protein options and side dishes—"

He shakes his head and pushes the menu back to me, gaze already falling back to his work. "Just keep doing whatever you're doing. I don't have time for this."

My upper lip wants to curl with annoyance, but I don't let it.

"Are you sure? You could just—"

"I'm sure."

Alrighty then. I take the menu and march right on out of there, determined to find some other way to be useful.

I'm loading clothes into the washer when Edith finds me.

"I've been looking for you everywhere!"

I smile and keep tossing clothes in. “I’ve been in here, loading and unloading. Tell me, how *do* two people produce so much laundry? It’s like you both change your underwear forty-five times a day.”

She ignores my question and holds up two yoga mats still in their original wrapping. My eyes go wide with wonder.

“Where’d you get those?”

“In town, yesterday.”

My fingers reach out as if to say, *Gimme, gimme, gimme*. My eyes glisten. My fingers twitch anxiously. I want one of the mats so badly. I *need* it. Even with the prospect of new floors, yoga on a thrift store rug is getting kind of old.

Too bad my conscience prods me to remember my mission for the week: *Be useful! Happy! Helpful! Especially do not accept any more help from Jack or his well-meaning, impossible-not-to-love grandmother.*

I drop my hand and turn away.

“I hope they’re both for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The blue one is yours. My new year’s resolution is to start doing yoga, and you’re going to help me.”

“It’s June,” I point out.

“I’ve learned that if I don’t start resolving until midway through the year, it’s much easier to make it to the finish line.”

I smile at her genius. “Right, well, you’ll have to find someone else to help you. I need to keep cleaning.”

“No, you need to come help me yoga. Can yoga be used as a verb? Anyway, it’s nice out and you need a break from this laundry room.”

“I don’t think Jack would agree with that.” I close the door on the washer and the machine rumbles to life.

“I just asked him, and he did.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, his exact words were, ‘I don’t care. Leave me alone,’ but coming from Jack, that’s all the approval we’re ever going to get, and all the approval I need. Now c’mon. I’ve been meaning to get in touch with my child’s pose.”

“That’s really more for resting.”

“Good. Best to start slow.”

I’m helpless to resist her, not only because I’d love a break from laundry, but because doing yoga outside under a shady oak tree sounds too good to pass up. I convince myself accepting the mat isn’t going against my mission for the week because technically helping Edith with her yoga practice will make her stronger and healthier. Jack wants his grandmother healthy, ergo I must become her yoga Yoda.

Once I reassure myself my logic is sound, I run to change into the yoga pants I got at the thrift store then meet her outside. I’ve been practicing yoga for years, but I’ve never led anyone else through a practice. I’m a little clunky, not sure how to best explain certain poses for a beginner, but Edith is a good sport. We start slow, and by the time we roll up our mats, she’s proven I shouldn’t have underestimated her. I wasn’t even really going easy on her; all in all, it was a pretty decent workout.

“Same time tomorrow?” she asks, standing up with her mat.

I grin. “Sounds good.”

I feel amazing as we head back to the house—better than I have in a long time. Not only did I get a little break from cleaning, it was actually really fun to practice yoga with Edith. I liked guiding her and coming up with poses, and I already have ideas for what I want to do tomorrow.

Later, Edith tries to get me to eat lunch with them, as she’s done every day, but I insist that I need to keep working. The rest of the afternoon passes quickly as I continue scrubbing, and shining, and folding, and generally staying out of Jack’s way. I figure my best chance of keeping under his radar is to steer clear of him altogether.

It works remarkably well. We don't fight at all. In fact, it's been so many days since we fought (two, for those of you counting at home) that he's probably already warming up to me. Bonus: I'm so preoccupied with Jack and my work ethic, I hardly have time to remember my own crumbling life. Thumbs-up.

On Wednesday, I turn into Betty Crocker in the kitchen. I don an apron, use a rolling pin, and have half a pound of flour caked in my hair by the time I finish trying out the recipe Dotty sent home with Jack. A few dozen cranberry oatmeal cookies litter the counter. I put extra white chocolate chunks in them, and the result is nothing short of a culinary masterpiece. After a quick thank-you call to Dotty—that lasts 45 minutes—I fill up little take-home bags with cookies and deliver them to all the ranch hands. They thank me so profusely. “Meredith, you're the best!” “Thanks Meredith!” “Aw Meredith, can't you stay and chat?”

Though they're remarkably good for my ego (much better than Jack is), I don't let the hands coax me into staying. I don't want to be a distraction. Instead, I tell them to enjoy then scurry back inside so I can take a plate filled with the very best cookies and an ice-cold glass of milk up to Jack's office. The glass numbs my hand as I walk up the stairs, and the cookies are the perfect mix between crunchy and gooey and straight out of the oven. They could force an entire squadron of bake-sale moms into early retirement.

The door to his office is open, and he glares at me from behind his desk as I stroll in and out again without so much as a word, just a pleasant smile and a wave. He scowls like he's confused by this version of me. Meredith Avery: non-nuisance. That *Employee of the Year* award has my name written all over it.

I grin to myself as I walk back downstairs. Obviously, I would have liked to stay and watch him roll on the ground, weeping at the glory of my baking abilities, but that's not part of my plan. Instead, I just have to imagine it.

I think I'm kicking butt, proving Helen wrong, and staying focused. Later on, I'm in the kitchen making a marinade for

tomorrow's lunch when Jack shouts my name through the house. *Uh oh*. That doesn't sound like cookie ecstasy. When I find him, he's in his closet, one hand on his hip, the other gesturing to his racks of clothes. He's wearing his Angry Jack face, his shoulders blocking out part of the overhead light. I wonder if he could squash me beneath his shoe or if it just feels that way when he's worked up.

“What the hell is all this?”

His voice makes me jump.

“What is *what*?”

He points to the clothes, reminding me of the task I undertook earlier while the cookies were baking.

“Oh, right. I organized your clothes by color and category.”

“Why?”

I sweep my hand across the impeccably organized garments. “It was all a jumbled mess before—I'm surprised you could figure out where anything was.”

I don't find it necessary to mention the fact that I did a fabulous job. His jeans are in descending shades of blue. His shirts are grouped together so that his black t-shirts (of which there are many) are all in their own section. His work shirts are separated from his nice long-sleeve shirts. The suits I was surprised to find are hanging together near the back. I also don't mention the fact that I imagined him wearing those suits and had to prop my hand on the closet wall and pause my organizing for a solid five minutes while I let the fantasy play out in my mind. It was jarring, to say the least.

“Looks good, doesn't it?”

“I don't like change.”

“Okay-okay-okay,” I say, immediately deferent. “I'll put everything back. Just...in the meantime, don't look in your underwear drawer. No reason.”

After I finish work for the day, the guys are still wrapping up some tile work in the shack, so I'm left with no place to go. I could stay in the farmhouse, but Jack still seems annoyed about his closet and I don't want to impose on him. I already did yoga with Edith, so I don't really need the exercise, but I decide I'll take another stroll around the property anyway. When I was chatting with Chris earlier, he mentioned that there was a nice creek due west of the house. He said it was a quarter mile or so to get there, but there's a trail to follow and it's worth the trek.

I set out in that direction and am a few minutes into my walk when I get the feeling that I'm being tailed.

I turn and see Alfred trotting behind me at a distance. He tucks himself half behind a bush. If he could, he'd be wearing a pair of those disguise glasses with the comically large nose and mustache. I continue walking and so does he. I stop and he stops and sits, tongue wagging, eyes shining with stupid love.

"Go back home, Alfred!" I shout, assuming my words will hit their mark.

He doesn't budge. His tail swings back and forth in the grass.

"Go on!" I wave my arms menacingly. "Get!"

I've become Frankie Muniz in *My Dog Skip*. Alfred is supposed to walk off dejectedly and the audience is supposed to cry, but Alfred, who promptly listens to every command Jack utters, seems to turn a deaf ear to me.

I sigh and tell him to stay—adding in a dramatic STOP hand motion—and then I continue my walk. He does stay for a little while, but then he hops right back up.

It's not like I'm *that* scared of him anymore. In the last few days, I've even gotten used to having him around. He's always in the farmhouse, sleeping on his bed or under the kitchen table, and I feed him and replenish his water bowl. Earlier, he came to lie down near my feet while I was baking, and I didn't even notice until I nearly stepped on him.

Still, there's a difference between tolerance and active friendship. I'd prefer the former; Alfred clearly disagrees.

He gets closer to me and trots along at my side. I glance down at him with pursed lips, and he nudges my palm with his nose, like he's saying, *See? I'm nice. Please love me.*

He is pretty cute with his floppy ears and golden coat. *Dammit.*

I sigh and give in to him. We walk together for a few more minutes in silence before I ask him how he likes the weather. He ignores me. Then, because why the hell not, I start to tell him about my day, and then that somehow morphs into me explaining to him why it hurts my feelings that I don't have a better relationship with Helen. I divulge the fact that even when we were younger, we didn't get along that well. He's the perfect listener, doesn't interrupt me even once, and before I know it, we crest over the top of a hill and I spot the creek.

Except, it's not a creek—it's a river! Or at least it looks like one to me: wide, crystal clear, and rimmed with cypress trees, wildflowers, and ferns. The path I'm on dead-ends in a little clearing on the bank of the creek. It looks like a perfect, pebbly beach entrance.

Alfred and I step closer. Even though the creek flows pretty quick, I figure it's not going so fast that it'd sweep me away to the Gulf of Mexico.

I can't gauge how deep it gets in the center, which means it probably goes well over my head. To my left, there's an overgrown oak tree with a rope swing hanging down. The knot at the top cuts into the tree's limb, and it's probably been up there for a while.

Even though it's early evening, the sun is still blazing overhead. The temperature has to be in the high 90s, and our walk built up a nice layer of sweat on my skin. Swimming sounds heavenly.

I turn to Alfred and dab sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. "What do you think? Should we swim?"

Alfred leaps into the water before I even have time to remove my shoes, splashing and pouncing and lapping it up like he's having the time of his life.

"Looks like we've finally found some common ground," I say, kicking off my sneakers and stuffing my socks inside. "You go on ahead and make sure to scare off any snakes."

I chance a quick glance behind us to confirm we're alone then strip off my t-shirt and shorts—not that it even matters if a ranch hand sees us since my underwear and bra provide more coverage than most of the bikinis I used to own.

"How is it?" I ask after I stow my things on dry land and make my way to the creek's edge. The water's so nice and clear, I'll be able to see my feet on the algae-covered pebbles. "Refreshing?"

My toes hit the water and I let out a wild "AH!"

It's FREEZING.

Alfred turns and looks at me, head tilted.

"How is it so cold!?" I cry. "Is this runoff from a freaking glacier?"

He ignores me and goes back to leaping around in the water. Right. I take another few steps, hissing and huffing and puffing as I get acclimated to the temperature. I know I'm being a wimp, and I'll never make it all the way in at this rate. There's only one way to swim in cold water, and that's by plunging under in one quick go. So, I inhale, hold my nose, and dive.

Cold water blasts me from all sides like I just dropped myself into an ice bucket. It's so cold it burns, but then just like that, my body is used to it. I break the surface and whip my hair out of my face.

"Woo!"

Alfred barks and doggy-paddles toward me.

We swim farther from the edge, but I'm still a few yards away from where the current looks the strongest in the center of the creek. Where I am, there's nothing to worry about.

Alfred swims toward me with a stick then drops it on the water's surface, nudging it forward with his nose. I take the hint and toss it toward shore, and he darts after it, fetching it back to me in record time. We repeat the cycle for a while. My arm starts to ache, but I push through the pain because he looks so damn happy. Eventually, out of desperation, I toss the stick into the current and say, "No more!" then flop back to float on my back. My arms and legs stretch out around me as I tilt my chin to the sky and close my eyes. He circles me like a shark.

"What do you think of your master?" I ask lazily.

He barks.

"I know, handsome, but that *personality*—rough around the edges, to say the least."

He licks my hand.

"Oh, you think he has a softer side too? Maybe. Edith seems to think there's still some love left in him, but I'm not so sure. I wonder if he ate those cookies or if he just tossed them out the window as soon as I left the room." He doesn't say anything and I feel like a jerk. "Oh I'm sorry, Alfred! I just realized I didn't give you any. How rude of me to bring it up."

He forgives me because he's a dog and he doesn't speak English. Also, I think he's my best friend.

We keep swimming and I lose track of time. My fingers turn into prunes. I'm starting to feel the temperature of the water again and I'm pretty sure my lips are purple by this point, but I can't get out yet. All this alone time has given me the chance to reflect on how far I've come, how much I've accomplished since that cab driver kicked me out in the middle of nowhere. Additionally, I'm inspired by my progress with Alfred, how far I've been able to get out of my comfort zone. With that in mind, I have a mission before we head back to the house: test out that rope swing.

"Alfred, if I die, you can have all the money in my checking account."

JACK

Meredith has done a complete about-face in recent days. Ever since Sunday morning, when she told me—with splotchy cheeks and puffy eyes—to not bother fixing up the shack, she’s been hardly recognizable. It’s like she’s walking on eggshells around me, and if possible, I find it more annoying than when she was giving me hell. I don’t have a problem with being nice; I have a problem with people being *fake* nice. I can tell she’s keeping herself restrained. When I snapped at her for color-coordinating my closet, I could see the shackled passion behind her eyes. I think she wanted to tell me to eat shit, but she just smiled and cowed.

Something isn’t right.

Edith swears she hasn’t noticed the change, but then again, I can’t really trust Edith when it comes to Meredith. She’s been on her side from the beginning.

This morning, she told me to go easier on her.

“She’s a nice girl,” she said in Meredith’s defense. “One who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, puts up with you.”

“Yeah, well it seems everyone’s seen Meredith’s ‘nice girl’ side but me.”

“A mean dog doesn’t ever see a cat purring. You make her hackles go up. You’ve been nothing short of cruel since she first arrived.”

Maybe that's why Meredith has changed her attitude around me. Maybe she agrees with Edith about how I've been acting and she's sick of me losing my temper with her.

Who cares? I remind myself I don't have time to worry about Meredith or her opinion of me.

After I wrap up work for the day, I go looking for Alfred. It's been a few days since I've played fetch with him. Normally he hangs around me all day, but he's been noticeably absent lately.

I don't find him around the farmhouse, and when I ask Edith, she says the last time she saw him he was heading down to the creek.

Odd.

He's never wandered down that far without me. Our property is huge, but he prefers to stick close to the house, which is convenient for me because then I don't have to chase him down at the end of the day.

I set off down the trail, appreciating the solitude. I haven't gone down this way in a while. When I was a kid, I lived at the creek in the summer. My friends and I would fill our inner tubes and hike over to the top of the property so we could catch the current and float all the way back down. For my twelfth birthday, my dad installed a rope swing on one of the oak trees and I spent months doing fool-ass backflips to impress *the* Carrie Suthers. My efforts weren't in vain—she let me kiss her at the end of summer, right on the edge of the bank.

I'm smiling, thinking about that summer, when I stumble upon a pile of clothes stowed on the path just up ahead. I don't hear any voices, but Alfred's definitely down here swimming with someone, and from the look of the jean shorts, it's Meredith.

I continue down the path, hear a small splash, and spot Alfred swimming in a circle in the creek, barking and whining with worry. There's no Meredith in sight, but then a few

seconds later, she breaks the surface of the water with a wild laugh.

“There!” she declares proudly, wiping her dark hair away from her face. “Did you time me like I asked you to? I counted to 35 Mississippi, which is like four minutes in dog time!”

Alfred barks right in her face, obviously glad to see she wasn’t drowning like he thought she was, and she doesn’t even flinch like I expect her to.

“Okay, well then,” she continues, “you’ll just have to take my word that I just set a world record.”

When I take a step toward the creek, a stick crunches underneath my shoe. Alfred’s ears perk up as he turns, spots me, and a second later, he’s bounding out of the water to say hello.

Of course, he stops a foot in front of me and shakes like crazy, covering me with water. I hold out my hands, but it’s no use.

“All right, all right! You got me!” I crouch down and pet him while he pants. He’s breathing hard and his barrel chest is heaving, which means they’ve probably been swimming for a while.

“Okay, you’ve had your look! You can go now!”

I jerk my head up and find Meredith retreating to the deep area, leaving only her head visible above the surface.

I frown. “What?”

“I don’t have a bathing suit on!”

Jesus Christ, she’s naked?! Fuck. My gut clenches at the idea and in a flash, I push to stand and prop my hands on my hips. “You’d better not be skinny dipping in my damn creek!”

Of all the idiotic things she could be doing. Any ranch hand could easily wander down here and find her like this. I thought we discussed this the other day—her respecting the fact that this is a working ranch with dozens of young, hormonal dolts wandering around.

“I’m not skinny dipping! I have my underwear on, you perv!”

“Then there shouldn’t be a problem, and for the record, I came down here to find Alfred, not spy on you.”

She stands and her shoulders become visible above the surface. They’re tan and freckled from the sun.

“He followed me down here, uninvited—clearly takes after his master.”

I glance down at my dog, who looks mighty proud of himself. “Yeah, well, he loves this place, and I haven’t taken him in a while.”

“Why?”

“You know why.” I sigh. “I’ve been busy.”

I glance over to see her bottom lip sticking out just a bit, her eyes downcast on the water. It almost looks like she feels sorry for me and I’m about to tell her not to bother, but then her eyes brighten and she smiles, snapping her attention up to me. I can see an idea forming in that pretty little head of hers.

“Actually, I’m glad you’re here! Does that rope swing still work?”

She’s pointing over to the old oak tree.

“What do you mean?”

“Is it safe? Like if I try to swing off will it break and send me to my death?”

I wipe away a smirk. “It’s sturdy. It’s been up there for years and it’s held much heavier than you.”

She thinks about that for a second before replying, “Oh, you’ve used it before? So it’s held, what, like 400 pounds?”

My eyebrow quirks like she just issued a dare. “Ha ha. You’re looking at the reigning backflip champion of Cedar Creek.”

“Well, perfect. The truth is, I’ve been working up the courage to use it for the last thirty minutes, but I don’t want to

go first.”

I look around as if trying to find another willing participant. “I don’t see how you have any other option.”

Her eyes meet mine as she smiles, and the air leaves my lungs like someone just drove a dagger straight into my chest. In that moment, there’s no denying that she’s gorgeous—not just pretty or sweet, but the most tempting heartbreaker I’ve ever seen. Her dark hair is wet and hanging in a tangled sheet around her face. Her eyelashes are long and thick, boldly framing expressive blue eyes. Her lips are dark red, and her small nose has the same dusting of freckles her shoulders have. She’s the girl next door all grown up, and she’s swimming in my creek in nothing but her underwear.

“I want a tutorial from the supposed champ.”

“I don’t have my bathing suit on.”

My voice is flat and emotionless. I’m trying hard to step back in time to a few minutes ago, to when I hadn’t allowed those thoughts about her to take root in my mind. Acknowledging my attraction to her is a dangerous game I don’t want to play.

“That’s a pitiful excuse,” she says, completely oblivious to what she’s doing to me right now. “I got in without a bathing suit. Also, I wash enough of your underwear to know you don’t go commando, so either shimmy out of those Wranglers and show me how it’s done or prepare to lose the crown.”

I can’t resist giving in to the subtle temptation to flirt with her.

“Y’know, you’re trying pretty hard to get me to strip. In fact, the last time a woman told me to take my jeans off and ‘show her how it’s done’, she wasn’t talking about a rope swing.”

Her face goes beet red. “That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

I grin and turn back to make sure we’re alone. If it’s just her and me, I can pretend like this isn’t a terrible idea. I can give in to the here and now and worry about the rest later.

“Wait!” she shouts. I pause. “If you do stay and swim, you can’t get weird on me. Just pretend I’m wearing a tastefully conservative bikini instead of my undies.”

I roll my eyes and start to work my t-shirt off over my head. “Meredith, don’t kid yourself. I’m not like those hands back there—I don’t lose control of myself at the first sight of bare skin.”

“You’ve never seen my skin,” she taunts.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know. It sounded cool in my head. Now just promise me.”

I sigh as I kick off my boots and work the zipper of my jeans. “I promise that I, a grown man and not a horny teenage boy, won’t think twice about seeing you in your—how did you put it? *Tastefully conservative underwear*. Besides, I have the benefit of knowing you’re a married woman.”

I meant to say the last part as a reminder to myself more than her—I’m practically panting at the idea that she’ll walk toward the shore and I’ll get a glimpse of her wet bra clinging to her curves—but the mention of her past and her husband back in California dampens the light in her eyes in one fell swoop. It’s like I just cut the music and flipped on the lights—party’s over.

She turns to look up the creek, and I berate myself for once again putting my foot in my mouth. We were having a surprisingly good time, and I bet it could continue if I swallow my pride a little bit.

“Forget I said that, okay? Here, look, I’m in my underwear now too, so we’re even.”

She turns back and I catch the subtle way her eyes widen when she sees me standing on the shore in my boxers. She does the quickest scan from head to toe I’ve ever seen and then her gaze flips to the sky. She looks like she’s praying.

“I thought it was implied that the whole ‘not getting weird’ thing goes both ways.”

“No, no, I’m fine.” Her voice is high and squeaky, but she recovers fast. “Wait, so you really know how to do a backflip?”

She sounds thoroughly impressed, and I can’t help but think, *Move over, Carrie Suthers*. Looks like my rope swing skills are still paying dividends.

It takes her a few tries to toss the rope up to me on the shore, but then I grab hold of it and climb up to the highest part of the bank.

“Shall I count down?” she asks.

Alfred barks from a few yards down, anxious about what I’m about to do. He’s seen me swing plenty of times, but it still makes him nervous.

“Sure.”

“Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three—”

“Meredith.”

“Okay, threetwoone GO!”

I jump off the ledge and arc out over the water. When the rope extends to the farthest point, right over the deepest part of the creek, I let go and allow muscle memory to take over. Warm wind rushes around me as I flip then plunge into the icy water with a splash. I kick up to the surface and shake off the feeling of tiny needles stabbing into my skin. I always forget just how intensely cold it is in the spring-fed creek. The water bubbles straight up from an underground aquifer, so it’s never warm, not even in the heat of summer.

Meredith claps as I break the surface. “Bravo! I totally thought you were bluffing.”

“It wasn’t bad for my first of the season. I’ll get more air next time.”

“More air!? You were practically flying there for a second. How’d you do that?”

“You’re just trying to talk your way out of your turn.”

She feigns shock. “What? Me? No! I just want to hear all about how you learned to do a backflip. Tell me in excruciating detail. Don’t leave anything out.”

“Meredith.”

She throws up her hands and they splash back into the water. “All right! Okay. I’m going...”

With a sigh, she starts swimming for the shore while I hold the end of the rope. For the record, I don’t try to leer at her as she walks out of the water. I have every intention of keeping my promise about not letting things get weird, but then the water starts to slip away inch by inch and I’m a man at a complete loss. The sun shines on the water in just the right way to create a shimmering reflection, and the effect is two Merediths, different but the same. One is an illusion, the other all too real.

Holy hell.

Her tan, toned back gives way to a small waist and long legs. Her bra is lacy and pale cream, sexier than I was expecting. Her underwear are full-coverage cotton panties, yet somehow I find them cute as hell, especially while they’re clinging to her ass.

I knew she had a good body, but not a killer body—not a body that makes me abundantly grateful that the water concealing the lower half of my body is ice cold.

Get a fuckin’ grip, I scold myself.

Once she’s on the shore, she wraps her arms around her chest, as if she’s embarrassed, and then makes a mad dash to the rope swing.

“Don’t look, don’t look, don’t look.” She turns to me and probably sees that my brain has lost all control of motor function. “I said don’t look!”

I slap my hand over my eyes comically. “There? Better?”

“Yes. For the record, these aren’t thrift store tighty-whities. They’re designer tighty-whities.”

“Really? I’m pretty sure they’re the same ones Edith wears. Cute that you guys match.”

“Why do you know so much about your grandma’s unmentionables?”

“Haven’t you heard the rumors about us in the Deep South?”

“Wow, is that a genuine joke from Jack McNight? Color me shocked. Now just throw me the rope, will you?”

I drop the hand covering my eyes so I know where to aim. She’s forced to uncross her arms so she can catch it, and I really fucking wish she was wearing a different bra, something that matched her underwear, because the tiny lacy thing covering her chest is sopping wet and I doubt she realizes just how translucent it is. I’m pretty sure I can see the tips of her breasts, and for *some* reason, I miss the mark on my first few throws.

“Jeez, you suck at this.”

I don’t even respond because I know my voice would come out hoarse and crackly, like a twelve-year-old in his first week of puberty. I’ve never seen a sexier sight. A naked woman is one thing, but a woman barely concealed, covering just enough to make you wonder if you’re seeing something or if your eyes are just playing tricks on you? It is without comparison.

I try my damndest to keep my attention on her face.

I toss the rope and she misses it.

I think this is what they refer to as cruel and unusual punishment.

“Okay! Just like that. I swear I’ll catch it now.”

If she doesn’t, I’m going to drown myself as penance for my sins. I promised her I wouldn’t let it get weird, and I’m a goddamn liar.

I toss the rope one last time and she catches it at the last second. “Woo! Okay, now move back so I won’t hit you.”

I do as she says, though I know there's not a chance in hell she'll make it out this far.

“Either hold your bent elbows close or let your arms extend out fully, because once you get to the bottom of the arc it's going to feel like you weigh twice as much.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'm sure it's not that hard.”

She jumps and barely clears the edge of the bank before inertia wins out and yanks her into the water. It was less of a rope swing and more of a rope drop.

“Oh my god! I barely even made it off the ledge.” She laughs once she surfaces, burying her face in her hands. “You made it look so easy!”

“About average for your first try.”

It was below average.

“Oh please, I basically just flopped into the water like a dead fish.”

I laugh. “Next time leave your arms fully extended like I told you and make sure to bend your knees. Want to try again?”

“I don't know.” She bites her bottom lip, thinking it over. “That was pretty embarrassing.”

“No one saw it but me,” I reassure her.

“And Alfred.” She points over to where he's lounging on the bank, basking in the sun, half asleep.

“Something tells me he didn't care. Here, c'mon. Now that you know what to expect, it should go a lot better.”

She swims over and climbs back out onto the bank. Her underwear has crept up and I can see the edges of her tan butt cheeks. I've seen bikinis more revealing than what she's wearing, but it's still such a turn-on. I shift my gaze up to the oak tree and focus in on a nest. *Yes, look at that—ahhh, the beauty of nature.*

“Ready!” she declares.

This time she does what I tell her and actually manages to swing out toward me before she lets go of the rope and drops into the water like a pro.

She's so proud of herself when she surfaces. I swim toward her and see she's beaming then realize my mistake after it's too late. I shouldn't have gotten this close. Her eyelashes sparkle as small beads of water catch the light, highlighting the bluest pair of eyes I've ever seen, a blue so vibrant it looks electric, like the sky right before a thunderstorm.

The water laps up around her shoulders, and it's tricking my brain into thinking she's not wearing anything at all. She's a siren. She stands, and the water barely conceals her breasts. I want to skim my hand down her delicate neck and smooth shoulders and tug down one of those delicate straps.

Then I blink and realize my wants and desires have turned into actions. My brain is the last thing to catch up. My fingertips are already on Meredith's shoulder, dipping beneath her bra strap. Everything I imagined doing, I *am* doing. Her skin is wet silk. A gentle tug and she's standing right in front of me. Her hips brush against mine in the water.

She's holding her breath, lips parted as she stares up at me.

"You're trembling."

"The water's cold," she explains, wetting her bottom lip. "Wh-What are you doing?"

Her tone is perfect innocence.

"Isn't it obvious?"

I'm about to kiss the hell out of her.

Her hands hit my chest and I blink my eyes closed, inhaling the feel of her palms on my bare skin.

Then she whispers my name, trying to snap us out of this moment, but I won't let her.

"I really should get back," she says, voice wobbly.

I snap my attention back to her face and see an expression that punches me in the gut: fear.

Before I can tell her to stay, she turns and starts swimming for the bank. “Thanks for the lesson. I’ll see you back at the house.”

I’m already swimming after her. “I can walk back with you.”

“No! No, you stay and keep swimming. I need to go home and shower. My fingers are shriveled and it’s getting late. I haven’t eaten dinner, and I should clean up a little bit.”

She’s firing off excuse after excuse as they come to mind, one after another—“Big day of cleaning tomorrow, I’m tired, I really need to call my parents”— then she’s out of the water and covering herself as she runs to gather up her clothes. She’s sopping wet yet she still tugs her shirt and shorts on rapid fire. I make it to the shore as she’s slipping her shoes on, but I don’t rush after her. I know when someone’s trying to get rid of me. She’s being smart, putting distance between us. I’m sure she saw the way I was looking at her, but it doesn’t come close to what I was thinking, the seduction I was planning in my mind. She should run away. She should scurry right on back to the shack, or better yet, all the way back to California, because the thoughts flitting through my head were filthy. Had she been a little closer and I a little more naive, I would have tugged her close and wrapped her legs around my waist. I’d have angled her face up to mine and pressed a string of kisses to her lips, her chin, her throat. That bra would have been peeled off and those panties would have followed. Nothing good would have come from it. Everything good would have come from it.

I might’ve had my first kiss underneath that oak tree, but I’d have taken a lot more than that from Meredith.

MEREDITH

The next day, I don't bring up what happened in the creek, and neither does Jack. As far as I know, we both would rather forget the entire sequence of events, so that's what we do. Sure, I was nearly naked, and sure, I watched him strip down to his boxers and had to pretend my heart wasn't falling out of my butt. There are good bodies, and then there is Jack's body. You know the sort of muscles that come from mutant protein shakes and sporadic bouts of CrossFit? Yeah, Jack isn't like that. He has long, lean muscle that comes from years of daily hard labor. In fact, he has the type of tall, muscular frame that would make any woman feel small and delicate in his arms, like—*ahem*—me, for instance, just a random example.

Standing there, watching him strip, my gaze pinballed from one detail to the next: his broad shoulders, his toned forearms, his Adonis V. HE HAD THE V, HALLELUJAH—except, from what I saw with my own eyes, his should really be called the Adonis Y for reasons I'll leave up to your imagination. All I know is that I was turned on and fidgety. I wanted to fan my face and shout *Lawd have mercy* with a serious southern twang.

And that was before he completed the effortless backflip into the water. I'm ashamed to admit how impressive that was. Sure, I was mostly focused on his biceps as he was swinging (eat your heart out, Tarzan), but it was pretty cool that he could just pull his legs up with his abs (heavy breathing) and

spin backward into the water, especially considering I barely made it off the shore at all.

I regretted swimming with him *even as* we were swimming. I knew it would set us down a path that would lead to all sorts of question marks, and awkward encounters, and conversations where we avoid eye contact, and that was before I stripped off my sopping clothes back home. Now that...*that* was the real *pièce de résistance*. I stood in front of my mirror to see myself the way Jack had seen me, and I realized with a blush so strong it nearly set my face ablaze that he could totally see my entire boobs—not just a shadowy peek or a sultry suggestion, but LIKE THE ENTIRE NIPPLE AREA AND THEN SOME.

My emotions overwhelmed me so much that I had to sit down and resist the urge to dry heave. Embarrassment gave way to denial (*He probably didn't notice! I bet the sun was too bright.*), denial gave way to anger (*How dare he not inform me that I was flashing him?!),* and anger eventually gave way to acceptance. My boobs are not bad boobs. In fact, they're pretty great. In Europe, women wouldn't even blink at traipsing around like I was. In conclusion: I am a cool, relaxed *femme Française* with no qualms about hanging out in nipple-ville with my boss.

That logic works surprisingly well, especially since I pair my newfound European attitude with a total avoidance of Jack. We're talking zero face time for two whole days. I keep myself excessively occupied with the usual busy work around his house. I scrub toilets, tubs, showers, walls, nooks, crannies. I launder like it's my God-given talent to make clothes shockingly clean and wrinkle-free. If I hear him coming, I find a reason to tidy the inside of the coat closet. During lunch, I leave his and Edith's hot food waiting for them on the table and head back to the shack to eat on my own while pacing feverishly near the window, just in case I need to leap out at the sound of footsteps approaching.

I anticipate that the weekend will present a new set of problems. I won't have work to occupy me for eight to nine hours like I do during the week, but heaven smiles down on

me because Jack is busier than ever down at the winery and restaurant. He's hardly ever around. Edith and I go into town for dinner on Friday and then Saturday night we watch a movie in our pajamas. Jack comes home in the middle of it and I freeze, popcorn kernel halfway to my gaping mouth, hyperaware that I've made myself comfortable on his couch. My feet are on his ottoman. My body is nestled under his throw blanket. If he had a fancy massage chair, I'm sure I would be using that too. Sure, Edith invited me, but it's technically still his house and I'm supposed to be keeping my distance and generally causing less trouble than I make. He strolls in, looking tired from a long day of work, tosses his keys in the bowl near the door, and then glances up. Edith asks if he wants to join us, and she even picks up the end of the blanket I'm hurriedly trying to shove off my legs.

“It's a romance, but you'll like it. I promise!”

He shakes his head, avoids eye contact with me, and heads for the stairs.

I don't see him the rest of the night.

Sunday afternoon, Edith informs me that she's invited a few of her friends over for yoga. There's Dotty and Lisa from the bank, a few women from Edith's book club, and Daniel's fiancée, Leanna. She's the closest to me in age and she has a bright, bubbly personality and curly blonde hair. She chats my ear off about her wedding next week and I sheepishly admit that I've been invited to go with Tucker Carroway. I expect her to be annoyed that a random stranger will be in attendance, but she throws her arms around me and tells me she and Daniel will be excited to have me there.

“And I'm so glad Tucker invited you! He's so cute and he's been single for way too long.”

Everyone agrees that Tucker's a great guy. *Charitable! Generous! Easy on the eyes!*

“So *very* kind too,” Leanna continues. “Last year, my grandmother needed someone to look over her outdated will and Tucker volunteered to do it for free. Isn't that sweet? She tried to pay him but he turned her down.”

I feel awkward with so much attention focused on my date with him considering it's not a date at all. I didn't even agree to it—Edith did. I try my best to turn the attention back to Leanna and Daniel's wedding and after we spend a good hour chatting about floral arrangements and last-minute freakouts, we finally get started on yoga. There are a dozen of us altogether, and I set up class out in the yard where the ground is level and there's a nice breeze and tons of shade. I'm nervous to lead so many women at once, but everyone is so complimentary and easygoing that I relax and we end up having a good time. After that class, we decide we'll make a weekly thing of it. Sunday afternoons, we'll meet for yoga, and if we happen to throw in some food and gossip afterward, well at least we got a good workout in beforehand.

I start my third week of work hoping for a few more days of avoidance from Jack, but I don't get my wish. On Monday, I'm in the kitchen cleaning up after lunch when he walks up and pauses near the counter beside me. Then, he says the most shocking thing anyone has ever said to me.

“I'd like you to eat dinner tonight with Edith and me.”

I don't look his way. If I did, he'd know how much his invitation means to me.

I suppress my voice to a normal octave. “Thank you, but it's okay. I was just going to eat on my own.”

As usual.

“I insist.”

“It's okay. Tell Edith you offered, but I turned you down.”

She's the one who wants me at dinner, not him, I'm sure.

“C'mon, you're wounding my ego here.”

I smirk. “Edith thinks your ego can stand to take a good beating.”

I finally chance a quick glance at him and find that his dark eyes are studying me thoughtfully. Today, he looks

irresistible in a red work shirt, and I have no idea what is going on in his mind, but he doesn't seem to be playing a trick.

In fact, he pushes off the counter with his hip and declares with a final, end-of-discussion tone, "I'm going to grill some steak and vegetables. It'll be pretty damn good, and I'd hate for you to miss out."

I arch a challenging brow. "You'd 'hate for me to miss out'? Who are you and what have you done with the real Jack?"

He goes right on ignoring my taunts. "It'll be ready at 7:30 sharp. If you want to make yourself useful, you can set the table."

And just like that, I'm a dinner guest.

It's quite a coincidence, because today, I'm also starting a new beauty routine that definitely has absolutely nothing to do with Jack inviting me to dinner. I wrap up my workday and rinse off in my newly tiled bathroom, taking extra effort with my conditioner. Then, I blow my hair out until the dark strands are silky smooth. I apply makeup because you know what they say: it's important to look your best on Monday nights after work for no particular reason.

I peruse the two sundresses I bought at the thrift store and tug on the less fancy of the two. It's white and the material is soft, hanging loose around my legs. The spaghetti straps are perfect for a summer evening in Texas.

True to his word, Jack is manning the grill when I stroll from the shack (which no longer even closely resembles a shack) to the farmhouse. He takes me in from head to toe and I *think* I catch the shadow of a smile on his lips before he turns back to the grill. My new nightly not-for-Jack beauty routine was clearly worth the effort.

Inside, I tell Edith I'm going to pull down the good china, the stuff they never use, because tonight is a special occasion. She laughs and says she always figured it wouldn't get used again until her funeral wake. When Jack heads in with the steaks and vegetables, Edith is sitting at the table and I'm

arranging the plates and cutlery. Everything is set except for my water glass in the kitchen. I run back in to grab it and don't watch where I'm going because I know the route by now with my eyes closed...aaand I trip right over a sleeping Alfred and go crashing to the ground along with the fancy heirloom. The good crystal glass shatters into a thousand good crystal shards, but my attention lies elsewhere. The incident throws me so quickly and so vividly into a memory of Andrew that I lose my breath. It feels like *déjà vu*, but worse.

Nearly a year ago, Andrew was sitting at our dining table while I brought in dinner. He'd had a bad day at work and started in on me as soon as he walked in the door. He was starving and annoyed dinner wasn't ready, and I was so worked up that on my way into the dining room, I accidentally dropped one of the serving platters gifted to us at our wedding. Food went everywhere. Ceramic shards cut into my hand. All the first instincts you'd expect a picture-perfect husband to have—*Are you okay honey? Don't worry, I never liked that ugly dish anyway, honey*—were nowhere to be found. Instead, he shot to his feet and berated me for bleeding on the rug, for ruining dinner, for not appreciating nice things.

“Meredith, *leave it.*”

I remember the exact tone of his voice when he told me to clean it up, like I was an animal—no, *worse*.

“Meredith!”

Jack's voice rattles me back to the present and I realize with a start that I'm down on my knees, picking up individual glass shards and depositing them in my open palm.

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry,” I mumble as I start to cry. I'm so embarrassed. “I can't believe I broke this. I shouldn't have pulled these glasses out in the first place.”

“It's nothing.” He's tugging on my arm, trying to get me to stand.

I know he's just saying that to make me feel better. Andrew would be screaming his head off right now. I could

tell the glasses were really nice when I got them out, and I'll have to figure out a way to replace it.

“Meredith! *Stop.*”

His voice is gentle but direct as he bends down to hook his hands underneath my arms and lift me to my feet. He deposits me away from the mess just as another glass shatters at the head of the table. I jerk my attention toward Edith to see her hand still outstretched, having just finished tossing hers down as well.

“Grandma, what the hell?” Jack asks incredulously.

She shrugs, trying to be nonchalant, but I can see the emotion in her eyes, the empathy she feels for me in that moment. “What? There’s nothing special about those dusty old glasses. I’m glad to be rid of them, honestly. This yoga kick has been making me more mindful, less occupied with material possessions.”

We both stare at her, stunned silent. To Jack, she may as well be speaking Greek.

“Don’t believe me?”

She shrugs, casually reaching out and nudging Jack’s glass to the edge of the table.

He lurches forward and grabs it before it falls. “Jesus woman! I get it. Now can you throw the rest in the trash instead of flinging them around the whole damn ranch?”

I whip around and find the dustpan in the kitchen so I can get to work cleaning up the mess. Jack steals it out from under me and tells me to go sit down. His voice isn’t exactly harsh, but it still leaves no room for argument. I take a seat beside Edith and she tugs at my hand to take a look at it. There’s a small cut, but nothing that really needs attention. I close my palm quickly, wanting to hide the traces of my clumsiness. I’m embarrassed that I not only broke a glass but also had a weird flashback like that right in front of them. It’s not like I was in a war; I shouldn’t have PTSD.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say, unable to meet her eyes.

“At my age, I don’t *have* to do anything,” she declares with her usual matter-of-fact tone. “I *wanted* to do that. Hell, I’ve been wanting to do that for years. Now, Jack, will you finish up and sit down so we can get back to dinner? This steak smells amazing and Alfred here is about to leap up and eat ’em if we don’t beat him to it.”

I try to get up to make new glasses of water for us, but she keeps me seated right beside her, insisting Jack can do it. He serves dinner as well, making sure to ask which of the steaks I want and heaping up a mountain of homegrown vegetables on my plate. I expect him to sit across from me, on the other side of Edith, but he takes the seat right beside me, so I’m sandwiched in between them. We don’t talk about the glass at all, even though I know they’re probably both wondering why I had the bizarre reaction that I did. Edith carries the conversation for the pair of us, but even so, I hardly listen.

By the time dinner is over, I’ve only eaten a quarter of the food on my plate and I’m ready to dart back to the shack and bury my face in my pillow. I want a few minutes of peace and quiet to process what the hell just happened and try to figure out how to stop it from ever happening again.

I finish loading the dishes in the dishwasher—a task neither of them could talk me out of—and then Jack finds me in the kitchen with some Neosporin and Band-Aids.

“Can I see your hands?” he asks, but it sounds more like a demand than a question.

I wave him off. “It’s nothing. I don’t think I need any of that.”

“I don’t believe you,” he says, his voice gruff and full of all the annoyance he harbors for me.

I hang the dish towel and offer up my best version of a reassuring smile. “I appreciate your concern.”

He ignores me, steps forward, and takes my hands in his, turning them palm up. I want to yank them away, but I don’t want to look like a petulant child. Besides, I’ve caused enough drama for one night.

He holds my hands like they're delicate little birds, and the gentle touch cracks my chest wide open. There's something about a man capable of such strength choosing tenderness instead. I can't remember the last time Andrew touched me like this—I'm not sure he ever did.

"You're right, it doesn't look too bad," he says, sounding relieved.

I nod and try to pretend my throat isn't growing tighter.

I turn my head away and blink back tears.

Finally, he releases my hands, and I take the ointment and bandages from him with a quick nod of thanks. Then I'm out the back door as quick as my feet will take me.

The next day, Edith and I meet outside for our yoga session.

"You got something delivered this morning," she says as we roll out our mats.

"Oh yeah? What was it?"

"Flowers from your ex-husband. Yellow roses."

Wonderful. I guess he got the ranch's address from Helen.

"You want me to trash them?" she asks.

"Yes please—or better yet, isn't there a burn pile out back?"

"I brought the note that came with them in case you want to read it." She's holding out a tiny white envelope. I take it and rip it open. Now that my eyes are open to his insidiousness, the words are almost comedic. The same artfully contrived remorse that might've fooled me before rings utterly hollow now.

"Want me to trash that too?" she asks with a pragmatic tone.

I hand it off to her. "Please."

I love Edith. I love her because she takes that envelope and doesn't bring up the flowers again. I love her because she

understands exactly what I need before I even work up the courage to ask. I love her because she never asks me to open up to her and never demands my secrets. Still, she offers hers. While we're out there under the oak tree that day, Edith confides in me that before she met Jack's grandfather, she was in a rotten relationship, one she didn't think she'd ever make it out of.

"He had a real mean streak," she says, staring off into the distance. "He'd get drunk and hit me every now and then, and I'd let him because it's not always clear what love is, what love allows. I was lucky though—it didn't last long. My family moved south and I never saw him again. Didn't bother following me, though a part of me thought he might."

"I'm a little worried about that," I say, more to myself than her.

"The bastard following you?"

I don't answer.

"Well," she says, "you know what? It's one thing to *follow*, and another thing entirely to *get*. We have a little saying down here in Texas—a taunt, from a battle where a small group fended off a powerful army."

I look at her questioningly.

"It goes like this, dear: *Come and take it.*"

JACK

I know Meredith and Edith do yoga every day at 10:00 AM because productivity stalls around the ranch. On Wednesday, I head outside and find half my ranch hands congregating near the fence beside the oak tree. A few of them have the decency to act like they're working—Max has a hammer in his hand (though not a single nail)—but most of them are just openly gawking.

“This is now the most solid and secure section of fence we have on this whole damn ranch.” My voice booms and they scatter like cockroaches. “You think we can get to work on the east pasture now?”

There are muffled apologies and half-hearted excuses, but most of them are smart enough to get to work without another word.

Chris doesn't scatter. He comes right up to me and hands me some wildflowers wrapped in parchment paper.

“Can you deliver these to Meredith for me?”

“Why in the hell would I do that?”

He frowns like I'm a blubbering idiot. “Because you just said I need to get back to work.”

He misunderstands me.

I look down at the colorful flowers. “No, I mean why are you trying to deliver these to Meredith?”

He smiles extra wide, really proud of himself. “Oh, yeah. Well, she sent me home with those cookies last week, and I wanted to return the favor. These are from my mama’s garden.”

I yank them out of his hand and motion for him to get back to work, mumbling under my breath.

I don’t deliver the flowers to Meredith. I carry them up to my office and set them down on my desk. I stare at them so long they should catch fire, but they don’t. They stay wrapped up, a pretty gift for the pretty woman everyone on this damn ranch seems to be in love with, and I study them right up until a phone call distracts me.

I answer with a clipped greeting.

“Jack! This is Tucker—Tucker Carroway. How are you?”

“I’m fine, busy.” I push the flowers out of my line of sight. “What can I do for you, Tucker?”

“Oh I’m good too, *thanks for asking*.” His sarcasm annoys me, and I’m reminded why we didn’t get along in high school. “I’m calling for Meredith. She’s supposed to be my date for Dan and Leanna’s wedding this weekend and I just wanted to confirm pickup time with her.”

“So call her cell phone. I can’t have you two blocking the ranch’s main line.”

“I would, but she never gave me her number.”

I lose the fight against a smug smile.

“Sorry to hear that, man. I hope you figure it out.”

“McNight, why do I get the feeling you’re intentionally being obstinate?”

I hang up.

The phone rings, I pick it up off the base just long enough for him to get the silent message, and I hang it up again.

In the late afternoon, I stroll into the kitchen, though not because I need anything. I'm still full from lunch, and I'm not thirsty since Meredith brought me some lemonade an hour ago. It was a nice gesture, but her gentle smile successfully distracted me for the half hour after that. Now, I'm down here again. I have enough to occupy me upstairs, but I still tug open the fridge and stand in front of it like I'm looking for something. I even shuffle around some yogurt cups for good measure.

"Was lunch too light? I can make you something else if you want to top it off?"

Meredith is by the sink doing dishes. I'm not looking at her, but I still know exactly what she looks like today. She's wearing cutoff denim shorts and a white t-shirt, her dark hair piled high up on her head in a messy bun. She has more freckles across the bridge of her nose today than she did last week, and I wonder if it's because of her outdoor yoga sessions with Edith.

I can even tell she's smiling because of the way she asked the question. I think she knows I'm in here for no good reason.

I close the fridge door at the same time she moves to take the trash out.

It's filled to the brim, and she has a hard time lifting it out.

"Here, let me get that."

I try to nudge her out of the way and take the bag from her.

"No, no, I can do it. It's my job—I'm a *professional*."

She groans as she lifts with all her might, but the bag only makes it halfway out of the bin before she's forced to drop it again.

"Meredith."

"You *pay* me to do this. You do realize that, right?"

I level her with a stubborn gaze, and she aims one right back at me.

"It's my own fault for letting it get too full," she points out.

I take her shoulders in my hands and gently shift her a foot to the right so I can empty the trash.

“Fine,” she hollers after me as I head out back. “I guess this counts as my first break.”

I pull the lid open on the outdoor trashcan, and just as I’m about to toss the bag on top of the pile, something catches my attention: a bouquet of expensive-looking flowers scattered as if they were dumped straight out of the vase and an envelope ripped down the middle sitting on top. I drop the trash bag on the ground and grab the two halves of the note.

It’s a private message, one definitely not meant for my eyes, but I read it anyway.

Meredith, my love, please come home. I can't think of any way to convince you of how sorry I am. I've racked my brain for ways to convince you you're making a mistake, and I know these flowers and this note won't be enough. You're the love of my life, my wife, my everything. Please don't walk away now and throw away the vows we made to each other five years ago. I knew the moment I saw you that you were mine.

Come home. Please.

I love you,

Andrew

They’re the words of a heartbroken man, words that cut through my chest as painfully as if I was the one who wrote them. I knew Meredith left her husband when she came to Texas. I knew she had a whole life back in California, but reading this puts it all in perspective. She’s still married to a man who loves her and expects her back. She didn’t leave a loveless marriage; she left a heartbroken husband who’s still foolishly pining for her. I bet he went half insane when he woke up and found her gone that day three weeks ago. No warning, no discussion—she just vanished and left him to pick up the pieces. I wonder how many times a day he calls her. I wonder what her reasons were for leaving him. I wonder if what Helen said was true, that her husband doted on her and

gave her the world, that she is spoiled and bored and left to teach him a lesson.

Honestly, though, I'm not sure her reasons matter. Regardless of why she left, I'm still a fool. I've been letting my guard down around her, allowing her into my life inch by inch. I'm acutely aware of her when she walks into a room, and I try to catch every one of her smiles as if they're meant just for me. I'm smitten, and I have been for longer than I care to admit.

Worse, I'm not the only person under her spell. I'm standing in line clutching a number. The ranch hands, Tucker, her husband—everyone wants Meredith, and I'd bet Meredith wants no one. She's a heartbreaker, a self-centered woman who wants nothing more than to be wanted.

I think of how she cried when she broke that glass at dinner the other night, how she looked so delicate and fragile in that moment that my heart softened for her.

Was it all a crock of shit? All for show?

I pick the trash bag up off the ground and toss it inside.

If so, it's about time Meredith took her act back to where it belongs.

MEREDITH

I can't believe how quickly I've settled in here. It's been nearly three weeks since I first arrived, and I'm already building a life for myself. I commute places in a pickup truck. I use the word y'all un-ironically. Just yesterday, I accidentally drank water with my lunch instead of sweet tea and I gagged.

I like it in Cedar Creek way more than I thought I would. The work is hard, and I don't exactly love what I'm doing, but it does come with perks: I love cooking lunch for Edith and Jack, and they actually seem to be enjoying my healthier dishes. Jack even requested my salmon this week. I really enjoy doing yoga with Edith, and yesterday, she told me she was pretty close to touching her foot to her face.

"I haven't been able to do that in years!"

However, my absolute favorite perk is Jack. Talking to him, annoying him, staring at him when he's not paying attention—there's really no end to my obsession at this point. He and I aren't friends exactly, but I still enjoy our exchanges. I'm aware of where he is in the house at all times, as if he's wearing a tracking device. Still, I try not to disturb him too much. I mean, bringing him lemonade or a snack isn't necessarily *disturbing* him, and it affords me a quick glimpse of him working, a little snapshot to hold me over while I'm in laundry hell.

Yesterday morning, he was out helping the guys clear a section of the garden. I have no clue what they were doing—

tilling? Harvesting? I really don't care, and it doesn't matter because whatever it was, it meant Jack was out there in plain view wearing jeans, a dark blue work shirt, and his baseball hat. I stood at the kitchen window, repeatedly drying a single plate as I watched him get his hands dirty.

I was biting my bottom lip.

Clutching the towel.

And then he lifted the bottom of his work shirt to wipe at some sweat on his face and Edith walked in on me, bent over the sink, eyes pinched closed as I recited what I knew of the Lord's Prayer, which was pretty much just the first few lines. I lose track after the part about bread.

"Are you having a heart attack or something?"

"Menstrual cramps," I lied.

"Go lie down and rest. I'll finish drying those."

Here's a little secret: I let her dry the last of those dishes so I could go take a break in the shack, and I did lie down, but I didn't *rest*.

I *didn't rest* THREE TIMES.

I know. It's probably a sin to *not rest* so soon after saying the Lord's Prayer, but sometimes you just have to *not rest* right when the mood takes you.

I should feel guilty about fantasizing about my boss, but a part of me is so relieved that I'm even interested in fantasizing about anyone at this point. Andrew and I hadn't slept together for months near the end, and before that, sex wasn't something I took pleasure in. He was like a soul-sucking, libido-killing leech.

Now...*nowwww* that's all I'm interested in.

It's like I have an unquenchable thirst and no matter how many times I *don't rest*, it never seems to sate me. I think I've got it under control and then Jack will say something in his gruff tone that's meant to get under my skin, but really it just feels like a whole lot of foreplay at this point. Getting under his skin has somehow gotten tied up in my horniness neurons,

so now, it's not just fun working him up...it's *fun*. I know—bad, bad Meredith. *Whatever*. I have problems, and I have every intention of sorting them out, just as soon as I see where this obsession with Jack could lead.

It's Thursday, and I haven't seen him all day. He left the ranch earlier and didn't return until after lunch. I was down in the living room, straightening up when he walked in the front door and breezed right past me. No smile, no wave, not even a grumpy comment.

Huh.

Later, I knock on his door and ask him if I can get him anything, perhaps a snack or something to drink. He shouts back that he's on the phone, and he sounds pissed that I'm interrupting him. I feel bad, not to mention slightly embarrassed that he sounded so put-off. Like I said, we aren't friends, but it feels like we've been heading in that direction. Okay, maybe not *friends* in the traditional sense, but we've at least been dialing down the hatred to a sustainable level.

Him dismissing me is a tiny step in the wrong direction, but I shrug it off. Maybe he's had a hard day. Maybe he's got a burr in his saddle. (*See?* I really do belong in the country.)

I wait for Jack to make an appearance after his phone call ends, but he doesn't. That burr must be wedged deep.

In the early evening, I brew a pot of decaf coffee and Edith joins me at the table with some shortbread cookies. We're ruining our appetites for dinner, but neither one of us mothers the other. We talk about how excited we are for the wedding on Saturday and what sort of snacks we should make for yoga on Sunday afternoon. After I've got her really talking, I work up the courage to ask her if she's noticed anything weird with Jack.

“Oh, and no big deal at all...just while I have you here...I was wondering if maybe, by chance...never mind—oh, do you want more coffee? Here, let me get it for you.”

She swats my hand away when I try to take her mug.

“Spit it out, woman!”

“Have you noticed anything weird about Jack lately?”

“I get less information out of him than a month-old lemon. All I know is he ate dinner out last night and he’s been gone all day.” She shifts her gaze up to me. “Is he giving you trouble again? I can knock some more sense into him—”

“No! No, it’s fine.” I smile covertly down at my coffee. “We’ve sort of come to an understanding, an equilibrium.”

“Equi-what? Y’all are getting along now?”

His tone from earlier leaps to mind. “I don’t think you’d say that *exactly*. It’s like when a baby tiger and a baby pig grow up together to be buddies in adulthood, but you just know deep down that it might all blow up the next time the tiger skips a meal.”

“Huh...okay. But he’s not upsetting you anymore?”

“No.” A flush warms my body. “He’s not upsetting me.”

After we finish, I clear the table and start prepping lunch for tomorrow. I’m technically off the clock, but I don’t want to go back to the shack just yet. A part of me is still hoping Jack will come down, act like his usual arrogant self, and put me out of my misery. Just one little teasing comment from him and I can go on home and keep myself occupied for the rest of the evening.

The sound of a truck pulling up out on the gravel drive takes my attention from the cutting board. That’s another thing different about the country—gravel is the universal doorbell. Alfred barks like crazy at the sound. It could be one of the ranch hands, but they all left an hour or two ago so I doubt that’s who it is. I wipe my hands with a kitchen towel and go investigate. There’s an ominous feeling in my gut, like something bad is about to happen, but when I step out onto the porch, I’m surprised and relieved to find Tucker hopping out of his truck.

It’s weird, but a part of me was worried it’d be Andrew.

I shake away the fear and trot down the steps to greet him. He’s in full lawyer mode, wearing slacks and a white dress shirt. His tie is a little loose, as if he tugged on it the moment

he left the courthouse. His blond hair is short and neatly styled.

“Tucker, the knight in shining armor himself! Here to see Jack?”

He furrows his brow. “Of course not. I came to see you.”

Me? I’m not sure why I’m surprised he’s here for me, but I am. I know we’re supposed to go to the wedding together, but a part of me half expected him to forget the invitation. It’s not like we’ve talked since he first mentioned it. That’s my fault; I didn’t give him my cell phone number, but it was a strategic move on my part. I didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. I’m not currently dating. Hell, I’m not even divorced. I have a whack job ex sending me flowers, and I’m currently loopy over a dark-haired devil who seems to be avoiding me.

Before I get splattered, I quickly step off the tracks of that train of thought and accept a quick hug from Tucker.

“Oh? Well it’s good to see you,” I tell him, motioning back to the house. “I just brewed a pot of decaf, there’s a little left if you want some?”

The screen door creaks open behind me. *Speak of the devil.* Jack steps out onto the porch, and I swallow down my nerves. He’s the complete antithesis of Tucker: dark and foreboding, a menace to society. His short dark hair is slightly mussed, and he’s wearing a black t-shirt and jeans. His expression is so steely and aggressive against Tucker’s honey-sweet smile, and it’s like an old western standoff—the desperado in black against the righteous lawman.

“Tucker. Good to see you.” His tone says the exact opposite.

“Such enthusiasm! You do know it’s my job to tell when people are lying, right?”

He ignores Tucker’s jab. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing. There seemed to be something wrong with your phone system, so I thought I’d come out here myself to have a conversation with Meredith, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course,” he answers, but he doesn’t leave, and he doesn’t take his eyes off Tucker. He shoves his hands into his jean pockets and leans against the porch beam at the top of the stairs.

When I turn back, I can tell Tucker’s trying hard to keep his temper from flaring.

“Tucker?” I ask, trying to regain his attention and diffuse the situation. I’m seconds away from snapping my fingers or flailing my arms.

Hey, remember me? The girl you’re apparently here for?!

He finally turns to me and his expression softens. “I tried to call you this week, but Jack didn’t seem to want to pass along the message.”

“My secretary is in Europe,” Jack calls from the porch, his tone a touch defensive.

“And I guess you didn’t have a pen and paper handy?” Tucker shoots back quickly.

“I don’t have time to pass notes.”

Oh, come on. This is ridiculous.

I step toward Tucker, trying to block his view of Jack. “It’s fine. I’m here now. What were you going to tell me?”

“I just wanted to confirm that you still want to go to Dan and Leanna’s wedding with me.”

“Oh, right.”

He must sense my hesitation because he continues. “I know we don’t know each other well, but I think it could be fun.”

Jack is standing behind us, listening to this exchange. I nibble on my bottom lip. *Yeesh*. This is awkward. I’m sure Edith is upstairs peeping through the blinds. Alfred is smart enough to keep his distance, and most of the farm animals have probably run to the barn to bury themselves in hay.

“Unless you agreed to go with someone else instead?” he asks, gaze shifting pointedly to Jack.

His meaning is obvious. I don't need eyes on the back of my head to know Jack is currently scowling at the idea of accompanying me to an event. Just the mental image is preposterous. Me in a fancy dress, him in a suit...our hands linked...his warm breath on my neck as he leans in close to pay me a compliment instead of an insult.

"No!" I'm quick to reply, pricking the fantasy with a pin. "I don't have another date, but..."

A part of me wants to turn Tucker down and be done with all this, but the fact is, I was actually really looking forward to attending the wedding. It's been a while since I've gone to an event like that and not been terrified of upsetting Andrew, and I was going to get dolled up and wear the fancier of my two thrift store dresses. Everyone I've met so far in Cedar Creek is going to be in attendance, and then there's obviously the most important part: wedding cake. Maybe I'll volunteer to help dole it out and they'll let me go home with some leftovers. *Oh no, I couldn't possibly...But we insist!...No, I actually can't—my purse is already completely full of cake.*

"Good." He grins, relieved that I've agreed to go with him. He really is cute, like a little blond cherub all grown up.

"I can meet you there. Edith and Jack are both going so I can catch a ride with them." I'm trying to wrap things up because I'm aware of dark eyes beaming lasers into the back of my head. *Sniff sniff—is that the smell of burning hair?*

Tucker doesn't like that idea; I can see it in the way his jaw shifts and his eyes narrow just for a split second as he decides to force the issue. "I'd prefer to pick you up. I'll swing by here at 5:00."

"Well I'm so glad this all worked out," Jack says sarcastically, effectively ending the conversation. "It was great to see you, Tucker. G'bye now."

What he means is, *Get the hell off my property.* If he had a shotgun, he'd pump it.

Tucker chuckles and shakes his head, trying to assure me that Jack doesn't ruffle his feathers. He does move to leave,

but not before he bends to kiss my cheek and whispers in my ear, “Looking forward to Saturday.”

It’s a slightly dirty tactic on his part. I wonder if he ever gives the judge a little peck in the courtroom. *Your honor—mwah—I rest my case.*

I stand there as he drives off and when I turn back, Jack is gone. He’s back up in his office with the door closed.

That no good, rotten...

I march right in.

“What was that?!”

“I’ll have to call you back,” he says before hanging up his phone.

“Why were you so rude down there? You’re Mister Busy Busy Bee all day, but apparently you had time to moderate my conversation with Tucker? You stood over us like the Grim Reaper.”

He watches me stomp around and shout with a steady, narrowed gaze. “Done?”

“Not even close.”

“Tucker and I don’t get along.”

Ya think!?

“Yes, obviously I understand that now. Why didn’t you just tell me that instead of acting like that down there?” I force a deep breath and attempt a calmer tone. “If you don’t want me to go with him to the wedding, I won’t. I’m not trying to cause trouble.”

“I don’t want you to go with him.”

I’m surprised he’s being honest about that.

“In fact,” he continues. “I don’t think you should go at all.”

I realize then that we’re both trying hard to stay calm, but it’s a losing battle. He and I burn hot, and this conversation isn’t going to end well. Still, I press on.

“Are you upset with me?” I ask, slightly embarrassed that my voice sounds so wobbly.

Throughout all our antics, I’ve never seen him act like this. I have a feeling he’s mad about more than Tucker’s visit.

He leans back in his chair and assesses me coldly.

“No, I’m not upset with you. I’d just like to know how long you plan on doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Playing this game. Staying here and acting like you belong.”

Something twists in my stomach, a feeling as painful as a sucker punch. I don’t like his tone, and I don’t like where this conversation is headed. I’d turn and leave, save myself from the sharp edge of his temper, but he continues before I can move.

“It’s been almost three weeks. I admit, Helen and I—we thought you’d be gone by now.”

“What gave you that impression?” My voice is shrouded in confusion. “Haven’t I been a good employee? I work nonstop. I do everything you and Edith ask of me—”

“Look at it from my point of view. Some rich housewife from fucking California shows up on my doorstep with blood on her face, asking for a job. The only intel I have on her is that she’s a spoiled girl with a history of dramatic, short-lived gestures. The only reason you’re here is as a favor to your sister—a favor I’ve regretted ever since I granted it.”

“Why’s that? Haven’t I done everything you’ve asked me to? Scrubbed your floors? Put up with your shit?”

“You’re a distraction.”

“For whom?”

I know he’s referring to his ranch hands, but I have a sneaking suspicion that he might be included in there too. I won’t let him skate by that easily. If he wants to hurt me, he’d better do it with the truth.

He sidesteps the question. “I think it’s time for you to go home, don’t you? I saw those flowers in the trash. I read that note.”

I step toward his desk, shifting my pain to anger. “That’s none of your business. If you want me gone, look me in the eye and tell me I’m not good at my job. I don’t think you have one legitimate reason for hating me, just a bunch of secondhand bullshit from other people.”

My hands fist by my sides and my upper lip curls. His brown eyes are shooting daggers as we stare across his desk at one another.

“It just doesn’t make sense. What game are you playing? You’re not from here. You have no real family, and the family you do have wasn’t thrilled to hear you’d shown up. No real friends. There’s no reason for you to be here anymore.”

“Sounds like you’ve figured it all out. You know exactly who I am, Jack.” I add in a condescending round of applause.

“Flirting with the ranch hands, accepting dates with Tucker—does your husband know you’ve already moved on? I bet not.” He pauses for just a beat. “Yeah, I have a pretty good idea of who you are, Meredith. You have a husband back home worrying himself sick over you, and I don’t even think you care. I think you like the attention, and I think you like playing games with men you have no intention of loving.”

It’s one thing to stand here and have my faults and failures thrown at me, and quite another to stand here and let him fling baseless accusations at me. He’s decided to play judge, jury, and executioner. He thinks I’m a bored sociopath with a doting husband waiting for me back in California and a trail of idolizers in my wake. To hear him actually say it makes me so angry that my fingernails dig into my skin as I fist my palms even tighter. There’s fire burning up inside of me so powerful, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to douse it. It’s anger like I’ve never felt. If I were a juvenile superhero, this would be the moment I lose control of my power and blow up a city. But, here in reality, the only things I lose control of are the tears gathering in the corners of my eyes.

Ever since I married Andrew, I've been misjudged and misunderstood by the people around me: my parents, Helen, my so-called friends in California. I've dealt with their assumptions and mistruths, and I've accepted their loyalty to Andrew over me in stride. Sure, it's painful, but I've tolerated it because *I knew* the real truth.

But, to hear Jack so taken in by Andrew's manipulation from over a thousand miles away is unbearable. It's the knockout punch. There's nothing left because now I fully realize that whatever evil is inside Andrew, he's poisoned me with it. No matter where I go, I'll carry it around with me forever, ruining my hopes for a new beginning.

If I weren't so furious, I think my trembling knees would buckle. My heart is beating so wildly it scares me. I feel numb and tingly and so full of helplessness that I want to scream until my throat is sore and my voice is gone.

I realize then that Jack is looking at me with new eyes, not quite as full of rage as they were a few minutes ago. It's obvious my reaction is scaring him—I'm glad. I hope he sees how deeply his words have wounded me.

"So the story of Meredith is open and shut. Why don't we move on to you, Jack?" I dig deep to conjure up a wicked, half-crazed smile. "I used to think the rough appearance you wear was all for show. I thought deep down, you weren't really the demon people think you are. I was wrong, just like you're wrong about me. You're the meanest asshole I've ever met, which is saying something because I was married to a monster, but you? You might have him beat." I laugh acerbically. "I even find it all a little hilarious—I escape from hell just to run right into the arms of the devil."

MEREDITH

Jack's not at the farmhouse on Friday, and I don't care to ask Edith where he went—back to the underworld, most likely. I still do my job; I scrub that asshole's kitchen and I hang up his clothes and I make his lunch and I don't burn the place down. If anything, that would probably make him more comfortable, sitting amongst the flames and charred embers.

I think of all the ways I could sabotage his life, from the extreme (poisoning his mouthwash) to the mundane (brewing decaf in the morning so he gets caffeine withdrawal). I replay our argument in his office and insert different responses. A part of me wishes I'd just given him a classic *fuck off*—simple and straight to the point. Maybe the next time I see him, I'll say it.

I know I won't though. I will be the picture of docile civility. I'll greet him with a smile and a pleasant hello. I'll continue being on my best behavior because I won't do anything he could use as an excuse to fire me. No, that jerk is stuck with me until I decide I've had enough, until I find some way to move on. I have one paycheck in the bank, plus my measly advance. Even if I wanted to (which I don't!), I don't think I could even afford to get back to California at this point.

Asking either of my parents to bail me out is still an option, but I just can't bring myself to do it. As far as they know, I'm still happily married to Andrew, living the sunny beach life. I won't tell them otherwise until I have some kind of plan for the future. The only thing worse than dealing with

Jack would be facing them in my current state. I can just imagine the look of disappointment on my mom's face. She thought I hit the jackpot when I met Andrew and married young. Before I even walked down the aisle, she admitted how relieved she was that I'd never have to worry about money.

Oh well. I learned my lesson. I survived Andrew, and now I know better than to depend on a man ever again. I'm going to pave the way for my future on my own. I just need to, y'know, narrow down what that future will actually entail.

Saturday morning, I wake up early to start getting ready for the wedding. I eat dry cereal while standing at the window of the shack, trying to spot Jack inside the farmhouse. I check the upstairs office window, kitchen window, bedroom window, repeat. He's nowhere to be found. After that bout of titillating reconnaissance, I do some light yoga to calm my nerves. I don't know why I have butterflies in my stomach and a weird feeling in my chest—well, other than the fact that I'll likely have to face Jack at the wedding, but whatever. I can handle him. I have a plan, remember? Polite indifference. Sometimes, a smile says *eff you* even louder than words can.

I shower and take extra time with my hair so by the time I'm done, it's smooth and wavy. I apply my makeup carefully and slip into my dress. It's dark blue with a triangle neckline and spaghetti straps. The top fits me like a glove, and the skirt flows just a little when I move. I wish I had a nice pair of shoes to wear with it, but I did manage to snag some nude heels at the thrift store. They're pretty worn down, but hey, they were three dollars, so if they last the night, I'll call it a win.

Edith comes to check on me a few minutes before Tucker is due to arrive.

“Well don't you clean up nice. Sure you don't want to cover up though? Maybe grab a cardigan? I have a wool coat you could button up over that thing.”

“Edith, this dress isn't even that revealing.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve seen the way Tucker looks at you.”

“You’re the one who insisted on this date—you practically signed on the dotted line for me!”

She shakes her head at that, annoyed with me as if I’m missing something.

“Yes, right. Whatever. Are you sure you don’t want to ride with me and Jack? These country roads can be treacherous.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“It sprinkled earlier, so the roads are slick. Tucker probably doesn’t know how to maneuver as well as Jack does.”

“I don’t care. There’s no way I’m getting in a truck with Jack.”

“Listen, I don’t blame you. After you told me what you two fought about, I don’t really want to be in a truck with him either. We can leave him here, go by ourselves?”

Tucker pulls up and honks his horn before she can convince me to change my mind.

She sees me off, not bothering to wave to Tucker. I don’t know why she suddenly hates him considering how hard she pushed me into being his plus one.

Jack doesn’t show his face.

As we drive toward the church, Tucker and I have painful first date conversation that makes my pits sweat.

Did you have a good rest of your week?

Weather’s been nice hasn’t it?

What kind of music do you like?

I’m itchy from how much it seems like a cross-examination.

He compliments me on my dress and tells me he’s been excited to pick me up all day. He looks handsome in a dark blue suit. Everything we talk about is light and pleasant. I

should be enjoying myself. Instead, I nearly barrel roll out of the truck after he swings into a parking space.

The church is a block over from the town square. There are cars lining the street, and Tucker tells me most of the restaurants and shops around Cedar Creek are closed for the night because so many people will be at the wedding. He's not kidding. When we walk into the church, it's overflowing. There's no bride's side and groom's side of the aisle; seating is simply first come, first served. There's a good chance I'll end up scooted onto Tucker's lap during the ceremony.

It seems most everyone knows each other, and Tucker is extra popular. For every one step we take, two friends come up to greet him. He introduces me to everyone and just about all of them proclaim that they're huggers. I see a few women from yoga, and they're all excited to see me here on Tucker's arm. I get a few conspicuous thumbs up and one rather loud, *Giddit, girl!* It seems the whole town sees him as their golden boy.

"C'mon," he says after we've finished making the rounds. "My friends saved us some seats up toward the altar."

Of course it takes another ten minutes to fight through the crowd of people congregating in the aisle, but we eventually break through to the other side.

A short guy in a gray suit waves us down, and Tucker tells me that's his best friend, Jacob.

"Tucker's told me a lot about you," he says, shaking my hand enthusiastically.

My smile falters for a moment, and fortunately Tucker saves me from having to reply.

"Nothing much, I swear—just said I had a smokin' hot date to the wedding."

Aw!

Nice compliment considering my entire outfit cost me less than a cocktail back in California.

I let him step past to sit beside Jacob then I take the aisle seat and turn to scan the crowd, looking for the one person I haven't seen yet. He left after me, but the ceremony is due to start soon.

It's not hard to find him.

Tall, dark, and handsome, Jack sticks out like a sore thumb.

He's sitting in the fourth pew across the aisle all by himself, staring straight ahead, jaw locked tight. He's focusing on the altar like he's deep in thought. All the while, life continues on around him—chatter and laughter among the adults, ringing giggles from the little kids. He's separated from it all, a black cloud sitting in the middle of that church. He doesn't turn to greet anyone, and in turn, everyone gives him a wide berth. They've completely written him off. Even Edith has abandoned him, opting instead to sit with her reading club friends on the other side of the church.

I surreptitiously study him while Tucker talks to his friends. His broad shoulders are clad in a black suit jacket—the one I imagined him wearing the day I organized his closet. His dark hair is tamed and sexy, and his strong jaw is clean-shaven. He could be so popular, so beloved, if only he'd let it happen.

I'm focused as if I'm going to try to paint him from memory later when his eyes cut to me, like he's known I was there all along. A cascade of goose bumps roll down my body and I jerk my attention back to the altar. My heart pounds. My breathing is erratic. Luckily, I can just pretend to be emotional about the holy matrimony about to take place before me.

Jack's loner status doesn't go unnoticed. One of Tucker's friends mentions it.

“Think someone ought to go save the poor guy? I feel kind of bad.”

Tucker sneers. “He does it to himself with that damn attitude.”

They chuckle and agree, and I'm left sitting there biting my tongue. My gut instinct is to defend Jack, but how? By admitting that he's treated me poorly too? By confirming that he's as mean as everyone thinks he is?

"Don't you agree, Meredith?"

No.

His actions might be indefensible, but I won't pile on him with everyone else.

I shake my head. "He's fine."

"You could run for office with a poker face like that." Jacob laughs heartily. "You live on that property with him day in and day out. He's probably chewed your head off more times than you can count."

"Yeah, well, I've given it right back to him." *Now shut up.*

Tucker chuckles and wraps his arm around my shoulder, jostling me. "That's my girl."

I chance another glance at Jack and if possible, he looks even more annoyed and grumpy than he did a minute ago. His brows are furrowed and his attention is once again on the altar up ahead, unwavering. I want to crack his skull like a clam and read his thoughts. *Why are you all alone? Why'd you have to push me away?*

The group of friends around me goes right on chatting, but I'm oblivious to their conversation. My attention is on Jack right up until Dotty walks up to his pew and asks if she can sit beside him. His brows arch in surprise and he scoots over, giving her the aisle seat.

"Why are you smiling?" Tucker says, following my gaze.

I blink and think quick, pointing to some floral arrangement a few feet beyond Jack's pew. "I was just thinking those are some of the prettiest roses I've ever seen."

He laughs and rubs his thumb along my shoulder. "You like roses that much? I'll be sure to remember that."

I strain my ears to try to catch a bit of Jack and Dotty's conversation, but there are far too many people separating us. A few minutes later, I do catch his laugh though—deep and throaty—and my gut clenches tight.

Then the ceremony starts and we all stand to watch Leanna walk down the aisle. For the first time since I arrived, I have no trouble keeping my attention on someone other than Jack. She walks toward Daniel with the biggest smile on her face and happy tears slipping down her cheeks. Her gown is a whole lot of dress. She's gone for the full princess look, and it's paying off—she's breathtaking. Daniel obviously agrees, the look of pure adoration in his eyes spawning more than a few tears in the audience.

It's a heady experience to watch a marriage begin knowing my own is in the process of being dissolved. I think about that as Daniel and Leanna say their vows, staring into each other's eyes and promising to stick together through thick and thin. I made those same vows, and a part of me feels guilty that I'm breaking them. Then I remind myself that Andrew was a different person when we got married, someone I trusted to take care of me and safeguard my heart. He chose to break our contract long before I did.

Maybe I should be cynical about marriage now, but I'm not. Not every man is like Andrew. There are Daniels floating around the world, you just have to keep an eye out for them. *Oh yeah, Meredith? And what about the Jacks of the world? What do you do for them?*

I glance over to see him fidgeting in his pew. He angles his head toward the back of the church then scans the crowd, hopping from person to person before landing back on me. Our gazes click into place like two puzzle pieces. This time, neither one of us looks away. His dark eyes are all I see.

The pastor speaks as Leanna and Daniel exchange rings: “May these rings be a visible symbol of the love that unites these two young hearts. May they serve as a daily reminder of the promises you made here today.”

I know the words aren't meant for us. We aren't the ones standing up on the altar, but I can't look away, and he isn't either.

"Meredith," Tucker whispers. I jerk my gaze back to the altar like he's just caught me red-handed. "Do you need a tissue?"

"Oh, no thank you." I'm not crying. In fact, I'd forgotten about the wedding altogether.

I chance another quick peek and find that Jack is facing forward again.

While the bride and groom snap photos with their family members after the ceremony, most of us walk one block over to the reception. It's in the middle of the town square, in the park surrounding the courthouse. Twinkle lights glow overhead, and all of the tables are covered in red and white gingham tablecloths. For centerpieces, mason jars are filled with sunflowers and white roses. Whiskey barrels serve as cocktail tables, and booze flows in every direction. Tucker goes to get me a glass of wine while I hang back with his friends. They really are nice, and even though they all grew up together, they don't make me feel like an outsider. Jacob even promises he'll teach me how to two-step after finding out I've never done it before. They all latch onto that, completely shocked that I could exist for twenty-eight years without ever having stepped foot in a "honky-tonk".

"Here you are," Tucker says, rejoining the group with a Corona for himself and a glass of white wine for me. "Sauvignon blanc, hope that's okay."

The wine is delicious, so crisp and refreshing. It's been a while since I've tasted wine this good, and I make a mental note to pace myself or I'll be acting a fool out on the dance floor later with Jacob and Tucker.

Once the bride and groom make their appearance, they open two buffet lines and everyone makes quick work of piling their plates with barbecue from Blue Stone's restaurant. I'm carrying my plate back to our group's table when I catch sight of Jack.

What is it about a handsome man sitting alone that makes your heart ache, even if you know the handsome man is sitting alone for a very good reason? He's probably offended half the people in attendance and yet deep down, I know I shouldn't give up on him.

No!

I shake off the feeling.

I'm not about to march over there and save him. He made his bed, and now he can lie in it. I follow Tucker back to the table and start eating. I fork some potato salad into my gullet then nibble on some bread, but I have no appetite and just can't handle the thought of Jack sitting by himself through the entire wedding reception.

God help me.

I turn to Tucker and offer up an easy smile. "I'll be right back."

JACK

Edith talked me into coming to this wedding. They aren't really my thing. In fact, given the choice between attending a wedding and getting a root canal, I'd lean back and say, *Ahhhh*.

Daniel's a good guy though, and he's worked for me for years. I'm glad I'm here now, though I plan on leaving as soon as they cut the cake. I hate weddings; I do not hate cake. Maybe I can talk Edith into snagging me another piece on her way out. Unlike most old-timers who grumble about the lateness of the hour, she'll be here until they shut the place down—except, she won't agree to the cake idea. She's not talking to me right now. She's pissed about my fight with Meredith.

“You think she left that husband for the attention?! How thick is that skull of yours?”

Those were her exact words. Then, she called me an idiot and thumped me on the back of the head before walking right out of the room. Edith can scold with the best of them.

I wonder if I'm really that far off about Meredith. I thought I was the only person in Cedar Creek thinking clearly about this woman, but I suppose it's possible that the opposite is true. Should I not have trusted Helen's judgment of her own sister? The day she showed up, she fit the stereotype I'd been warned about to a T: gorgeous, dolled up, headstrong. She didn't seem like a wounded bird to me. Hell, she pecked at me every chance she got.

I thought I'd finally pinned her down in my office the other day. I voiced every suspicion swirling in my head and then I watched, waiting for the fury, the anger, and the lies. I knew she'd deny it all, and she did, but something felt...off. I've never witnessed hurt like I saw in her eyes. My words weren't just insulting, but deep affronts to her pride. I realized in that moment that my accusations might have been out of line.

I hate to admit a mistake, because I try so hard not to make them, but there's a possibility I'm wrong. Okay, there's more than a possibility. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have stuck around this long if she were just trying to get a rise out of her husband. I was told she was entitled and spoiled, but other than the advance, she hasn't asked for a single thing. She's worked damn hard and then some. I never told her she had to bake cookies for the ranch hands or organize my closet. She puts in more hours than anyone else besides me, and I thanked her by—how did I put it? Ah yes, I accused her of being a spoiled, heartless flirt. Boy do I have a way with words.

Christine would be howling with laughter if she could see me now, sitting alone at a wedding—well, not totally alone. I've somehow found myself at the kids table. They're supposed to be minding their manners and eating their dinner, but between you and me, the brown-haired boy—the one who reminds me of myself—is acting like a little snot, putting ice down the dress of the girl beside him. I tell him to knock it off and his eyes get wide with fear. It's pretty much the same way everyone has looked at me tonight. I wonder if the kids around Cedar Creek think of my house as the dark, scary, haunted house on the dead-end road. Apparently, I've created quite the reputation for myself.

It's why I'm here by myself.

Meredith isn't alone though. Even now, she has all of Tucker's friends circled around her, eating out of the palm of her hand. She has a way with people. She makes them laugh and puts stars in their eyes. Two days ago, I accused her of using her charms on purpose, but now I'm not sure it isn't just

her natural effect on people. *Add that to the list of things I need to apologize for.*

I push barbecue around on my plate because I can't stomach another bite.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. It's Daniel's brother walking over—a nice guy I've hung out with once or twice. I smile and pull out a chair for him to sit.

“Oh, actually I was just gonna ask if anyone was using the chair...”

The troublemaking boy laughs. It's just him and me at the table now. Seems fitting.

“They say you're mean as the devil.”

“And what do you think?”

He looks at the top of my head, in search of red horns.

“I think it's true.”

“Well, you'll find out if you keep messing with that girl who was sitting by you earlier.”

He scowls and stomps off.

“Oh yeah, and also if you don't eat your vegetables!”

I push away from the table and head for the bar. They're serving Blue Stone wine tonight. I donated a few cases as a wedding present to Daniel, plus a fat check and a week off from work. Apparently he's taking Leanna down to Cancun. I might treat myself to a trip there later this year; I could use a few days away from the ranch. It occurs to me in this moment that Christine tried for two years to get me to take a vacation and I turned her down every time. The thing is, I didn't want to go away with her. Now, the feisty brunette who hates my guts? I wouldn't mind being on a beach with her. Piña coladas, coconut bikini, tan lines...*sí señora.*

I'm thinking about the prospect when she comes up right beside me at the bar. I haven't spoken to her in two days and now here she is, within arm's reach.

I glance down at her and offer a conciliatory smile.

She doesn't respond.

"You just skipped the line," I joke, trying to coax some kind of conversation out of her.

She ignores me, orders another sauvignon blanc, and then tells the bartender to put it on my tab.

I smile wider. "It's an open bar."

She emits a little annoyed humph then spins on her heel. Before I know what I'm doing, my hand reaches out and I catch her elbow, spinning her back around to me and gently leading her away from the bar.

"Still upset with me?" I ask, leaning down to try to catch her blue eyes. Tonight they're more electric than ever, alive with disdain for me.

"Upset is putting it mildly."

Her voice is biting, but mine's not.

"Fair enough. Still, I saw you watching me during the ceremony."

"We were in a church, so I was waiting to see if you'd spontaneously burst into flame. I didn't want to miss it."

I'm smiling, even though I know I shouldn't be. I just can't help it. She's funny.

"Dance with me."

Her eyes turn into two huge saucers.

"You're kidding."

I've never been kidding less.

My hand releases her elbow and I hold it out palm up, waiting for her to accept it.

"Don't say no."

Not with everyone watching.

She looks at my hand like it's a snake.

"I *did* just buy you a drink."

“It’s an open bar,” she points out, throwing my words back at me.

“Yeah, but that’s Blue Stone wine.”

She sneers at her glass and sets it down on a nearby table.

I have no choice but to take matters into my own hands. She’s not going to accept a dance with me—and she shouldn’t—so I’ll just have to guide her toward the dance floor while she’s too stunned to turn me down.

I pull her into my arms, appreciating the slow song playing over the speakers. Her hands hang like limp noodles at her sides and I tug her closer. We aren’t hip to hip, but we’re not far off.

“Why do you want to dance with me?” she asks, her voice devoid of any real anger. “After everything you said in your office, I’m surprised you can even stand to look at me.”

“You’re supposed to put your hands on my shoulders,” I say, ignoring her question. “Or if you’re feeling fancy, you can clasp them around my neck.”

“That might give people the idea that I like you. Where should I put my hands if I want to show that *I can’t stand you?*”

Her dig garners a few suspicious stares and awkward laughs from the couples dancing around us.

“Guess I’m not alone in thinking you’re a jerk,” she continues, firing shots every chance she gets.

I smile. “Alfred doesn’t think I’m a jerk.”

She snorts. “You don’t deserve Alfred.”

Finally, resigned, she moves her hands tentatively up to my shoulders. I use the opportunity to bring us a little closer. She feels good in my arms even though every atom inside of her is trying to pull away from me. A more polite guy would respect that and move away, but I think we’ve established that I don’t have much respect to lose in her eyes.

“What about you?” I ask gently. “Do you hate me?”

She's focused on the edge of the dance floor, her profile facing me. I can still see anger building behind her blue gaze. "I do."

"Then I won't try to talk you out of it."

She nods. "There's no point. You won't convince me you're anything but an arrogant jerk."

"Glad that's settled."

My capitulation only makes her madder. She's fuming for a fight, but I'm ready to humble myself and apologize.

"No. You know what?" Her temper flares. "One second you're hot, the next you're cold. What you said in your office was unforgivable."

"I completely agree."

She jerks her gaze to me, and I hope she can see the regret buried there. For a second I think she does, but then she shakes her head and tries to move away.

"Please don't leave. Everyone's watching us."

Her expression breaks and I know I have her. Her heart's too big to walk away now. She won't embarrass me.

"This isn't fair. I don't want to dance with you, not after what you said."

"I want to apologize."

"I don't accept."

I lower my voice. "Look, Helen painted a picture of you early on that wasn't pretty, and I didn't know any better than to believe her. But, I'm starting to see that she doesn't know you any better than I did three weeks ago."

"I don't want to listen to this."

I tip my head down and whisper against her hair. "Meredith, I'm sorry. I wanted to make sure you weren't the person I thought you were. Once I saw your reaction in my office, I realized I was wrong."

“Oh yeah? Is that why it’s taken you two days to apologize?”

“It’s not an easy thing for me to do.” I smile. “Besides, you can run pretty hot too. I know what it’s like to need time to cool down.”

She’s a ball of fiery anger in my arms. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s thinking about socking me in the jaw.

The song ends and she finally steps away, dabbing at the corner of her eye. *Fuck*. I made her cry.

“I want to go home.”

“I’ll take you.”

“I’ll ask Tucker.”

“He’s been drinking.”

I saw him have a beer earlier, so technically I’m not lying.

“Then I’ll ask Edith.”

Edith, smart woman that she is, tells Meredith she’s not ready to leave yet.

“Just have Jack drive you,” Edith says, pointing to me.

“I’ll walk.”

Edith shakes her head sternly. “I won’t have my yoga teacher end up being coyote food.”

Meredith pauses, as if really contemplating the choice between a car ride with me and being picked apart by a pack of wild canines. For her, it’s a tough call.

Fortunately, she has enough sense to agree, but Tucker isn’t happy about it. When I walk over with her to say goodbye, his eyes are focused on me accusingly.

“You really want to leave? Don’t you want to stay for the cake and bouquet? I thought girls loved that stuff.”

She offers a weak smile. “Thank you, but I’m tired. I’ve had a long week and it’s finally caught up with me.”

“Are you sure you want to go with him?” His eyes slice to me. “I could take you.”

“She’s sure.”

The ride home is tense and silent. Meredith is stewing in the passenger seat, arms crossed, gaze out the window. I can’t leave things the way they are. I know she’s still upset with me and I want her to get it out, to shout at me like she wanted to back on the dance floor.

I turn off the main road, down a street that leads to the old quarry. On either side of the dirt road, cornstalks jut toward the sky. There’s nothing but night beyond my headlights. We’re alone.

I put the truck in park, cut the engine, and turn toward to Meredith.

“I get it, you feel cheated—you want a fight,” I say calmly. “Okay then, let’s fight.”

MEREDITH

We're parked on a dirt road in the middle of a cornfield, and I have no clue where we are or how to get back to the ranch from here. I should have been paying attention while we were driving, but I was too busy stewing. It's pitch black outside. If I got out and tried to walk, I'd end up marching blindly into the comically large open mouth of a mountain lion.

"You want a fight. Okay then, let's fight."

That's what he says to me.

I turn to him just as he kills the engine and turns to face me on the bucket seat.

"I don't want to fight."

I don't have the energy. I'm so tired, so defeated. I can't keep putting on a brave face for the world. I've used up all my confidence, burned through all my false bravado. I almost cried on the dance floor, and I'm dangerously close to actually doing so now. Once I start, I don't think I'll be able to stem the flow of tears.

"How about we talk then?"

I shake my head and turn to the cornfield.

"Take me home please."

We sit there for a few more minutes, but then he sighs and restarts the truck, turning back for the main road.

When we pull up to the farmhouse, I jump out before he's even put the truck in park and bee-line straight for the shack. I don't thank him for the ride, and I definitely don't stick around to listen to any more of his apologies. I'm so sick of people, of the back and forth, of the emotional rollercoaster. Maybe I should go live on a private island somewhere, just me and a bunch of wild swimming pigs. That sounds fucking great.

I change out of my dress and kick off my heels. I tug on one of Jack's t-shirts—the one I didn't return with all the others a few days back—and then stare at my bed. It's still early. I'm too wired to go to sleep. I want a stiff drink—a big one, something bigger than a shot but smaller than a swimming pool. I step toward my window and check the farmhouse. Jack's bedroom light is on, but it's dark downstairs. I could probably make it to the liquor cabinet and back without him even knowing.

I know from cleaning it that it's well stocked. I hesitate, really not into the idea of having another confrontation with him, but my need for alcohol wins out. I'm special agent Tom Cruise weaving in and out of red lasers as I tiptoe across the lawn and tug open the back door. Alfred is there, tail wagging, excited by my impromptu visit.

“Shhhh,” I hiss, petting him behind his ear before he starts barking or something. “Go away—can't you sense that I'm fighting with your human? Stop hitting the wall with your tail! You're making too much noise.”

I pause and listen for Jack, hear footsteps upstairs, and know I'm in the clear. I dash toward the liquor cabinet, grab whatever my hand lands on first, and then sprint back outside.

Alfred follows after me, acting as my accomplice, and together, we hightail it back to the shack. Once we're inside, I slam the door closed and press my back against it. Mission: Possible, apparently.

I glance down at my bounty. I managed to nab a bottle of Jack Daniels. Fitting. I pour myself a bit and barf a little in my mouth when I take my first sip.

“It’s so bad,” I tell Alfred, trying to keep the rest of it down.

He looks at me with sad, questioning eyes as if to say, *Hmm, and I thought you weren’t a little bitch.*

I nod. “You’re right. Here goes nothing.”

I drink my glass in one long swallow then sit down on the floor and pet Alfred.

I continue like this for a while, so long that I lose track of time and space and the number of times I’ve forced myself to swallow more disgusting brown liquor.

What I do know is alcohol is great and Alfred is soooooo soft. My fingers feel tingly. I forget I have any problems. I know nothing beyond this tiny shack and this adorable golden retriever licking my toes. I’m lying on the rug, spread out like a snow angel.

“I’m considering moving to Mexico,” I tell Alfred. “I get that most people only flee to Mexico if they’ve committed a crime, but what’s so wrong with good ol’ fashioned fleeing? Do I gotta robbabank or something to JUSTIFY running away from my problems?”

He splays out beside me.

“Of course, you can come with me if you want. I’ll just have to reteach you your commands in Spanish so we don’t stand out. Okey, hello is *hola*. Sit is *siéntate*. Stay is...I dunno, let’s go with...*estée lauder*.”

A fist pounds on the shack’s door and makes me scream out in fright.

“Relax,” Jack says from outside. “It’s me. The door was ajar back at the farmhouse, so I’m just making sure Alfred didn’t run off. Is he in there with you?”

“Uhh...” I look over at the dog in question. He licks my foot. “No! But I have a very strong feeling he’s fine!”

“He was in the house when I got home, but now I can’t find him.”

Apparently excited to hear his owner's voice, Alfred hops to his feet and pads over to the door, scratching it with his paw.

"Alfred?" Jack asks, apparently hearing said scratching.

I contemplate telling him it's me, etching hatch marks into the wall like a prisoner counting my days.

Alfred whines.

I cover my eyes with my arm. "Ugh, fine. He's in here."

The door opens and owner and dog are reunited once again. *Whoop dee doo*. I don't have the energy to move off the ground...or open my eyes.

"Meredith?"

"S'wat they call me."

"Are you drunk?"

"What's with the twenty questions?"

"Did you polish off that entire bottle of Jack?"

Depends on how much was in it when I started—I can't remember.

"Who's can say, really, in this day and age?"

"Why are you on the floor?"

"Be-*cause* it's comfortable and my twin bed isn't big enough for me *and* Alfred."

He steps into the shack and toes the glass of liquor away from my hand.

I still have my arm thrown over my eyes, but I hear what he's doing. "Hey, I was going to drink that."

"I think you've had enough."

"There you go again, with the *I thinks*. I think *this* about Meredith, I think *that* about Meredith. Well guess what? I don't need Jack to tell me when I've had too much...JACK! Pffffff. Now please leave."

"Not until I'm sure you won't get sick. I can't remember how much liquor was left in that bottle."

“Okay, but can you close that door? You’re letting all the freezy-freezy air out.”

He obliges then I hear him take off his shoes and sit down on my bed. Meanwhile, I’m lying in the shape of a chalk outline from a homicide, legs splayed on the floor.

“I didn’t realize you were a drinker,” he says gently.

“I’m not. I hated every sip. Alfred peer pressured me.”

“Well watch out around him, he’s also a big fan of tattoos.”

“Ha ha, funny man. Now, please be quiet. I was in the middle of wallowing and I’m not finished. You can stay, but you have to stop asking me questions.”

The bed creaks, and maybe he’s getting comfortable where I sleep. Maybe he’s stinking up my blankets with his sexy scent. I’ll have to run the linen through the wash twice tomorrow morning, or I could just leave his scent there... maybe that wouldn’t be so bad. I push the rogue thought aside and try to get back to what I was thinking about before he so rudely interrupted me. Oh, right, Mexico. *Mexico*...I can’t remember why I was thinking about Mexico. I groan, fling my arm away, and sit up, eyes blinking open as I try to find my balance.

Jack’s sitting on the bed, just as I imagined, except he’s not in his suit anymore. Like me, he changed when we got home. Sweatpants and a t-shirt—how adorable of him.

“Have you been here long enough to confirm I’m not going to get sick?”

The very edge of his sexy mouth tips up like the smirking emoji. “No.”

I glance away. “Right.”

“Why were you drinking?”

“You.”

I sigh and lie back on the rug. My head is spinning.

“Are you okay?”

I hold up both thumbs. “Peachy.”

“Why did I drive you to drink?”

“Because you hurt my feelings on Thursday.”

“I’m sorry for that, Meredith.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before. I know the routine. It goes like this: make me fall for you, be mean to me, say you’re sorry, and then repeat. It’s the same thing Andrew used to do.”

“He was mean to you?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“How was he mean to you?”

There’s a long silence as I stare up at the ceiling.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I enunciate the words like they each make up their own sentence.

“How about we trade off?” he goads. “A secret for a secret?”

“I know all your secrets.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Edith told me about your parents’ accident. She told me how you changed. It’s why I know you’re not as mean as you pretend to be.”

“You told me on Thursday I’m the meanest person you’ve ever met.”

“It might still be the truth, but I just wanted to make you feel bad for hurting me.”

“See? You just went first. That’s a secret.”

That wasn’t so bad, I guess.

“Tell me one of yours.”

With my gaze on the ceiling, it’s like I’m lounging on a therapist’s couch. It almost feels like he’s not really there, like we aren’t really talking at all.

“All right. I actually like your cooking,” he admits.

I smile then wipe it away quickly before he sees it. “That doesn’t count. Everyone likes my cooking. I want a real one.”

“Okay fine. You want to go deep?” He thinks for a second, and then he sighs. “The way I figure, there’s only a handful of people who really give a shit about you in this life. I’m not talking about friends you see at Super Bowl parties. I’m talking about people who would take a bullet for you. There just aren’t that many, for a lot of people.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I used to have three people like that, and the day my parents died, I lost two of them. Now it’s just me and Edith.”

I turn my head so my gaze catches his. He’s staring down at me from his perch on the bed. I think he’s been watching me this whole time, studying me with indecipherable emotion in his eyes. It’s that gaze that makes the truth tumble out of my mouth.

“You want to know something even sadder?” I swallow and look away, back to the safety of the ceiling. “I don’t think I have anyone.”

“What about your parents? Helen?”

“Sure, on paper, they’re my family, but I’m not close with them. I hardly even know them anymore.”

When he speaks again, there’s remorse in his voice. It’s so heavy and sad it breaks my heart.

“In my office, when I said you didn’t have any family or friends here—”

“Yeah, that hit the mark.”

“I’m sorry.”

I wipe away the tear slipping down my cheek and shake my head.

“This game fucking sucks.”

“It’s my turn.”

“Fine. Make it something juicy.”

“I was jealous you went to the wedding with Tucker.”

That *is* juicy.

“How jealous?”

When he doesn’t answer, I turn to find he’s still studying me, except now his gaze is on his t-shirt, my pajama top of choice. I wonder if he’s annoyed I didn’t give it back with all the others.

I sit up and turn to face him, sitting cross-legged on the rug.

“If it helps, every single woman at the wedding was infatuated with you, except maybe Leanna. You might have been putting out some major *fuck off* vibes, but had you smiled at any one of them, you would have had her falling in love with you on the spot.”

He tilts his head to the side. “I smiled at you and as I recall, you nearly ditched me on the dance floor.”

“Those were different circumstances.”

“Right.” He frowns, and it might be the alcohol, but I swear he’s looking at me with desire. Yeah, he definitely is—it’s the same look Alfred gives his food bowl.

“My turn?” I say quickly, anxious to break up the tension starting to brew in this tiny shack. “Okay here’s mine: I’m really bummed I didn’t get to eat a piece of wedding cake. I really wanted a corner piece.”

He smiles. “Cute. Now take your turn.”

“That *was* my turn.”

“I just told you I feel like I’m alone in this world.”

“And I confessed I have an addiction to icing.”

Seems equally as important to me.

“Fine. Okay.” I sweep my hands through the air and turn away, eyes narrowed on my bathroom mirror. He wants honesty? He’s about to get it. “I think you’re handsome—h-o-t.”

“How handsome?”

I scold him with my stare, and he doesn't even have the decency to hide his arrogance.

Enough. I've had enough. I push to stand and yank the door open.

“How about we change this into a game of truth or dare?” I quip. “I dare you to leave this shack right now.”

“That's a terrible dare.”

“Fine, truth: did you mean all that stuff you said in your office? Do you really think so little of me?”

“Meredith, I was wrong. I was angry, and jealous, and worried that you were too good to be true. I'm sorry.”

I want to delve into every single word he just said, but I'm too drunk. I've already forgotten half of them.

I nod. “Okay, fine. Let's just forget about it.”

“How was Andrew mean to you?”

I pinch my eyes closed. I knew he'd bring that back up, knew he wouldn't be able to leave well enough alone. I've learned the hard way that it's better to keep my lips zipped about my marriage. The reasons are stacked one on top of another at this point: I'm embarrassed that I put myself in that situation in the first place. I'm ashamed I stayed as long as I did. I'm hesitant to call it abuse and to open up about the things Andrew used to say, because then I'd actually have to acknowledge that I was a victim. I don't like that word. I don't want to have to wear it like an albatross around my neck. I just want to move on.

Those are all good reasons, but there's still one more: I *have* tried to open up about Andrew in the past, and it hasn't gone well.

Honestly, why do I care if Jack knows the truth about my marriage? Up until a few days ago, he wielded incorrect assumptions about me and my life as hurtful weapons. Maybe he's realized the error of his ways now, but I'm still annoyed. I want to quote Clark Gable and say, *Frankly, my dear, I don't*

give a damn. I don't give a damn what he thinks of me or my choices.

Not anymore.

"Meredith."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"How was he mean to you?"

"I said I don't want to talk about it!"

I think I'm doing a good job of voicing my resistance to this topic, but he isn't so easily swayed.

"I'd like to know what he did to you."

Jesus Christ! He's not going to drop it.

I slam the door closed again and throw my hands up in defeat. "It was the way he spoke to me. It was the things he said to me...the things he called me."

There, he has his answer.

"Like what?"

"Does it matter?" I move to straighten a towel hanging near the shower. Then I go check on Alfred.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but you should talk to someone about it."

"I have talked to someone," I grumble, "and it didn't go over well."

"Why didn't it go well?"

"Because it's hard to explain! It makes no sense to other people. If I was living with an abusive monster, why didn't I just leave? He wasn't holding me captive, wasn't threatening to kill me if I left. He was such a manipulative asshole, it took me years to realize what he was, what I'd become! It makes no sense. He's this outgoing, happy person. To the world, Andrew Wilchester is perfect. No one wants to believe he has another side to him—just ask Helen."

"You told her about the abuse?"

The way he says the word makes my skin crawl. I don't like that label. I want to lay no claim to it.

"I tried."

"And she didn't want to hear it?"

He sounds angry, but I'm careful with my next words. Helen helped me get this job; I don't want to throw her under the bus.

"She wasn't trying to hurt me. We aren't close—that's my fault. I kept the truth from her for too long, and now it's too late. To her, it's all so confusing. She wants me to reconcile with him."

"That's what she told me would happen." His voice is steady and calm. I'm envious of his sobriety. "She said you'd go back to California once you got a dose of reality."

I laugh, and I'm embarrassed to find it's not a laugh at all but a broken sob.

It hurts knowing she said those things about me to someone else. It's one thing to suspect it, another to hear it confirmed. I heave in a deep breath and try to get it together. This is embarrassing. I'm drunk.

"I swear I'm not weak. I didn't stay because I was scared of being on my own." I'm pacing now, worked up from all the truth spilling out of me. "It was just really confusing—the cycles he put me through. It was like being on the end of a line. He'd toss me out and reel me back in. Human beings gravitate toward cycles, routines, and that became ours."

"I'm sorry."

"My marriage to him is part of the reason I feel so isolated now. I put distance between myself and the people around me because I was afraid people would find out I was living this... lie."

He's off the bed now, bending to where I'm sitting on the rug. I don't remember sitting down, but he's here now, right in front of me, catching my tears and cradling my head.

"It's not your fault Helen didn't believe you."

“Please don’t be angry at her. She’s not to blame in all this. I should have left earlier—”

His eyes flare with fury. “Stop talking like that. You’re the victim, not Helen, and not Andrew. You left when you could, and that’s all that matters.”

He’s cradling my face and I’m weeping like I’ve never wept in my life. I’m losing water weight by the gallon, shriveling up like a raisin. I will be dehydrated and dead by the end of this sob session.

“I just want to move on.”

“So do it.”

“I thought I *was*,” I cry, angry now. “But Andrew still followed me here! I’m still married to the man for Christ’s sake! That’s why I have to go to Mexico—*MEXICO!*” I snap my fingers. “*That’s* why I was thinking about Mexico earlier!”

“If possible, I think you’re getting more drunk. Here, blow.”

I don’t realize I was creating snot bubbles until he forces a tissue under my nose. That’s...fun. I’ve successfully solidified my role in his life as Crazy Housekeeper To Keep At Arm’s Length. I wonder if I can use my tenuous emotional state to finagle some benefits like health insurance or paid time off. There has to be a bright side to having a mental breakdown in front of your boss.

“I *am* more drunk.” I try again, losing my fragile grasp on language. “Durrunk.”

“Do you feel sick?”

“Just weepy and sleepy.” I laugh at my rhyme. “If you move your hands away from my cheeks, I think I’ll drop right to the floor face first. I’m so tired.”

“I’m going to put you to bed.”

He hooks his hands under my arms and hoists me off the ground. Cold air blasts my bare legs. I wrap them around his waist to warm them up. God, he’s so warm...so warm and tall and strong. I want him to set me down and pick me up again.

It turns me on that he can just pluck me up off the ground like that. It fulfills some vestigial cavewoman need I didn't even know I had.

He hoists me higher and I'm reminded that I'm still wrapped around him like an anaconda. *Damn*. This is hot, but it's not right. When I imagined having sex with him on this twin bed, I was fully sober and on top, riding him like...well, a cowgirl.

"I didn't think this was how tonight would end," I whisper against his cheek. "I think you're really handsome, like so so so bangin' sexy, don't get me wrong, but I'm pretty drunk and sleepy."

I'm pawing at his chest. I'm running my hands along his strong jaw, feeling it for the first time. It's magnificent. He is magnificent.

"Meredith, I said I'm *putting* you to bed, not *taking* you to bed."

"Oh, I see, Mr. Verb Man, got different verbs for all occasions."

He sets me down on the bed and tugs my blankets aside so I can slip my legs underneath.

I wait for him to pat my head and tell me to go to sleep like a good little girl.

Instead, he tugs the covers up and sits down beside me.

His brown eyes are pools of sympathy. I wonder if I was imagining the desire I saw in them earlier.

"How ya feelin', champ?"

He brushes his hand across my forehead, pushing my hair back.

"Like I'd keel over if I wasn't already lying down."

"I'll stay with you until you fall asleep."

"That reminds me—can Alfred stay with me tonight?"

"He's already asleep at the foot of your bed."

“Whew.”

“Go to sleep.”

I close my eyes.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I really wanted to hate you after the things you said on Thursday, but I couldn’t. When you were at the wedding all by yourself, I felt so bad. I only came up to the bar because I wanted to talk to you, but I didn’t know how. I was so...angry. Maybe I should still be angry, but I’m not.”

“Well if you wake up tomorrow and realize you’re still mad at me, that’s okay. I know this is probably just the alcohol talking.”

“Thanks. Yeah...maybe I’ll be double pissed in the morning.”

“Maybe.”

“Could you tuck the blanket around me now?”

He laughs. “Like you’re a kid?”

“Yes, exactly. It’s been a really long time since someone put me to bed like this.”

He chuckles, and I keep my eyes closed as he leans over and tucks, tucks, tucks around my entire body. I’m in a little cocoon of warmth when he’s finished. I think he’s about to go, but I’m not ready for him to leave.

I keep my eyes closed, but I’m smiling as I ask, “Wait, are we still playing that game? Because I have one more thing I want to know.”

“You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“I’ll go to sleep as soon as you answer,” I promise.

“Okay, shoot.”

“That day we were swimming, did you see anything you weren’t supposed to? Like underneath my bra?”

I can hear his smile when he asks, “You mean, was your bra completely see-through? Yes.”

“Right. That’s what I thought. If you could go now, I’m going to turn over and suffocate myself with my pillow.”

He laughs, kisses my forehead, and then I must really be drunk because five seconds later, I’m dead to the world, completely conked out.

When I wake up, Jack and Alfred are sleeping, splayed out on the rug together.

They never left.

MEREDITH

Jack slept on the floor in the shack all night. He was supposed to leave once I went to sleep, but he stayed. He's still there, lying on his side, using one of my blankets as a makeshift pillow. His t-shirt is scrunched so I can see a little bit of his abs and the top of his boxer briefs. If I had a camera, I'd snap two photos. The first I would send to Calvin Klein so he could be their new model. The second I would put in a maximum-security safety deposit box.

I roll over and poke him with my finger.

“Are you awake?”

He groans and keeps his eyes shut.

Alfred—who's excited to see that I'm up and moving—trots over and licks my hand then turns and starts lapping at Jack's face.

“Get,” Jack says, feigning a stern voice. “Get back.”

He tries to fend him off, but it's no use. He's not getting back to sleep now that Alfred and I are both awake.

He pushes to sit up and holds the dog at arm's length so he can't get to his face. Then he rubs sleep from his eyes and tugs a hand through his hair. I sit very, very still, as if I'm dressed in camouflage, observing the habits of a wild animal in its habitat. The sight of Jack there on the ground is a little funny and a whole lot sexy. His hair is askew from his blanket-pillow. His chin has a light dusting of black stubble, and his cheek sports a red imprint from sleeping on it. I want to slink

off the bed and tackle him, pin him to the ground, and rub my cheek against that stubble.

“Shit, my back hurts,” he groans.

I smile. “Shack-sweet-shack.”

He twists right and left, trying to wring out his spine.

“You were supposed to leave after I fell asleep,” I point out.

At least that’s what I remember, but there are clearly gaps in my memory because the most recent browser tab on my phone shows a search for burro rides in Mexico.

He nods and pushes to stand. “That was the plan, but then I kept worrying you’d drown in your own puke or something. Freaked me out.”

My cheeks turn a nice rosy shade. “It was stupid of me to drink that much.”

He turns to me with one eye winked as if he’s trying to keep the early morning light from blinding him. “Everyone needs to get out of their head once in a while.”

I nod, appreciating that he doesn’t feel the need to scold me for my poor choices.

I push the blankets aside and kick my legs over the side of the bed. “I really should get going, eat breakfast or something. Edith has me teaching yoga to half the town this afternoon, and I think I’m still a little drunk.”

I stand and stretch my hands overhead. My head decides to take the opportunity to remind me that I basically poisoned myself last night and I’m now going to pay the price. I press a hand to my forehead and wince.

“Ahhhh...also, I should probably drink some water.” He laughs and I drop my hand. “What?”

He turns away, but he’s unsuccessful in wiping the smile from his face. “Your shirt’s tucked into your tights-whities.”

I glance down and sure enough, he’s not kidding.

Well, that's a great way to start my morning.

“Oh god,” I groan, yanking on the t-shirt until it's back to hanging on me like a dress.

“It looked kind of stylish,” he assures me.

I go to grab some sleeping shorts, slightly embarrassed that I didn't put them on to sleep. How many times did I flash him my ass during the night? *Oh right—the limit does not exist.*

“I'll make you pancakes if you promise to erase that image from your memory.”

He slips his shoes on and heads for the door. “I like them topped with banana slices.”

“Obviously. I'm not a pancake amateur.”

We walk together to the farmhouse, Alfred darting in between our legs.

Edith is sitting at the kitchen table sipping some coffee when we walk in. She's reading the Sunday paper and when she hears us enter, she folds down one corner and eyes us over the top of it.

“Mornin', you two. Jack, I didn't know you were doing wake-up calls nowadays.”

Jack clears his throat and heads for the coffee pot. I head for the pantry to grab pancake supplies.

“Long night?”

“No,” I say quickly, voice shrill and obvious.

“When did you get back from the wedding, Edith?” Jack asks, changing the subject.

“Oh, not too late. Must have been before you 'cause I saw your room was empty.”

Jack holds a cup of coffee out to me and I greedily accept it, hoping the caffeine will dull my headache. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, I went to bed pretty late,” he admits smoothly.

“What about you, Meredith? Did *you* go to bed pretty late too?”

“Edith,” Jack warns.

“Just trying to make polite conversation, sheesh.” She shakes out her paper and pretends to get back to reading.

“Do you want any pancakes, Edith?”

“No thank you. I already ate. Unlike you two, I’ve been awake for a few hours.”

Jack sighs and I finally cave. “Edith, we aren’t keeping secrets. There’s nothing to tell. I got drunk like an idiot, and Jack had to make sure I didn’t die in my sleep.”

She seems disappointed. “That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Well dammit, that’s boring.” Her chair screeches away from the table then she grabs her coffee and her paper. “And it means I owe Dotty and Deedee twenty bucks a piece.”

Jack and I exchange an amused glance and something sparks between us—a feeling that could easily overwhelm me if I let it. I shift my attention to the pancakes and fill them up with bananas and blueberries. Jack gets me an aspirin and some water and I’m so grateful, I let him pick his pancakes from the first batch. He takes the big ones, which is fine because everyone knows the little ones are tastier, with a better crust-to-fluff ratio. We sit at the table across from one another with Alfred lazing at our feet, hoping to catch an errant crumb.

My attention is pinned on the window in front of me while Jack’s is on the kitchen wall—we’re suddenly playing a game of chicken. We don’t talk for long minutes as we cut into our pancakes, fork bites into our mouth, and chew. Last night, we saw hidden sides of one another, the deep, secret parts you’re supposed to expose after like three years of dating, when you already share a lease, and a couch, and possibly an animal, when you aren’t afraid to make bodily noises in front of each other. We did it all wrong. We cut through the bullshit layers of polite conversation and small talk. I told him the truth about Andrew. We bonded over the debilitating fear of being alone, just a casual Saturday night between attractive, single employer and attractive, “it’s complicated” employee.

How unsettling. I really thought he was the devil. Now, I know it's a disguise. Beneath all that arrogance and good hair, he's funny and thoughtful and kind. He slept on my rug because he didn't want me to aspirate my vomit—not exactly the MO of a fallen angel and leader of the damned.

I know the truth about him now, and it's impossible to know how I'm supposed to navigate from here. Do I try to wipe my memory completely clean of last night? Do I pretend he was just being polite? Nothing more, nothing less? I don't think it's possible. I'd have to hit myself in the head with a rock or something.

Maybe instead, I could bring it up casually and laugh it off. *Ha ha, I have a crippling fear that Andrew has broken me in a way that can't be fixed. LOLOL, FUNNY RIGHT?!*

Obviously neither of those choices will work.

I sigh, and then, like fools, we try to talk at the exact same time.

“About last night—”

“I was wondering—”

I laugh and he smiles, waving for me to go first.

“I was just going to say, thanks for last night. You didn't need to be that nice. I think I remember 90% of what happened, but it's that 10% that really scares me. I'm worried I might've flashed you, or joined a Mexican cartel or something.”

“You might've done both, but I hear those guys have a 24-hour try-it-before-you-buy-it policy.”

I drop my head into my hand and pinch my eyes closed. “It was pretty bad, huh?”

“Pretty bad? No. You were honest with me, and I'm glad. Also, yes, you flashed your underwear a few times, but I was raised a gentleman and I didn't look.”

I glance up at him and arch a brow.

The right side of his mouth perks up just a little. “Well, when I could help it.”

“What is it with me?! First the swimming debacle and now this. I swear I’m not usually such a weirdo around my friends.”

“Friends, huh?”

I can feel heat spread across my neck. Funny how *friends* feels intimate after being enemies.

“I mean, we are, right? Friends?”

“I guess so.”

He doesn’t seem all that enthusiastic. *GIVE HIM AN OUT BEFORE THINGS GET WEIRD.*

“But don’t worry, I have a 24-hour try-it-before-you-buy-it policy too.”

“Nice.” He laughs.

“Because maybe you want friends who can hold their alcohol better than I can? Or better yet, friends who don’t get snot all over you? Or most of all, friends who don’t hysterically cry about their disastrous marriages?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “You don’t have to feel weird about last night. I don’t.”

“Even though you had to blow my nose?”

“Even then.”

Interesting.

“What were you going to say earlier when I cut you off?” I ask.

He swallows and turns back to his half-eaten plate of pancakes. “Well, I was just wondering if maybe you’d woken up still upset about our fight? Remember, I told you I’d give you an out. You were drunk.”

“Not that drunk.”

He gives me a teasing smile. “Pretty drunk.”

After that, we go back to eating in content silence. I have to hurry and finish so I can clean up and get ready for yoga. People will be arriving soon, and I still need to change. I could really use a shower, but I'll save that for after since I'm about to get sweaty anyway.

I finish my last bite then push to stand.

Jack catches my hand to stop me. "Meredith?"

His voice is barely louder than a whisper.

I swallow and stare down at my hand tucked in his. I bet he can feel my wild pulse—his thumb is pressed right over my artery. I stay focused there as he continues.

"Do you remember what we talked about last night? How you told me you don't have anyone to care for you? To put your needs above theirs?"

My throat constricts. I was hoping that part of the conversation was an alcohol-induced delusion. *If that was real, did I also tell him I think he's handsome? Did I spell out the word h-o-t?!*

"Um..." I stall, waiting to see if a meteor will strike and save me from having to admit I said something so sad and depressing. The earth keeps spinning, so I have no choice but to mumble, "Uh-huh." I clear my throat and wear a mask of feigned coolness. "I mean, yes."

He lets go of my hand and I step back.

His brows are furrowed, his voice steadfast and thoughtful when he says, "I know you haven't known us long, but if you want, Edith and I could be your people—that is, if you decide not to join the cartel."

My chest cracks right down the middle.

Emotion squeezes my throat and makes it impossible to speak.

He pushes away from the table and carries our plates to the sink. "Think about it."

He doesn't need to angle himself that way to wash a dish. He doesn't need to keep his attention on the sink. He could have pressed me for an answer, but he didn't. He's letting me stand here with tears filling my eyes and overwhelming gratitude bubbling up inside of me, and he's giving me privacy.

I'm pushing out the back door and stumbling out into the backyard before I can even process that I'm moving.

That...that is so not what I was expecting from him this morning.

A pat on the shoulder and a sad, pitying smile—*maybe*. A one-way ticket away from this ranch—much more likely. Instead, he just looked me in the eye and told me I'm his brand of crazy, that my flaws and failures don't scare him, that he believes me about why I left my marriage.

I'm nearly back to the shack when I turn on my heel and run right back to the kitchen. He's still there, washing dishes when I whip the door open and lean inside.

“Okay! But I want Alfred too!”

IN THE DAYS following the wedding, Jack and I solidify what can only be described as a friendship. We smile at each other a lot. We joke and tease and I picture him in his underwear. *Friend stuff*.

Edith and Jack don't have an official adoption ceremony for me, but I'm theirs all the same. I have a standing invitation for dinner every night. Most of the time Jack grills chicken or steak and I whip up a side dish or two. Edith provides two things: sweet tea and local gossip.

If someone were going to make a movie about my life, this chunk of it would be contained in montage-style scenes backed by an upbeat song from a band with banjos. I'd be laughing and cleaning one second then running in gleeful slow motion through the lawn sprinkler with Alfred the next.

It's great.

Everything is great.

There's just one tiny, microscopic problem: I have developed what I can only describe as the world's biggest crush on Jack.

To anyone watching the montage play out, it's painfully obvious. There are quick cut scenes where I watch him and the second he turns my way, I jerk my gaze in another direction so fast my neck breaks. The montage then gets a quick dose of comedic relief as I visit a chiropractor to fix my new neck problem.

But it doesn't end there. I spend extra time doing my hair and makeup in the mornings, as if he will notice that I look prettier than usual as I empty his trashcans. I make his favorite foods and bring him coffee in the afternoon just to have an excuse to see him. It's pathetic. *I'm* pathetic. All the viewers shift uncomfortably in their seats.

In the early weeks of working at Blue Stone, I was so consumed with the turmoil surrounding us that my attraction for him wasn't at the forefront of my mind. I was discovering the art of survival and learning how to share the shack with woodland critters. I was basically Harry Potter in a parallel universe where he never gets a Hogwarts letter, instead living in the spidery cupboard under the stairs all the way through his late twenties, cursing the mean Muggles he lives with. Now that things have settled down, however, it feels as if someone has tweaked the connection between us like a TV antennae. All the static and background noise are gone—he's coming in loud and clear. That handsome face of his is showing in full HD glory, and there's no going back now.

I like him. I really like him. However, I'm smart enough to sit on my crush, to push and shove and poke it so that maybe, just maybe it'll go away. Why? Because nothing good will come from wanting my boss, the man currently providing me with a safe haven and who also sort of happens to be my only friend (besides you Alfred! You'll always be my numero uno).

To his credit, he is nothing but respectful and kind. I never get the sense that he's harboring feelings for me like I am for

him—and believe me, I look for the signs. There are the obvious things men do when they're interested in a woman: spending time with her, laughing at her jokes—but he *has* to spend time with me because I'm always around, and he's probably laughing at me rather than with me. Beyond that, there are more subtle ways to tell if a guy is interested, like if he finds excuses to touch you (he doesn't) or if you catch him checking you out (I don't) or if he creates situations to get some alone time with you (I wouldn't know—Edith is always around).

My infatuation is screwing with my head. The fact that all day I actively try to push Jack out of my thoughts means at night, my desire comes back stronger and more demanding than ever. Night after night, my sleeping hours are filled with raunchy sex-filled dreams. I wake up with my hands on different body parts (boob, thigh, stomach, halfway down my Fruit of the Looms), or I wake up sweating and so turned on I have no choice but to finish what my incorrigible subconscious has started.

It's a real problem. Night after night of bad sleep means I have less energy to stand up to my crush on him come morning. I'm jittery and self-conscious and worried my true feelings are becoming too obvious to ignore. All these harbored fantasies have to be manifesting somehow. I bet I'm leaching pheromones like a farm animal in heat.

Without a doubt, Jack knows I have a crush on him. There's no way he doesn't know. I'm just not sure what he's going to do about it.

JACK

Meredith has been here for almost seven weeks now, and I'm officially stuck between a rock and hard place. It's a dingy hellhole I like to call *the friend zone*. I can't act on the feelings I'm developing for her. She opened up to me about her marriage, I'm newly single, she's only been single for a month and a half, and technically, that's not even true considering she's still legally married. I know she's in a fragile place. She's probably glad to be free of her crazy husband and on her own; the last thing she wants is another guy sniffing around. I need to keep my distance and help her get back on her own two feet, at least that's what I tell myself while I stand under the shower stream and wrap my hand around my dick.

What? I'm trying to be a gentleman, not a saint.

I close my eyes and prop my hand against the wall, remembering how hot Meredith looked the other day while she was bathing Alfred in the backyard. She was wetter than he was, her t-shirt clinging to her curves. It was spring break in South Beach. She kept saying things like, "Okay, big guy, you're gonna get it!" and "Stay still, I'm about to finish! I just need to get your face." It was pornographic, and if any of the ranch hands had seen it, I'd have needed to put them down like a rabid dog.

"Jack!" Her voice sounds from the other side of the bathroom door. "You in there?"

I jerk my eyes open, tilt my head back, and stare up at the ceiling. *Wow, is my imagination this good?*

“Jack?” Meredith calls again, all sweet and naive. Her voice is honey, and my dick hardens even more.

I grit my teeth. “Yup. What’s up?”

“I just realized you don’t have any clean towels! I bleached them earlier and forgot to put one in here before your shower.”

“Just leave one by the door!” *Or better yet, turn around and walk about a thousand yards the other way.* I don’t need a towel—I’ll just shake myself dry like Alfred.

“You sure?” she asks. “I can close my eyes. No big deal!”

No big deal? NO BIG DEAL? If she comes into this bathroom to bring me a towel, there’s a 100% chance I will fling open this shower door and drag her in here with me. I’ll haul her up against the tiled wall and cover her body with mine and roll my hips against her ass and give her the employee review I so badly want to.

“I just know I hate getting out of the shower without a towel nearby,” she continues.

Oh good, now I’m thinking about her in the shower with me...suds running down her stomach, slipping down between her legs. I think the majority of the blood in my brain has left, headed south for greener pastures.

“Meredith, just leave the towel outside, okay?”

My voice is gruff and she calls me on it.

“Sheesh okay, *sor-ry*. I didn’t know I was interrupting some private ‘ranch *hand*’ time.”

“*What?* I’m just showering, nothing else.”

“Uh-huh. The lady doth protest too much.”

After she leaves, I’m left there, staring down at my hand, frozen. I can’t finish, not because I’m not horny as hell, but because I feel like a disgusting perv lusting after Meredith like that, not to mention she obviously guessed what I was doing. I

cut the water and pad out to get the towel she left on the other side of the bathroom door.

She's incapable of meeting my eyes when I walk down into the kitchen a few minutes later.

"Feeling better?" she asks with a high-pitched, helpless voice.

"From my shower?" I ask, fooling no one.

She clears her throat a half-dozen times. It's like she's got a whole pond's worth of frogs stuck in there.

I try to catch her eye, but she looks everywhere but me—ceiling, wall, cutting board.

I sigh. "I wasn't masturbating."

"I know that," she answers quickly, pale eyes going wide. "Don't you think I know that? Ha, obviously."

"But just to be clear, even if I was, it's perfectly normal," I point out, walking over to pluck a slice of the apple she's chopping. Between you and me, I don't really want the apple. I want to get a closer look at that pink flush on her cheeks.

"Of course it's normal," she says defensively. "Everyone does it."

"Everyone?" I taunt.

"*Jack.*"

"What?" I tease. "Now we're even. We both know what the other is doing when they're in the shower."

"I don't do it in the shower," she mumbles, almost as if she doesn't realize she's saying the words out loud.

"Interesting."

She catches herself and shakes her head, chopping at double speed now. She's entered some kind of apple-chopping competition with herself.

"This is inappropriate."

Chop, chop, chop. She's about to lose a finger.

“You’re the one who tried to come into the bathroom while I was showering.”

“To give you a towel!”

She’s getting hysterical.

I turn to head up to my office. “Uh-huh.”

A piece of apple hits me smack-dab in the back of the head as I walk away. Alfred snatches it up before I can.

A week later, Meredith convinces me to watch a chick flick with her. Edith is out with her friends, so it’s just Meredith, me, and Alfred. He’s up on the couch between us, taking up more space than the both of us combined. Meredith is wearing a tank top and pajama shorts. Her legs are hidden under a blanket, and her attention is focused squarely on the TV.

On her lap is a bowl of popcorn she just made for us. I’m watching her bring each kernel to her lips, and I have a pillow strategically placed on my lap.

Alfred is scowling at me like, *Really, dude? Can’t the girl just eat her popcorn in peace?*

Meredith smiles. “I love this part.”

I make a noncommittal sound and it sounds a lot like someone just kneed me in the groin, but she doesn’t notice. She holds the bowl of popcorn out for me.

“Want some?”

I hold up my hand. “No thanks.”

She sets it down on the table and stands. “I gotta go wash my hands. You want a beer?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” *And while you’re at it, would you mind grabbing a weapon and putting me out of my misery?*

She drops an ice-cold bottle of Blue Moon over my shoulder a few minutes later.

“Here, I put an orange slice in there for you.”

My favorite.

She saunters around the couch and scoots Alfred to the floor. “Ah,” she sighs, stretching out with a content little smile on her face. “Much better.”

Her legs are stretched out toward me now, and her toes hit my thighs.

“Whoops,” she says, scooting them back a little.

“It’s fine.”

I reach out and tug them back where they were. It’s nothing—or it should be. I’m touching her ankle, and yet it’s erotic. The pillow’s fabric is straining.

The movie continues, and I sip my beer, all the while trying to reason with myself about why it’d be a good idea to turn and kiss her. Maybe she wants to move on from her ex? Maybe she’s just as sex-deprived as I am? *Maybe you’re an opportunistic asshole. Leave her alone.*

Characters I’m not invested in are suddenly ripping their clothes off on screen. They’ve been avoiding each other for the whole movie, building toward this sexy scene. They’re really going at it—stumbling into things, bumping against walls, making picture frames crash to the floor.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if sex was actually like that?” Meredith laughs. “Like if you kept having to run to IKEA to replace all your broken lamps and shattered vases because you were so turned on that you lost all spatial awareness?”

I can’t help but smile. “That’s actually happened to me before.”

“You broke a lamp?”

She makes it sound like it’s completely absurd.

“Didn’t shatter the base, just the bulb.”

“You’re kidding.”

I sip my beer, anxious for the next subject.

“*How?*” she asks, amazed.

“I needed to use the side table for...well...” I clear my throat, aware that there’s no way of continuing without getting graphic. “Leverage, and I accidentally knocked the lamp to the ground. The light bulb shattered, but you’re right, it wasn’t as dramatic as this.”

“Oh.”

She sounds like she’s in a daze. I stare intently at the TV.

“So you were on top of the girl.”

Her voice sounds shaky.

“Woman,” I correct. “Yes.”

“And just how much...leverage...do you usually need?”

This question, asked with her innocent lilt, is made worse by the fact that the characters on screen are going all out, scene after scene of rhythmic gyrations overlaid with moaning and groaning. Time seems to slow to a crawl.

I push to stand, finish off my beer, and deposit the empty bottle on the coffee table.

I know when I’ve reached my limit, and talking about having sex, while listening to people have sex, while Meredith is just sitting there, perfectly...well, perfect, is...*fuck*.

“Anyway, I’m going for a run,” I announce, tugging on the sneakers I left by the door.

Then I just turn and walk out.

Running is not something I do. I don’t need to; working around the ranch is enough of a workout on its own. Lately, though, I’ve been running a lot—all the time, in fact. I run after I catch sight of a sliver of Meredith’s stomach when she reaches for a glass on the higher shelf in the cabinets. I run after she makes a joke at dinner and brushes my arm gently. I run after she walks into my office with some afternoon coffee and a freshly baked muffin. She sets it down on my desk and winks then just strolls right back out, hips swaying. I run because it’s the only damn thing I can do that helps me blow off steam without feeling like a predator.

Hell, maybe I should just train for an Ironman triathlon at this point. If Meredith continues living here, I could probably win the damn thing.

When I make it back to the farmhouse thirty minutes later, I'm sweaty and breathing hard, but no less worked up than I was before my run. *Shit*. My coping mechanisms are starting to lose effectiveness. I'll have to get creative, maybe consider a cold bath or—

My thoughts freeze when I pull open the door and find Meredith in my living room, pacing. I figured she'd have gone to sleep by now. The movie probably ended a few minutes after I left.

She whips her attention to me and wrings out her hands.

“You're still here,” I say, deciding that's the safest thing that could possibly come out of my mouth at this moment.

She steps toward me, drops her hands, turns, fidgets with her ponytail, and then turns back to me.

“Okay, I've been thinking...”

Her eyes are wide with worry. Her teeth nibble on her bottom lip. I've never seen her look so nervous, not even back when she used to be scared of Alfred.

“About what?” I ask this while standing very still, hand propped up on the doorframe.

“You find me attractive, right? Like as a woman?”

I blink. Blink, blink, blink.

Is this a trick? A trap?

I'm her employer, her confidant.

“Umm...sure?”

She frowns, and a deep crease settles between her eyebrows. “Women usually hope for a little more enthusiasm.”

“Were you?” *The fewer words, the better*, I think to myself. I'll use one more. “Hoping?”

“Well yeah, because I find you...”—she waves her hand up and down my body and then clears her throat—“very good-looking.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And we’re both available.”

“I’m aware.”

“And I think we should kiss.”

Gulp.

“And break lamps.”

Her euphemism makes me smile, but then reality catches up with me.

“Believe me, I want to break thousands of lamps with you, but you just got out of a bad relationship.”

“Right. So did you.”

“I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“Noble, but unnecessary.”

“Also, you work for me.”

“True, but irrelevant.”

“It could make our relationship really complicated.”

“Indeed, but it’s worth the risk.”

“And...well...”

I’m at the end of the line. I’ve run right out of excuses. She was supposed to agree with one of those and call this whole conversation off. She was supposed to nod and say, *Oh, you know what? I hadn’t thought of that. Well see ya!* Then we’d shake hands and she’d get the hell out of my house.

Instead she’s staring up at me with those big, hopeful blue eyes and she might as well be saying, *Let’s find the biggest, most breakable lamp in Texas.*

“Fuck.” I turn and wrench the front door open and step outside.

Don't. Do. This.

I have to be better than this. I have to set the boundaries and hold to them. She doesn't know what she's asking for—she's under the influence of heartbreak. I drag my hands down my face and clasp them behind my neck. I count to ten. I do some deep breathing. I try to listen to the angel sitting on my shoulder. He should be there somewhere...ah, there he is, getting strangled by the devil from my other shoulder. Welp, there's my answer, folks. I yank the door back open and slam it closed behind me.

Our eyes lock and the fuse burns away, counting down the last few milliseconds before she and I collide. I have one thought before I reach for her: *if there have to be consequences, make them all worth it.*

Meredith runs straight for me and I meet her halfway. Her body crashes into mine as I lift her up and wrap her legs around my waist. I turn and haul her against the front door then hoist her a little higher. We're a fucking mess, like sex-crazed teenagers, moving too fast, disjointed and wild. I kiss her cheek and the side of her mouth. She threads her hands through my hair and tugs. My lips finally find hers and I am a dying man who's found his salvation. Her hot mouth, her full lips, *her kiss*—the second our mouths connect, I know there's no going back now that I have her.

I show her how well we fit. Her breath is my breath. Her taste is my taste. I tilt my head and take the kiss even deeper, skimming my tongue over hers. Our hips roll together. She's so eager and receptive, wrapping her legs tighter so that even if I pulled us off the door, she wouldn't fall.

It's not hard to decide what to do with her when I've done nothing but play out scenarios in my head for a week. I lose track of time as we kiss. Days pass as I learn every inch of her impatient mouth. For so long, I keep her right there, careful not to press my luck. I want to rip her clothes off and fill her up, but my wants don't matter.

She's the first one to initiate more. Her hand skims down my neck and chest. She tugs my shirt up and then her hand is

covering my bare abs. My stomach squeezes as she skims lower.

Her hands find my shorts.

She tugs on the drawstring.

I growl into her mouth.

It's not my proudest moment.

Her pajama shorts ride up and her smooth thighs are completely exposed. Her fingers are still skimming back and forth along my shorts. She's turned on, just as alive with the tension exploding between us as I am.

My hand slips down between us. If she can venture south, so can I.

I skim along her taut stomach, the waistband of her shorts, inside her cotton panties. Then I find wet, hot heat.

Later, when someone asks me about the happiest moment of my life, I will think back to this, right now. I'll lie and say something PG-rated, but I'll know the truth.

I guide my middle finger into her and her legs drop to the ground. I need better access, more access. She doesn't move from that door though. Pinned is the way I like her. Between my body and the door, there's no end in sight. I pump in and out of her and sweep my tongue into her mouth. *This is what we've been waiting for*, I tell her with my touch. *This*.

My other hand is lonely, and that tank top she's wearing might as well be paper-thin. I can feel her chest quivering against mine. She's shaking, and it could be from nervousness, but I know better—it's adrenaline.

I can feel that she's not wearing a bra. *No. Damn. Bra.* Had I known that while we were watching the movie, I would have had her pinned to this door an hour ago. Now, I'm pissed I waited so long. I'm anxious and hungry. I don't bother taking her top off, just yank down the front of it until one of her soft breasts fills my palm. She shivers, like that little touch alone could bring her to an orgasm. I smirk against her mouth, memorizing the wordless cues her body shouts back at me. *So*

you're sensitive there? I skim the pad of my thumb over the tip of her breast and she yanks my hair in response.

My other hand is still working wonders inside her wet panties. Poor Meredith, she really doesn't stand a chance.

My palm covers her breast, and I roll my hand up and down. I get the best reaction from her with a feather-soft touch in the beginning, nothing too aggressive, just subtle teasing and torturing. I know from the way she's grinding her hips against me that I'm hitting the mark.

I break our kiss and tip my head down, replacing my hand with my mouth. My tongue teases her breast. Her head falls back against the door and her eyes flutter close. I do it again then wrap my lips around the flushed tip.

She releases a slow exhalation and I think maybe I should take this to the bedroom, but there are a lot of things in life I *should* do. I'm happy right where I am, coaxing and licking and seducing until her fingers dig into my shoulders, and she's promising me she's about to lose it.

I keep her right against the door even as I move on from her breast and continue farther south. She moans, annoyed with the loss of friction between her thighs, but then I'm on my knees and her eyes widen with wonder.

"Oh no," she says, in shock.

Oh yes.

From what I know of her husband, he probably never put her needs before his. I bet he never knelt like this and tugged these tiny little shorts to the side and stared up in awe. There's only a thin layer of cotton between me and my end goal.

"Jack," she whispers, unsure.

It feels like we're going fast, but there's no slowing down, no going steady. This moment has been weeks in the making. I've written a thesis in my head about the things I'd like to do to her body.

Our eyes lock and I see every unspoken word there, all the uncertainty and worry. I see that this isn't comfortable for her,

to have me looking at her like this, but I won't back off unless she tells me to because I don't see regret in her gaze—I see need, hot and raw.

I brush my thumb up and down the center of her panties and she bucks her hips toward me. I try not to gloat. Still, a smirk forms all the same. I pin her hips against the door with my free hand and try again. This time, there's no reprieve from the gentle strokes, the small circles I draw against the wet cotton. Her breathing quickens.

I could let her come just like that, with my fingers and my breath on her, but I want more. She wants more—*deserves* more.

I tug her pajama shorts and panties down until they fall to the floor and then lift one of her legs so her foot is propped on my shoulder. I have the perfect angle, right between her spread thighs.

“Oh my god. I don't think...” She's rambling, words slipping out between sharp inhales.

She tries to move her leg, to squeeze her thighs together and close herself off. I hold her steady and glance up. Her ponytail's gone now. Her dark hair frames her face, softening her delicate features even more. She swallows and I drag my hand up her thigh slowly. I'm saying, *See how good this feels? See how much better it could feel?* I reach the groove of her hip and pause; it's a question. Our eyes lock again, and I ask for her consent out loud. I need to hear it.

“Do you want me to keep going?”

There are no fancy words or pretty promises.

I could tell her things to ease her mind, things like the truth: I've never wanted anyone more than I want her.

But words have been used against her in the past, and maybe for her, talk is cheap. I have no way of knowing what that bastard said to her, what abuses he slung at her in moments like this to make her scared of letting me touch her. Even still, I know enough not to promise her things with words when I can use my body instead. I can prove to her that

there are better guys in the world, guys who would sink to their knees and worship at her feet.

“Meredith.”

Her name comes out gritty and hard, pleading.

I know she’s uncomfortable. I know she’s thinking too much about the bare facts of what we’re doing, so I decide to overload her brain, to give her a future to focus on so her past is the last thing on her mind.

I tug on her thigh, and she lets her leg fall open. I keep my gaze locked with hers as my hand covers her wetness. I brush up and down softly. It’s a pace intended to torture. She rolls her hips and two of my fingers sink into her.

She closes her eyes for a moment then opens them. One word slips from her mouth, followed by another.

“*Yes...please.*”

It’s all the urging I need. I rub soft circles while I kiss up the inside of her thigh. We both know where I’m headed, but she still loses her footing when my mouth finally gets there. The leg she’s standing on buckles and I wrap my right hand around her thigh, holding her up. My other hand goes around her waist so I can press her hips against my mouth.

Her breathing grows labored as I bury my head between her thighs. My fingers pump in and out, quickening. She fists the top of my hair and arches her back as I suck and kiss and swirl my tongue in soft circles.

Her inhibitions are lost to the Texas wind.

Her focus is on my mouth and the climax building up inside her.

I drag my tongue up the length of her and our eyes lock.

She’s a goner.

Her legs are shaking and she’s watching me do this to her, watching me as I spread her thighs even wider and tug her down until my tongue sinks into her. My thumb starts rubbing

circles against her wetness, and the combination is too intense for her to run from any longer.

Her eyes pinch closed as her thighs quiver. I can feel the waves of pleasure roll through her, feel her clench, and—*fuck*—it's the sexiest thing watching her come undone like that, *tasting* her as she falls apart.

I'm relentless, dragging out every drop of that orgasm I can get. She's still shaking from the aftereffects, so sensitive that each drag of my tongue makes her hips buck. Only when I'm sure she's really finished do I smile and sit back on my knees.

She blink, blink, blinks.

“Where am I? *Who* am I?”

Her leg drops back to the ground, and she's standing there naked from the bottom down, her tank top askew. I'm still completely clothed, and we realize it at the same time. Her hands shoot up to fix her top and I help her step back into her underwear and shorts. Then I stand and smile.

“Wow.” Her eyes are glossy and her cheeks are flushed.

I smile and finger the strap of her tank top, righting it on her shoulder.

“Now what?” she asks, voice shaky.

“Now, I go shower.”

I'm still sweaty from my run.

“And me?”

She's so damn cute standing there, unsure of herself. I can't fathom how a woman as beautiful as she is still manages to have a self-conscious bone in her body. Then it hits me: of course she's uncertain and reserved.

It was the stuff he said to me...the things he called me.

I remember what she's lived through, what events led her to my doorstep, literally, and I decide we've done enough for tonight.

“Jack?” she asks, tilting her head to the side, studying me.

“Hm?”

“Are we gonna keep going?”

I smile and shake my head. “Not tonight. Not because I don’t want to—I do—I just don’t see the point in rushing things.”

She furrows her brows. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. You want to watch another movie? I just need to rinse off really quick.”

She laughs. “You think I’m capable of hanging out with you right now? I feel like I need to go smoke a cigarette, and I’ve never so much as even tried one.”

I laugh. “Do you want to stay the night?”

“Like in your guest room?”

“I was thinking my bed.”

Her eyes widen like that’s a crazy idea.

“I think I want to be in my own bed tonight.”

I take the hint.

“C’mon, why don’t I walk you home?”

Her smile lights up her whole face. “I think I can manage fifty feet.”

“I insist.”

She accepts my outstretched elbow and I lead the way outside.

“This is weird,” she announces.

“Yeah, kind of.”

She slices her gaze up to me. “Just so we’re on the same page, are we going to wake up tomorrow and pretend like this never happened or are we going to be cool about it and just reference it as the one time you went down on me against the front door?”

“Maybe somewhere in between?”

She laughs and tugs open the door to the shack.

We stand there looking at each other for a few long seconds. There’s not a proper send-off for this. A hug, a kiss, a handshake—they all feel wrong. She takes matters into her own hands, tips up on her toes, and plants a kiss right on my cheek before disappearing inside.

I’m left standing there for a few seconds before I shake my head and turn back for the farmhouse.

I don’t remember the last time I had such a hard time falling asleep. I lie awake in bed with a nervous tension in the pit of my stomach I haven’t felt since childhood. It reminds me of how I used to feel on Christmas Eve, jittery and excited, anxious for the next day to come. It keeps me awake half the night. It makes me regret not insisting Meredith sleep here with me. I want to know how she’s feeling. I want to know if she’s currently packing up everything she owns and hitchhiking out of town. I want to know when exactly I let my guard down enough to fall in love.

MEREDITH

The morning after the whole *JACK IS PULLING DOWN MY PANTIES AND I AM GOING TO HAVE AN HONEST-TO-GOD ORGASM AGAINST THIS DOOR* episode, I wake up early and life continues—and you’re not going to believe this—*normally*. I’m surprised by how easy it is to be in the same room as him. When I walk into the farmhouse to make breakfast, Jack greets me with a warm smile and a tip of his head, and I don’t even think for one second how he was face to face with my vagina just hours ago, not even once. It’s called maturity—you’ll find it defined in big books called dictionaries.

I walk to the pantry to retrieve pancake supplies with a confident, shoulders-back stride, and I blink, blink, blink the sleep out of my eyes. There’s more of it than usual this morning because I only managed about half of one minute of deep sleep last night. The rest of the eight hours was spent vigorously tossing and turning while simultaneously playing out every possible outcome for this morning in excruciating detail.

Fortunately, we seem to be living out outcome #145, in which I am still hopelessly infatuated with him and he is still seemingly into me. It’s the best possible scenario—well, other than outcome #509, in which Andrew gets hits by a bus, Jack is in love with me, oh, and I have a new job with 100% fewer toilets to scrub.

I’m not complaining though. This is amazing. Part of me wasn’t sure how he’d react to my presence in the kitchen this

morning. Last night was a lot...like, I orgasmed *literally* before his very eyes. If that's not intimacy, I don't know what is. This morning, he could regret his actions. He could ask me to hand in my resignation, turn in my rubber cleaning gloves, and, in true Texas fashion, "get tuh goin".

Instead, he leans against my shoulder while I pour pancake batter onto a hot skillet.

"How are you this morning?"

I blush so hot he gets a sunburn.

"Oh, yeah. Shit." I accidentally over-pour and create one colossal pancake that covers the entire skillet. "Yup. I'm good."

"I'll take it—you know I like the big ones," he says before he catches my eye and winks.

WINKS.

And it's not one of those lecherous man-in-power winks; it's a teasing quick one. Men who have callused hands and know how to fix a truck radiator should have to have a special license before going around winking at women.

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Edith demands.

I jump a mile in the air. "Edith! Where'd you come from?!"

She's sipping coffee at the table. "I've been here since you walked in."

I didn't even see her—that's how focused in on Jack I am. I walked right past Edith like she was a marble statue.

I laugh and sweat. "Ha ha ha, of course. You're just looking so thin from all the yoga. Want a pancake?"

She eyes my skillet over the brim of her reading glasses, lips tugged in a thin, disapproving line. "Not if it's gonna be like that."

"I'll make you a better one."

She's skeptical of my weirdness. I need to tone it down, but I'm scared she knows what we did in this house last night. I'm scared Alfred has ratted us out. He probably didn't even need to. Hell, my butt cheeks probably left sweat marks on the door. I make a mental note to check just as soon as I finish with breakfast.

"Jack, what do you have goin' on today?" Edith asks as he goes over to fill her coffee. He usually doesn't wait on her like that, but I think he's trying to throw her off our scent.

"Working for a good part of it. Might take you and Meredith into town later for dinner if y'all are up for it."

A DATE!

A DATE *WITH* HIS GRANDMA! That's basically skipping straight to meeting the family.

"That'd be fine, but it better not be someplace cheap," Edith says. "If I'm fixing myself up nice, I want a steak."

He agrees and turns to me, brow arched. "Meredith, you free?"

I stare into his brown eyes for so long I burn his pancake. Then, I carry it out back and toss it in the trash so it doesn't stink up the kitchen.

"What's with you today?" Edith asks when I walk back inside. "Do you have the flu? You look pale and red at the same time."

I don't even think that question merits a response, but I give her one anyway. "No, Edith, I don't have the flu, but I'll go take my temperature just in case. Yes, Jack, dinner would be fine, provided I don't have the flu—which I don't. Now will you two stop distracting me so I can actually make some decent pancakes?"

Jack holds up his hands in deference and says he'll be out back throwing the ball for Alfred. Really, he's just trying to get away from Edith. He knows if we're together in a room with her long enough, she'll catch on to us. She's like a wily detective, good cop, bad cop, and grandma all wrapped up in one.

You'd think I wouldn't be one for keeping secrets. *Secrets, secrets are no fun unless you tell everyone*—yada yada. Whoever came up with that catchy little rhyme clearly never engaged in a sexy secret affair, because guess what? Keeping this secret from Edith is fun as shit, like when I take some coffee up to Jack's office later in the afternoon and just as I turn to leave, he catches hold of my elbow and pulls me down on his lap. The door is open. We could get caught. Edith could swat us in the heads with a rolled-up newspaper.

“How are you feeling about last night?”

“Good,” I reply dreamily.

He's staring at my mouth. “No regrets?”

Now I'm staring at his mouth too. “None.”

He wraps his hand around my neck and a little spark trails down my spine. I shiver and he pulls my face toward his. Then we make out like teenagers. We kiss until I'm fluent in the ways of the French. We kiss until my chest is constricting and my panties are wet, and then he releases me and I half hobble, half skip out of the room. I'm panting like one of those sled dogs that just finished lugging a lazy human across the Iditarod finish line. He tells me he's excited to take me to dinner and I tell him, “I too, am, uh, dinner excited.”

My lips are swollen. Edith asks me about it when I make it back to the living room after a quick 38-minute cool-down on the stairs.

I tell her I got stung by a bee.

“On your lips?” she asks, dubious.

“Yeah, it was weird—flew right in the kitchen window.” My voice wobbles. “Now if you'll excuse me, I've been meaning to read...”—I grab the first book within reach on the shelf beside me—“...this book...”—I look down at the cover—“*Advanced Husbandry Techniques*.”

She tosses her hands in the air and walks away. “Strange choice for light reading. You do know husbandry doesn't mean

what you think it does, right? No book is gonna teach you how to land a decent man.”

Later that evening, I doll myself up and hop into the back seat of Jack’s truck. Edith and Jack sit up front, and I’d just like to point out that of the two us, I’m a much easier date than Edith is. She insists she’s too hot, and then she’s too cold. She snaps at Jack to drive faster then tells him he’s taking the bends like a madman.

At the steakhouse, she demands to be seated in a booth and makes Jack and me sit on the same side because she “has baby-birthing hips.” Jack reminds her that she gave birth nearly fifty years ago and she stares right at him as she orders the most expensive bottle of wine on the menu in retaliation. I have no choice but to drink some of it too. Smirk.

I don’t think Edith picked a booth to intentionally make me sit closer to Jack, but if she did, she’s a miracle worker. We’re basically squashed together. His denim-clad thigh is pressed against mine. The booth isn’t tiny, but then, neither is he. I’m stuck between him and the wall, and I’m not sure which one is more unyielding.

We shift and get settled then he stretches his arm along the back of the booth, behind my shoulders. If we were fourteen and at the movies, I’d consider this, like, fifth base. His hand is near my shoulder, which is riiiiight around the corner from my boob. His finger brushes the strap of my dress innocently. I try to focus on my menu, but my eyes are glazed over with visions of what I would be doing if we were alone right now. I want to climb into his lap and eat him for dinner.

“Jesus, don’t they have steakhouses back in California?” Edith asks, grabbing my attention. “You look overwhelmed by the five choices.”

I laugh like I’m trying it out for the first time.

Jack saves me. “Want to share something?”

“Yes,” I say like that’s the best idea I’ve ever heard.

We put our order in with the waitress who’s a friend of Edith’s. Edith takes it upon herself to invite her to our yoga

session tomorrow, which, after a few weeks of Edith spreading the word, now includes more than 30 people on any given weekend. Last week, we had 48. Pretty soon, I'm going to have to find a stadium to host it.

“Oh, and it's a five-dollar donation,” Edith adds quickly.

Up until then, I've never charged anyone for the class. I'd never even considered charging for it.

Our waitress doesn't even bat an eyelash at the cost. When she walks away, I lean forward.

“Since when am I charging people?”

Edith sips her wine casually. “Since now. You're a good teacher and five bucks is nothing. I spend that much on a damn cup of coffee down at Starbusk.”

“You mean Starbucks,” I correct.

“'S what I said, Starbusk.”

Jack is watching us with an amused smile.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think if people are willing to pay for your time, then clearly your time has value.”

I sit up straighter. *Yes, right. My time is valuable.*

“Okay, Edith, I'll have you ask for the donations tomorrow and we'll see how people respond. If everyone runs back to their trucks and peels out, I'll just go back to doing it for free.”

Once that's settled, I turn to the basket of warm rolls in the center of the table. I'm slathering whipped butter onto every crusty bit I can find when I hear my name from a few yards away.

I jerk my gaze up and see Tucker making his way toward us. I haven't seen him since the wedding, but we've talked. He called the farmhouse the day after to see if I was doing okay since he wasn't able to take me home. Jack was out working, so I happened to answer the phone first.

I smile. “Hi Tucker, good to see you.”

Edith barely greets him. I realize now that she never really wanted us together. She was using him as a pawn.

Jack scoots a tiny bit closer to me. At this rate, my face will end up squashed between the wall and his bicep. My lips will pucker out like a fish.

“How are you guys?” Tucker asks, looking at no one but me.

“We’re fine. Jack is treating us to a dinner date,” Edith answers.

She enunciates the final word extra hard.

Tucker notices Jack’s arm around my shoulder and frowns. “Meredith, I tried calling you the other day, but you know how fickle that Blue Stone phone can be.”

I glance at Jack, and he doesn’t even bother feigning remorse. In fact, his face is a mask of indifference. It’s like he doesn’t even know Tucker is standing there. I want to poke him in the ribs and tell him to play nice.

“Oh, um, yeah.” I glance back up at Tucker. “Sorry about that. What’d you need to tell me?”

He glances away from the table. “Well, we should probably talk about it in private. It’s about your divorce.”

He says the word divorce like it’s nasty and pus-filled.

I frown. “What about it?”

He rocks back on his heels, understanding that anything he needs to say, he’ll have to say in front of Edith and Jack. “I was just going to offer you my legal advice pro bono, if you need it.”

“Not necessary,” Jack cuts in. “We’ve already got it covered.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize.” His gaze cuts to me. “Well, regardless, if you need any help, Meredith, you know where to find me.”

When he walks away, the three of us sit in awkward silence. My roll is still buttered and untouched. It feels weird

to stuff my face at a moment like this, though just to be clear, I could still easily put away four to five buttered rolls at this very second.

“Since when do I have my divorce covered?” I ask my roll.

Jack sighs and moves his arm from around my shoulders. “I called my lawyer the other day and asked him about our options.”

“‘Our’ options?”

He clears his throat. “Your options.”

Edith excuses herself to use the bathroom then I look up and see her take a seat at the bar. Let it be known, I’ve never met a person smarter than Edith.

“It’s not that I’m not grateful, I am, I just...” I sigh and drop the roll. No one is sadder about that than me. “It feels wrong to have you help me with this, like I’m just running from one guy to another, looking to you to solve my problems.”

His dark brows crease. “Do you really think that or do you feel like you *should* think that?”

Oh.

Well...good question.

“I don’t know.”

A not insignificant part of me is worried what other people will think.

“We aren’t talking about a rebound here,” Jack continues. “I’m talking about your future, about you rebuilding your life and accepting help freely given.”

The edge of my mouth curls up. “Is it freely given though?”

He rears back, almost offended by the question. Still, it bears asking. “Of course it’s freely given. When I asked you the other night if you wanted me and Edith to be your people, this was part of the deal. You can walk out of my life tomorrow. Quit working for me. Date Tucker. Go back to your

husband, and I'll still be your person if you need me. That's how it works."

Well damn.

I'm tearing up inside a steakhouse while an overwrought country song plays overhead. How cliché.

"I appreciate what you're saying, I really do, but think about it from my perspective. You're holding all the cards. You've given me a place to live and a place to work"—I drop my voice in case the people in the booth behind us are listening—"not to mention what happened last night. *That* introduces a whole other slew of complications."

"So let's uncomplicate it."

Oh shit.

"Do you not want to repeat what we did last night?" I ask quietly.

If so, what was all that making out we did this afternoon for?

"I do."

"Are you firing me?"

"No."

"Are you kicking me out of the shack? Because now that it's adorable and trendy, I really like living in it."

He finds that amusing. "No, you can live in the *chic shack* as long as you want."

"Well then how are we uncomplicating things?"

"I think I'm going to hire another housekeeper, maybe one with housekeeping experience."

"Don't you like the way I fold your underwear?"

He cracks up at that.

"I'm doing it because it's a lot of work, and I think if you had some help, you'd have more time to focus on what your next step should be."

“Next step.”

“Yes, like what Edith was saying about charging people for the yoga class. That’s a good idea.”

Interesting...

“Well if you’re going to phase me out, I’ll need severance, and if we’re going to keep doing that other thing, I’ll need hazard pay.”

He moves his arm back around my shoulder. “I’ll consider it.”

“Also, the new housekeeper can give Alfred his baths. I’m never doing that again.”

He’s wearing a panty-dropping smile as he says, “He likes you.”

“He likes everyone.”

“Tell that to the door-to-door salesman he chased down the road the other day.”

We are flirting. We are openly flirting, and I need to focus.

I straighten up and return my attention to the table. “Right, but what about what you just told Tucker? About having my divorce under control?”

“We can call my guy in the morning. He’ll explain it better than I can, but basically a lot depends on whether or not you come to an uncontested agreement on the terms of the divorce.”

I nod. “I’ve already decided that’s what I want.”

“What about alimony? My lawyer says you could easily get two or three years of spousal support.”

My stomach twists into a knot. “No. I don’t want anything from him.”

“Don’t throw it away just to spite him.”

I turn and look him square in the eye. “Think about what I’ve done for the last eight weeks. Do you think I would have willingly scrubbed toilets if it wasn’t absolutely necessary? Do

you think I would have survived in that dingy shack with no A/C if there was any other way forward? I would gladly give up all the money in the world in exchange for not having to deal with him any longer.”

He nods. “Good. That means the divorce will probably be done as soon as possible.”

I glance down at his lips, suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to lay one on him.

“This is the sexiest family law conversation I’ve ever had on a date.”

He smiles. “Want to change the subject?”

“Will you do that thing with your finger again? Where you play with my dress strap?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was doing that.”

Our gazes lock, and I think if Edith weren’t making her way back over to us, he’d lean down and kiss me. Maybe it’s better that she is here; this way we have to eat our steaks instead of each other.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Edith says when she sits down. “I’m just an old lady who can’t hear a damn thing in this loud-ass restaurant.”

MEREDITH

We make it home late after dinner and Edith announces very loudly to anyone within earshot that she's going to bed.

“And you two better go on too. That's my secret to good health, you know—eight hours every night!”

Jack walks me back to my shack, which is odd considering his bedroom is in the exact opposite direction.

I'm thinking of ways to draw him into the shack for a little nightcap (*Ooh, I called my sex lawyer and he's about to serve you with a big subpoena*), when he tells me he has to head over to San Antonio for a day trip early in the morning.

He might as well have just told me he's going off to war with the way my body reacts to the information.

“Why?”

What I really want to ask is, *Do you have to?*

“I have meetings with a grocery distributor there. We've been working on getting Blue Stone wine into their stores. There are a lot of details to hammer out and I need to be there to help my project manager.”

“When will you get back?”

“Sometime after dinner.”

I should not be depressed by this, but I am.

“Are you going to start Christine-ing me?”

“Never,” he says, squeezing my hand. “I’ll bring you back a souvenir.”

Now we’re talking. I perk up immediately.

Then, he throws a cherry on top. “And maybe the day after, you and I can go out on a real date, just the two of us.”

“Really? I don’t know...Edith makes a great third wheel, like when she talked about her bunions on the way home? I would have never brought that up on a first date, but I liked the sincerity.”

He laughs at my stupid joke, which means he’s definitely into me.

When we reach the shack, he turns me to face him and hooks his hands around my waist. His fingers barely dip past the hem of my jeans as he squeezes and tugs me toward him.

“So this is good night?”

I tilt my head back to look up at him. His head is framed by stars. Out here, you can see millions of them.

“Or?” I ask, like a shameless flirt.

“Or I could kiss you?”

He’s bending down before he’s even finished the question and the last word is whispered against my lips right before his mouth presses to mine. My insides liquefy. My arms link around his neck, partly because I want to keep him right where he is, and partly because he’s so tall, I sort of have to hoist myself up to reach his lips without straining my neck.

Just like against the front door and in his office, our kisses go straight from zero to sixty. If a scientist stuck an old-fashioned thermometer between us, the mercury would blast straight out of the top.

His hand skims along the side of my breast and my brain says, *Yes! Let’s do this, big boy!* but he pulls back and presses his forehead to mine.

“It’s just that my meeting is really, really early tomorrow morning, and I have to be on point.”

“That’s okay, we can have sex really quickly.”

He laughs. “I want us to go slow. After everything you’ve been through, I want to be careful.”

“I’m not fragile.” I pinch my forearm to prove my point. “Look, see? That didn’t even hurt.”

He soothes the patch of slightly red skin with his hand. I swoon.

“You could come with me tomorrow?” he continues, obviously noticing how sad I am that he’s leaving.

I smile. “You go. Make all the deals, shake a bunch of hands, sign contracts, kiss babies. I’ll be here, holding down the fort with Edith.”

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath (like he’s gathering every ounce of resolve inside of him), and then he steps back and releases me.

“So then I’ll see you when I get back?” he asks. “It could be pretty late.”

“I’ll stay up.”

He seems happy about that, stealing one last kiss before he turns back for the farmhouse.

I watch him walk away and a very clear thought flashes in my head like a neon sign. I try to ignore it and it starts glowing even brighter, as if someone flipped a switch to max brightness. I bat the thought away and my brain says, *Nice try*, then adds exclamation marks. In the end, I have no choice but to acknowledge the intensely blazing thought:

I AM FALLING IN LOVE WITH JACK MCNIGHT!!!!!!!!!!

If you’re curious, one day is made up of 24 hours, which is 1,440 minutes, or 84,000 seconds. 86,000 seconds feels like too long to go without Jack. Sure, technically, I went twenty-eight years without him, but now I’m counting seconds. So far, he’s only been gone for 10,800 of them; I have a lot more

seconds to live through before he walks through that front door again. Fortunately, life sees fit to make those seconds as interesting as possible.

While I'm scrubbing the upstairs bathroom, an unfamiliar black SUV pulls up on the gravel drive. It catches my attention for two reasons: it's fancier than any car I've seen at Blue Stone Ranch, and it doesn't park over near the farm trucks. It pulls up right in front of the house. I push to stand and peer out of the bathroom window just in time to see the driver's side door open and a tall, well-dressed man step out.

My husband, Andrew, has finally decided to come to Texas.

I had a feeling this day would come. I knew he would eventually track me down and show his face. Andrew has built up a large ego in recent years, and I imagine me leaving in the middle of the night was quite a blow to it. He's either here to demand I come home or to seek some kind of retribution. Either way, he'll want some kind of apology from me. He loved nothing more than when I groveled at his feet, begging for his forgiveness and love.

I hate the woman he turned me into, and I refuse to revert back to that outdated facsimile of myself—the subordinate housewife, the woman who took his verbal abuse for years without saying a word. I've changed.

He's staring up at the farmhouse with his hands on his hips, a look of disgust contorting his classically handsome face. He spits in the dirt. I move away from the window and whip my rubber gloves off.

I'm surprised; I thought I'd be more nervous than I am. I feel the exact opposite: calm and resolute. I walk out of that bathroom and down the stairs without a moment's hesitation. I feel like if I unbuttoned my shirt, I'd find a spandex superhero uniform.

I might not have invited him to come, but I'm glad he's here. I'm glad, because it dawns on me that he probably still thinks I'm the same old Meredith, ready to tremble at the mere

sight of him. For the first time in our marriage, he doesn't know who he's messing with.

When I make it downstairs, I call out for Edith, but I don't get a reply. I guess she must have gone into town. *Good.* I head for the front door. Andrew's still standing on the gravel drive, apparently waiting for me to make an appearance.

I wonder how different this meeting would be if Jack was here. I doubt he'd let me face Andrew on my own, but that's exactly what I'm doing. I'm facing my demon all by myself.

It feels better than I imagined it would, similar to how it felt to leave him that night.

The screen door slams behind me as I step outside.

"Morning, Andrew," I say with an insincere smile.

His piercing gaze snaps to me and I see rage there like I've never seen before. I bet he's pissed he had to come all the way out here to talk to me. He hates wasting time; busy, important men like him never have enough of it.

"Nice of you to make the trip. For a while, I didn't think you'd bother. How was your flight?" I asked.

My voice is a sugar-dipped cone with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

"Cut the shit, Meredith."

My smile holds steady. "Manners, Andrew. Remember, you're in the south now. But, if you'd like to cut to the chase, I have some bad news: I'm not going back to California with you."

He sneers at the suggestion. "You honestly think I still want you? Look at yourself. Jesus."

He's talking about my work clothes, my t-shirt and jean shorts. My hair, which he only ever saw styled and perfect, is in a high ponytail with an abundance of flyaways. I don't think he's seen my face without a pound of makeup in a few years.

"Well, you traveled an awfully long way just to tell me I look like shit, though I do recall you always had a flair for the

dramatic. What is it that you came to hear? That you ruined my life?”

He laughs acerbically. “Ruined your life?! *Ruin*—” He shakes his head and pivots on his foot, turning away and wiping his mouth before he jerks back around and points a finger straight at me. “I gave you more than you fucking deserved. You think you’re the only pretty thing worth something? You’re a dime a fucking dozen.”

His words roll off me like I’m wearing insult-repellant gear. “I’ve heard this all before, Andrew. Nothing left in your little bag of tricks?”

Something in him snaps at that. “What did you just say to me?”

My voice is louder when I continue, “You’ve said that same exact thing a million times.” I wave my hand in continuous circles. “I’m ‘a dime a dozen’. Well gather up your dimes, sweetie, and go collect your dozens, because I’m done giving a shit about what you think of me.”

I think he’s going to lose his mind. I’ve never talked to him like this, but he’s more cunning than that. He collects himself so quickly that for the first time all day, a shiver of fear runs down my spine.

“That’s good.” He smirks. “You’ve got a little backbone now, huh? You think you can leave me and make a new life for yourself? Your sister tells me you’re the housekeeper for the guy who lives here. You like cleaning toilets? Mopping floors? If I’d known you liked to be on your knees that much, I wouldn’t have paid all that money to have a maid.”

It’s strange to me that I ever found him attractive. Looking at him now, his sharp bone structure seems too severe—cruel, even.

“Are you whoring yourself out to him too?”

His words hit too close for comfort, but I force a bored expression.

“You almost sound jealous.”

He snorts and angles his head back to the black SUV. I didn't see her before, but there's a pretty blonde perched on the front seat watching our exchange. I wonder if she's one of the girls he slept with during our marriage or if she's new. Either way, I feel bad for her. *Piece of advice for ya: get out while you still can.*

Whatever motive inclined him to send those flowers and apologetic note is dead and buried. Her presence is confirmation that Andrew isn't here to drag me back home with him—that, and the manila envelope clutched in his right hand.

“What's in the envelope? More love letters?”

“Divorce papers.” He says it like it's supposed to wound me, so I'm careful not to appear too gleeful. I don't want him knowing how badly I want out of this marriage. “I figured you'd stay here for a few weeks and then come crawling home, but these weeks without you have been nice. I realized how glad I was to be rid of you. You really were a boring fuck there at the end. I'd like to try my hand with someone who's a little more appreciative of the life I give them.”

I assume he means the mail-order blonde in the SUV.

“Did you come all the way here just so you could tell me you're glad to be done with me? You could have just mailed the papers.”

“I was curious to see your new life.” He nods toward the farmhouse. “You think this new guy will want you after he finds out what an ungrateful cunt you are?” He must see me wince because he laughs. “Don't tell me you have feelings for him?”

His laughter takes a turn for the sinister, and I want to say something, want to tell him to go to hell, but my words die on my lips.

“Jesus Christ, Meredith. You're pathetic.”

I reach my hand out and speak, but my voice is barely above a whisper. “Give me the papers and leave.”

He holds them against his chest, taunting me. “You should be on your knees thanking me. Do you even realize what I did? I couldn’t wait to be rid of you, so I called in a few favors. If you sign these and get them to my lawyer by Monday, he’ll be able to expedite the process.”

“How long?”

“Four weeks.”

In California, it’s supposed to take six months.

I wonder what kind of strings he had to pull to get rid of me that quickly, but honestly, I don’t care. I’m so excited I want to rip the envelope out of his hands. I won’t though. I don’t want to get that close to him.

“I need to have a lawyer look over everything.”

He smirks. “If you think you’ll be able to squeeze another cent out of me, you’re wrong. We were only married for five years. My lawyer confirmed that you have no leg to stand on. You left me. It looks bad, don’t you think? I’m the doting husband who’s been reaching out to your sister and sending you flowers while you can’t even bother to call me back. In fact, everyone we know has been lovingly referring to you as the gold-digging disappearing act. It has a nice ring to it.”

Just then, his attention cuts behind me as the screen door is thrown open. I glance back to see Edith step out onto the front porch with a shotgun resting by her side.

“There a problem out here?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Andrew snaps. “I’m having a conversation with my wife.”

Edith narrows her eyes and glances thoughtfully into the distance. “Now, see, that’s not how we greet people here in Cedar Creek. Would you like to try that again?”

The door to the SUV opens and the blonde steps out. “Andrew! C’mon, this is stupid. Let’s go.”

“Get back in the car!” he snaps.

I glance to Edith and shake my head. She doesn't drop the shotgun, though I don't think she plans on using it. With Edith, though, you never really know.

"I'll have my lawyer look at the papers and then I'll sign," I tell Andrew. "After that, you leave me the hell alone."

He tosses the envelope in the gravel at his feet and dust puffs up around it.

Even in the end, he couldn't act like a decent human being. It's a shame. If he'd just walked over and handed the envelope to me nicely, maybe Edith wouldn't have cocked the shotgun and fired.

A few pellets ping off a trashcan in the distance and Andrew cowers, hands covering his head.

"Are you fucking insane?!"

Edith reloads the shotgun. "Senility *is* exceedingly common at my age."

His girlfriend slams the car door and cowers behind the dash.

Andrew jerks up, eyes blazing. "I'm calling the cops!"

Edith pumps the shotgun. "Good. I've got the number for the station if you need it. Petey'll probably answer. You let him know Edith McKnight's the one 'bout to fill your sorry ass full of birdshot."

He curses under his breath and runs for the SUV like he's concerned she's going to open fire again. I'm not 100% sure she won't.

He puts the SUV in reverse and hightails it down the gravel drive. I have no doubt he was serious about calling the cops.

"Think you'll get in trouble?" I ask, slightly worried.

Edith levels me with a bored stare. "Welcome to Texas, darlin'."

JACK

I'm having lunch in San Antonio with the heads of the grocery chain on Monday afternoon when I get a call from Cedar Creek's sheriff. I excuse myself and walk outside before answering.

"Pete, what's going on?"

"Jack, hey. I don't want to worry you, but I have an Andrew Wilchester down here at the police station wanting to press charges against Edith, spoutin' off about attempted murder."

It takes a second for the name to click, but when it does, I see red.

"Wait, wait—say that again. Andrew Wilchester is there now? In Cedar Creek?"

"Got him right outside in the waiting room. Won't leave until I issue a warrant for Edith's arrest. From the looks of it, he's chewing out one of my deputies at this very moment. Better him than me."

"What's Edith got to do with anything? Did something happen at the farmhouse?"

"Sounds like it, though I haven't been able to get the full story from him. He's real worked up, rambling on and on about how his lawyers are going to take Blue Stone for all it's worth after locking Edith away. I think he really expects me to march down there and put your grandma in handcuffs. Can

you imagine? I think she'd have me cuffed before I got within ten feet of her."

He's not making any sense. Why would Edith need handcuffs?

"Pete, start from the beginning. What happened?"

"Andrew showed up wanting to talk to one of your employees—Meredith? Claimed he had some business with her. Apparently Edith didn't like the look of him, because she may have, well, fired at him with a shotgun."

Of course she did.

"Did anyone get hurt? How's Meredith? And Edith?"

"Everyone's fine, which is why I'm not too worried about this guy causing trouble. I do have an obligation to investigate, so I had Martinez go down to the ranch to take statements. The way this Wilchester guy kept going on, I half figured Edith would blast on him too, but there she was rockin' on the porch, inviting him inside for some sweet tea and homemade cookies. He's still over there, gettin' fat."

"Good. Keep him there, please, until I get back into town."

"Should I be worried about this guy?"

"I don't know, but if Andrew's that worked up, I don't want him going back by the house. I'd rather have you keep an eye on him until he settles down."

"I can't hold him here, but I can stall him."

"I can probably make it to the station in an hour at the most."

"You don't think it's a better idea for you to head back to Blue Stone?"

"I just need five minutes with him."

He lowers his voice. "Now listen, I don't consider Edith to be a threat to public safety, and besides, she was defending her own property, but if you hit him inside the station, we'll have to book you."

“Then tell him to wait outside the station.”

“Jack,” he warns, but I’m already heading back inside to excuse myself from the rest of lunch.

That drive back to Cedar Creek is a blessing and a curse—a blessing because it gives me time to cool down from my initial rage that Andrew had the audacity to show up on my property unannounced, a curse because that calmness doesn’t last long. I have time to rebuild my anger a dozen times over, right up until I whip my truck into a parking spot at the police station beside a fancy black SUV.

When I walk inside, Andrew’s still there, pacing in the waiting room like a caged animal. He’s shouting about the “damn hillbilly police force wasting his time” and I don’t hesitate. I don’t think of the consequences. I think of the night Meredith drunkenly opened up to me about the abuse she sustained over the years, the twisted manipulated hold this sick fuck had over her, and I march right up to him and sock him square in the face.

My punch is solid. I wouldn’t be surprised if I broke bone.

I’m in a daze as he hits the ground, knocked out cold.

Police officers rush over and put me in handcuffs.

Pete finds me in the holding cell, my hands between my knees, my gaze on the floor.

“Goddammit, I told you not to touch him,” he admonishes with an annoyed tone.

I peer up as he pulls a keychain from his belt buckle and unlocks the door.

“Coulda killed him, you idiot. Then you’d really be up shit creek.”

“Is he pressing charges?”

“Obviously—you heard what kinda guy he is. Luckily, most of the witnesses saw it as a little slap. Misdemeanor assault, \$500 fine most likely.”

I nod. “I doubt that blonde with him will corroborate that version of the story. She saw what happened.”

“Oh, she left about an hour ago, sick of this guy’s bullshit, most likely. Officers overhead her shouting that she was going back to California without him. As far as I can tell, it’s your word against his.”

He slides the cell door open and I push to stand.

“Best \$500 I ever spent.”

“Yeah, well, it’ll also go on your record, so don’t make this vigilante thing a habit.”

“I didn’t plan on hitting him. I just wanted to talk.”

He chuckles under his breath and pats my shoulder. “That punch sure looked like it was worth a thousand words.”

I don’t see Andrew again as I leave the station, and that’s a good thing. That one punch felt pretty good; a second one would probably feel even better.

I had time to cool off in that holding cell, but now I’m more anxious than ever to see Meredith. I want to know why Andrew came to town and what he said to her. I want to know if he threatened her in any way. I won’t allow it. I’ll get a restraining order, a fence, a fucking private army stationed at the front of Blue Stone if that’s what it’ll take for her to never have to see him again.

I’m relieved when I pull up at home and see a black-and-white parked out front. Officer Martinez is inside playing a game of Scrabble with Meredith and Edith. True to Pete’s word, there’s sweet tea and a plate of cookies spread out on the table. Martinez looks damn comfortable sitting there, but as soon as he sees me step inside, he shoots to his feet.

I tip my head in thanks. “Good to see you, Connor.”

“Things, uh, settle down at the station?”

His gaze shifts to my bloody knuckles and I wonder if he got word about the incident.

“Everything’s fine.”

I glance to where Meredith is sitting, eyes wide with worry. Without a word, she stands and rounds the table, walking toward me in a daze. There’s an emotion in her eyes I’ve never seen as she steps right up to me and wraps her arms around my waist. I’m still standing frozen as her forehead hits my chest and she squeezes me tight. A chain reaction happens so suddenly, emotions firing off one after another: anger replaced by relief, worry replaced by love. I bend down and press a kiss to the top of her head as her shoulders shake. I wonder what kind of day she’s had, if she was scared when Andrew showed up like that. I wish I’d been here with her and feel guilty that I wasn’t. I whisper that against her ear and she shakes her head, but there are no words.

Edith and Martinez excuse themselves and I wrap my hand around her neck so I can tilt her head back and look at her face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, gaze flitting back and forth between her eyes.

I finally realize she’s not crying...she’s laughing.

“You should have seen Edith with the shotgun.”

“Tell me what happened with Andrew. Why was he here?”

She huffs out a little exhale and smiles—*smiles!*

“He actually came to hand-deliver divorce papers.”

Hope explodes into my chest. “You’re kidding.”

She steps back to retrieve a stack of papers from the coffee table so she can hand them off to me.

“Nope. Apparently, he’s as eager to get rid of me as I am to get rid of him. He said he has a way to expedite the process once I get them signed.”

I start riffling through the papers quickly. I’ll need a little while to read them, and of course I’ll pass them along to my

lawyer, but they're real, honest-to-goodness divorce papers. She's not kidding.

“Why'd Edith fire the shotgun then?”

A little chuckle escapes as she shakes her head at the memory.

“Oh, he was being an asshole. Edith had had enough and wanted to scare him a little.”

“By trying to kill him?”

She rolls her eyes. “Is that what he said happened? The shot wasn't even close. She was aiming a couple yards off.”

I smile at Edith's gumption. “Andrew was trying to get attempted murder charges drawn up. She could have spent the rest of her life in some dingy jail cell all because she couldn't help herself.”

“Ain't a jury in the land that would convict me!” Edith shouts from the kitchen. Apparently, she didn't go too far when she left us alone. “That pansy boy hit the deck like he was in the middle of a war zone. Total wimp if you ask me—that's why he had to pick on Meredith, made him feel better about himself!”

Meredith and I exchange a smile and then her expression turns thoughtful.

“Wait...” Meredith says, frowning. “How'd you find out about all this? Aren't you supposed to be in San Antonio?”

“Sheriff called me, let me know what had happened. I rushed here as soon as I heard about it.”

Her eyes narrow on my rumpled clothes then her gaze falls to my bloody knuckles.

“You rushed straight here?” she asks, picking up my hand to inspect it.

Her bottom lip juts out as she examines the damage. It's nothing.

“I might have made a quick stop at the police station first, but I did bring you the souvenir I promised.”

It's one of those plastic police badges they pass out to kids on school field trips. It proclaims the wearer to be a Junior Deputy Sheriff. I'm pretty sure it's legit.

“Welcome to the force.”

Her blue eyes whip up to me. She isn't impressed. “Jack!” she admonishes. “Please tell me you didn't do anything to Andrew.”

“All right,” I say, leaning down and kissing her cheek. “I didn't do anything.”

“Jack!” She groans as I head toward the kitchen. I need to clean my knuckles off.

Edith is in there, sitting at the table, sipping her tea.

Meredith tries to recruit her onto her team. “Your grandson bloodied his knuckles in a fight with Andrew!”

Edith seems barely interested.

“Technically, it wasn't a fight,” I say as I run my hand under cold water. “I punched him once and knocked him out.”

Now *that* elicits a smile from Edith.

Meredith points her finger at the two of us. “You two! I *swear!* Violence is not the answer—you can't just go around blasting shotguns and knocking people out.” She's pacing now, getting herself real worked up. “What if he presses charges? What if he gets the cops involved?!”

I remind her that the cops are already involved.

“What if you go to jail?!” Her eyes go extra wide then and her hand shoots to her mouth.

There's no talking her down. I tell her everything will work out the way it's supposed to, but she doesn't believe me until we get a call from the sheriff a few hours later informing us that Andrew is dropping all charges.

I put him on speaker and we all listen. Apparently, my lawyer came up with half a dozen charges to counter with, things like trespassing and disorderly conduct. He even went so far as to accuse Andrew of stalking and informed him that

Meredith would be filing for a restraining order. Whether or not these charges would stick in a court doesn't matter. Whatever Andrew expected to find in Texas, I'm sure it didn't include Edith and me. My suspicions are proved right when he leaves a heated voicemail for Meredith that night, informing her that he thinks they should behave like adults from this point forward.

“Sign the damn papers and let's get this over with,” he implored, right before the voicemail cut off.

She drops the signed paperwork in the mail first thing Monday morning.

MEREDITH

In the end, I have to take money from Andrew. When they drew up the divorce papers, he and his lawyer worked out a figure that was deemed more than adequate compensation for our five-year marriage. If you're wondering, it was \$500,000. To Andrew, that's pennies. To me, that's half a million dollars. Half a million shirts I don't have to fold. Half a million plates I don't have to wash. Still, I would have turned the money down altogether, but my lawyer made it clear that the quickest way forward would be to agree to their terms and move on. If I wanted to decline the money, I'd have to draft a new set of documents and pay the requisite legal fees. I don't exactly have money to burn at the moment, so... fine, *whatever*. I'll take it.

I've thought a lot about what I'll do with the money, but it's obvious, really. The second it's deposited in my account, I'll be donating to three different women's shelters around Central Texas, the region I'm happy to call my new home. I know I could use the money to pad my savings account or buy a house or start a business, but it doesn't feel right—not only because I don't want Andrew's dirty money anywhere near me, but also because I don't need that money. Most women in these shelters have no one by their side. I know how that feels. I was there once not long ago, and if my money can help lighten their load even a little, I'm more than happy to send it their way. Also, in case you think I'm doing it for completely selfless reasons, I also get a kick out of the fact that Andrew's money is going to help these women. He'd hate it. He doesn't have a philanthropic bone in this body.

Anyway, the fact that I'm giving his money to those women makes me smile at least twice a day. If I didn't want to leave well enough alone, I'd ask the organizations to each build a new wing: The Andrew Wilchester Shelter for Women Escaping From Andrew Wilchester. Who knows, I still might. It's not like his rage can hurt me anymore because—*cue confetti drop*—our divorce was finalized today.

I got a call from my lawyer at 1:35 PM and I sank down to the floor then wept like a little baby. It was totally unexpected. If someone had asked how I would react when I got that call, I would have assumed I'd pop some champagne, blast Beyoncé's "Single Ladies", and dance until I got a cramp in my side. Instead, I crumbled into a heap of tears and snot. It was like when Frodo finally dropped that damn ring into the fire after three long-ass books full of trouble for himself: *It's over. It's done.*

There was no way to pinpoint the exact source of my tears. It was relief, of course, but there were also conflicting, strange emotions like fear and anger and pity. I cried for the younger version of myself, the naive girl who fell in love with a monster. I cried for the fact that I'd wasted five good years in a manipulative marriage before I finally had the courage to leave. I cried because even though I want to be independent and in control of my future, a part of me is still scared I won't be able to do it. I also cried because I'm scared of the scars. I don't want this to harden my heart. I want to learn from my mistakes without swearing off love altogether. I want to make my own money and pave my own path without assuming that leaning on a partner makes me weak, stupid, or crippled.

Even after my ordeal, I still believe in the power of love, and maybe I owe that to Jack. I wonder if I'd still be so reluctant to shun love if I wasn't currently *in* love.

An objective observer would say it's too soon. They would purse lips and cross arms, admonishing me for even *considering* love at a time like this. They would declare that I should be single for exactly one year and one day and not a moment sooner, that I must take time for self-discovery (*Have you read Eat, Pray, Love?!*) before I even consider opening

my heart to another man. If this were the 1850s, they would demand I wear mourning black out in public and shun all social engagements.

I get it. I really do. It would be great if life worked like that. How convenient would it be to meet someone special at the exact right time it was deemed socially acceptable?

The truth is, life introduced me to Jack less than 24 hours after I left Andrew. Insane, I know, and sure, at the time, I didn't see him as a potential love interest. In fact, given the choice between lover and potential murderer, I would have put money on the latter.

But the great thing about my life is that it's *my* life, not their life. If *they* think I should let my heart turn to stone, that's okay. They can think that, but I'll be over here, accepting love at face value. It's simple if you don't think too hard. I want to love Jack, fiercely, naively, and just as strongly as if love had never burned me in the past, because the alternative? Turning into a miserable shrew? Yeah, hard pass on that.

Today is a big day, not just because my divorce is finalized, but because I'm going to see Helen. She and Brent returned from Europe earlier in the week and they're hosting a small dinner party to show off the renovations on their house. I've been nervous about it since she first invited me, planning and re-planning my outfit five different times. She and I have talked a bit over the last few weeks, but it's been surface-level bullshit, the stuff I hate. Tonight will be different. I wrote her a long letter, and I mean *long*. It's 10 pages, front and back. In it, I apologized for my mistakes and outlined exactly what I want for our future. I could vomit just thinking about it. It might seem strange. She's my sister, but we've never really *been* sisters. I want to give it a try. I'm basically handing her my heart and openly declaring that even though we each have plenty of reasons to be bitter, we deserve more than that. I want us to be close and confide in one another. I want her in my life from here on out.

I told Jack about the letter the other day.

“It’s ten pages.”

“Are you going to bind it in paperback or hardback?”

I shoved him. “It’s long because I had a lot to say!”

He laughed. Hopefully Helen doesn’t laugh.

I have my work cut out for me. Our relationship is damaged with a capital D. Andrew was a wedge between us, along with distance, deep-seated jealousy, and the ten-year age gap. Now, I’m going to be the glue—sticky, annoying, and resilient. She is going to love me because she has no other choice. That’s the plan.

Edith and I ride together to Helen’s house; Jack had to run over to the restaurant first so he’s meeting us there. I’m quiet in the car, cradling the letter on my lap. Edith asks me if I’m nervous and I reply with a noncommittal grunt. Truthfully, yes, I’m either nervous or my stomach has stopped working. I couldn’t manage food all day, and my hands are shaking. I tell Edith we should keep circling the block as we pull up out front.

“I grew up in the wake of the Depression—I’m not wasting gas,” she says before parking.

Edith isn’t an enabler, and that’s a good thing. She gives me the kick in the ass I need, both in the car and midway up the path when I turn back and tell her I left something at the farmhouse. She grabs ahold of my dress and tugs me all the way to the front door.

When it’s swept open, it’s like I’m seeing my sister for the first time in five years. Her light brown hair is trimmed short, just below her chin. Her simple wrap dress accentuates her curves and her glowing skin. I’m glad to see she looks happy.

I hold up the bouquet we picked up on the way—sunflowers. I remember she used to love them when she was younger, and I tell her so. She smiles.

“They’re still my favorite.”

I’m pleasantly surprised to see Daniel and Leanna along with a few other guests in the living room. Helen introduces

me as her baby sister, and maybe it's wishful thinking, but I think I can almost detect pride in her voice. After I wave to the room at large, I follow Helen into the kitchen.

“Can I help with anything?”

She's got her hands full finishing up dinner and I really hope she says yes, because this is so awkward and I have nothing to do with my hands. I can't keep wringing them out. I try crossing my arms, but then I seem tense. I prop one on my hip and try to act natural.

“Sure, can you put those flowers in water? There's a vase in that cabinet over there.”

As I trim and arrange them, she tells me about Europe. She says it was the trip of a lifetime, but she and Brent are both happy to be back home.

“We walked a ton, but I still gained ten pounds. It's all those damn croissants! I think I ate six a day. Starting tomorrow, Brent and I are going on a diet.”

“I think you look great. You have that post-travel glow. But, if you want, I have a few healthy recipes I've been making for Jack and Edith lately. I can write them down for you.”

After we finish talking about her trip, we're silent for a few minutes as she puts me to work mixing up the salad ingredients. We have things to talk about. The letter is burning a hole in my purse and I know she knows about the divorce. I mentioned it the other day in a text.

“Have you heard from Andrew lately?” I ask.

“Didn't I tell you I blocked his number?”

She says it so casually that I don't think I hear her right.

“*What?*”

She glances over her shoulder. “Yeah. After Jack told me what happened when he came down to Texas, I blocked his ass.”

Wow. Um, okay.

Talk about the end of an era.

I'm so shocked, I have nothing to say, so I apologize. "I'm sorry about...well, everything."

She sets down the spoon she was using to stir the pasta. "Please don't apologize, okay? I didn't want to get into this tonight, not with everyone here, but—" She breaks eye contact and glances away, taking a deep breath. "I was so wrong about...a lot actually." I hold stock-still as she continues. "This situation has been hard for me to navigate. I've always wanted the best for you, and I thought that meant staying with Andrew. You have to understand, Meredith"—her voice cracks—"I thought you were happy. I really did."

I'm around the island and pulling her into a hug before she can even finish.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry too. Had I not cut you out of my life, you would have known. You would have believed me." I pull back and try on a big smile. It feels tight and awkward. "Let's get coffee this week, yeah? You and me? I have a letter to give you, but I'll wait and give it to you then. I don't want to make you cry at your dinner party."

She laughs and shakes her head, drying her eyes with the back of her hand. "I swore I wouldn't cry when I saw you, but it just feels so strange to have you here in Cedar Creek. I still can't believe you're actually staying."

"I really like it here."

"I'm glad. I never imagined you and I would live this close to one another again."

After we pull ourselves together, we go back to prepping dinner and don't talk about anything too heavy. She tells me she's excited to go back to work on Monday.

"I know it seems weird, but I actually missed it."

I laugh. "Well Jack definitely missed you too. He's been counting down the days until you get back."

She smiles. "Honestly, I don't know how you do it. I work mainly from home and I go out to the ranch a couple times a

week for meetings, but you live there! God, you must be so sick of him by the end of the day.”

“Oh, umm...”

Yeah...Helen doesn't know about Jack and me, mostly because we've only been officially dating for a month, and also because I'm scared of what she'll say when she does find out. A part of me fears she'll be quick to judge me.

I even tried to strategize with Jack about this dinner party last night. I was lying with him on the couch while we pretended to watch TV. Really, we were making out with one ear perked for Edith's car. His hands were underneath my bra and mine were working on the zipper of his jeans. We've been like that lately—hot and heavy—and it's driving me crazy. Jack has kept us safely tucked away in the foreplay zone. No sex, because there's apparently no rush. He doesn't want to take advantage of me—OF ME! Is he kidding?! I'm about to march down to the barn to find some rope so I can tie him to my bed and take advantage *of him!* No amount of convincing on my part will work either. He has it in his head that he needs to work us up to that point slowly, *tortuously*. I am insistent. I look him square in the eyes and say plainly, “Jack, I want it.” The other day, I wrote it on a sticky note and slapped it on his computer screen: *SEX @ TONIGHT*. I even drew two anatomically correct stick figures in case he needed a visual. It didn't work.

Anyway, last night, I tried to talk to him about the dinner party in between kisses.

“Should we act like we aren't dating?”

“No.”

“Okay, but Helen doesn't know about us. Should we tone it down a little?”

As it is, our touchy-feely lovey-doveyness brings Edith to the brink of nausea at least once a day. I don't want to make Helen feel that way too.

“You're overthinking things.”

Men, *seriously*. I'm 'overthinking things'? Doesn't he realize this is a fragile situation? Doesn't he realize I'm trying to mend my relationship with Helen and we need to handle this with tact or everything could blow up in our face?

That's why when Helen says, "You must be so sick of him by the end of the day," my answer is, "Oh, umm..."

She doesn't even notice my fumbling, but now my nerves are stronger than ever. We can't do this. I can't date Jack. I'll just break it off with him and then I'll never have to tell Helen, and sure I really think I love him, but there are other fish in the sea and lots more cowboys where he came from. *Phew, glad that's settled.*

"Jack!" someone shouts in the living room, and the subject of all of my fantasies has just arrived. I can hear him greeting guests in the other room with that husky, deep voice, and my heart is a fluttering little mess. My hands are shaking so badly, I have to stop chopping carrots.

Helen smiles. "Oh, Jack's here!"

I keep my mouth zipped shut. The only reaction that won't give us away is a non-reaction.

When I don't move, she quirks a brow. "Aren't you going to go say hi?"

I reply like this: "Oh...hmm...um...yeah...ha!"

She looks at me like I've just suffered a stroke in her kitchen, and then Mr. Sexy Cowboy walks through the doorway and all my well-planned tact flies straight out the window because he's so handsome, my mouth waters.

"There you are," he says with a smile.

Helen glances between us like she's confused. I try for the same expression. *Yes, I know, Helen—why is he looking at me like he's seen my panties up close and personal? So strange!*

Jack isn't having it. He marches right up to me, bends down, and presses a kiss to my lips. My knees buckle a little. When he's made his point, he pulls back, wraps his hand around my waist, and turns us to face Helen.

“Helen, your sister was worried about telling you that we’re dating, but you know I’ve always preferred to be direct.”

Oh.

My.

God.

I drop my face into my hands.

“Wait...*what?!?*” she exclaims.

What a fun way to die—of pure mortification, right in the middle of my sister’s newly remodeled kitchen.

“For how long?”

“Oh, I don’t know...a month?” Jack answers nonchalantly.

She doesn’t exactly sound upset, which gives me enough courage to glance up at her. Her hand is on her mouth and her eyes are welling up with some fluid that looks a lot like tears.

I cringe and rush toward her to grab her shoulders so she’s forced to listen to me. “I swear this is as unexpected to me as it is to you. I hated him when I first moved here!”

Jack nods. “It’s true. I was a real asshole. Also, she wasn’t exactly the ideal hire.”

“But then we sort of became friends?” I look to him for help. “Right? I don’t know.”

“No, it’s been more than that on my end for a while—since the rope swing.”

My mouth drops open. “Even then?”

He shrugs, all confident and unruffled by this obviously awkward conversation.

Wow. Okay.

Then, in the most shocking turn of events, Helen yanks a towel off the counter and rushes over to pop Jack’s bicep.

“Jack McKnight! I asked you to help my little sister get back on her own two feet, not to leg-sweep her into your damn

bed!”

She winds up the towel again, but he’s learned his lesson and moves out of the way before she gets him again.

He holds up his hands in defense. “I did help her!”

“You better not be taking advantage of her,” she snaps with a protective tone.

I blush a dark red. “*Believe me*, he’s not.”

Jack grins at that, which only pisses Helen off more. She’s really going to bat for me, which is definitely a new thing. I like it.

It takes a bit more convincing before Helen will calm down and stop growling at him about dating “her baby sister”, but she does eventually come around. In fact, she tears up she’s so happy for us.

“You two—” she sniffles. “I can’t believe it. If you’d asked me before, I would have said it’d never work, but now that I see you together, it makes perfect sense.” She’s shaking her head. “Jesus! What else are you going to surprise me with?! You two aren’t engaged are you? *Oh my god*, am I going to be an aunt?!”

I don’t bother telling her it’s actually impossible for me to be pregnant at the moment. Instead, I laugh and shake my head. “I swear this is it. No more surprises.”

After that, the rest of the night is a whirlwind. Jack and I sit beside each other during dinner and though I’d like to crawl over and sit in his lap, I resist and am a very good dinner guest. I keep my hands to myself, even when, as Helen serves dessert and we’re all sipping coffee, Jack leans back and drops his arm on the back of my chair. I want to reach over and touch his thigh, but I don’t trust myself. My libido has a hair-pin trigger at this point. Sure, I’ve had orgasms, and don’t get me wrong, they’ve been W-O-N-D-E-R-F-U-L, but there’s something missing, something I want even more—something I’ve decided I’m finished waiting for.

MEREDITH

Neither one of us is talking on the drive home. The radio is playing softly in the background, and we'll be back home in fifteen minutes...fifteen minutes of quiet country roads. I look back over my shoulder and see one of his jackets in the back of the truck, probably forgotten from winter.

On our right, there's nothing but cornfields. On the left, rolling hills and oak trees.

"Does this land belong to Blue Stone?"

He nods. "It starts back near the edge of town and stretches this way a couple miles."

Good.

"Pull over up there, where the road cuts into the cornfield."

"Why?"

"I want to see something."

"A cornfield?"

Not exactly.

Despite the skepticism in his tone, he listens and pulls off the road. We dip between the rows of corn.

"Keep going." The road turns to dirt and there's nothing but stalks as far as the eye can see. We're at least a mile from the main road, not another soul in sight.

“This is good,” I say, unbuckling my seatbelt and reaching into the back for his jacket.

He puts the truck in park and turns, a question in his eyes, but I don’t give it time to surface. I hop out of the truck and round the back so I can lower the tailgate and climb up. Fortunately, it’s empty and pretty clean—not that it would stop me if it wasn’t.

Jack cuts the engine and steps out, leaving the door open.

He doesn’t realize we’ll be staying a while.

“Might want to close your door or that overhead light will kill your battery.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you have planned?”

I shake out his jacket and drop it on the bed of the truck. I set my phone down and Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” plays softly from the speakers.

“Oh my god,” he says, shaking his head.

“Haven’t you figured it out by now?” I ask, stepping to the edge of the truck bed and leaning down to prop my hands on the ledge. I smirk and he steps right up so I can kiss him. His hand wraps around my neck and his fingers twine through my hair, keeping me bent there while he deepens the kiss.

His fingers massage my neck. His tongue skims against mine and my arms start shaking from the weight of holding myself up. I smile and break the kiss, pressing the back of my hand to my lips.

His eyes are alight with mischief, but he’s still there on the ground. Maybe I’ll need to do a bit more convincing.

I move to the first button on my sundress. There are five up top. Each one will reveal a little more of my pale cream bra—the same bra I wore the day we jumped off the rope swing.

“Y’know, I’m legally a single woman as of today.”

His brow arches, but his eyes are on my fingers as I slowly tug each button free.

“That means your excuses have all run out.”

He shakes his head and waves for me to get down. “Let me take you back to the farmhouse, to a bed.”

“This is a bed—well, a truck bed. Are you worried someone’ll see us?”

My taunt brings a little smirk to his lips. He wipes it away and glances down the road, contemplating something. I want to know what he’s thinking. I want to know how much more convincing it’ll take before he climbs up here.

All five buttons are free and I push the strap of my dress down my shoulder.

He’s watching me, mesmerized.

“*Meredith,*” he warns.

“*Jack.*”

His brown eyes implore me to get down, but I shake my head and offer up a sweet smile.

I’ve never stripped like this for a man, but it’s exhilarating. I know he wants me as much as I want him. I know he’s scared to hurt me, but I’m not as fragile as he thinks. In fact, I think I’ve proven pretty resilient these last couple months.

I push the second strap of my dress down, and—*oops*—the fabric falls to my waist. His eyes skim down, blazing a path across my bare skin. The humor is wiped clean. Now he’s looking at me like a man who’s a little bit angel and a whole lotta devil.

A summer breeze picks up strands of my hair and wraps me in a gentle warmth. Goose bumps bloom across my skin, and all the while, he stands there, watching me.

I tug the rest of my dress down and kick my shoes off with it. I’m standing there in my underwear, exposed and vulnerable. He could still force me to get down. He could drag me to the farmhouse and tuck me into bed, but I don’t think he wants to wait any longer either. I think he’s sick of being the responsible one.

With a groan and a tug of his hand through his hair, he turns and whips the truck door closed. The light cuts off and

we're left under the stars. I blink, trying to force my eyes to adjust faster, but the loss of that sense heightens all the rest. I'm jumpy and nervous as he rounds the truck and hops on up.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he warns with a husky tone before his hands find my waist and he pulls me to face him.

My bare leg brushes against his denim-clad thigh and he squeezes, holding me tight. His chest crushes mine and I feel so small, so out of my league all of a sudden.

His head dips down and his breath hits my hair. I shiver even before he presses a kiss just below my ear.

"Have you ever had sex in the bed of a truck?" I ask, breathless.

He laughs. "I like to treat women a little better than that."

"Oh yeah?"

He nuzzles against my ear. "I don't think you realize how uncomfortable it's going to be for you."

I smirk and kiss his cheek. "Not if I'm on top."

And I will be. Tonight, my fantasy is coming true.

We kiss like that, standing in the bed of his truck until I'm panting and writhing and acting like I'm going to spontaneously combust if he doesn't fulfill my every want and need ASAP. My hands have done the heavy lifting, unbuttoning his jeans and yanking them off as fast as possible. His shirt is gone too, hanging limply on one of the cornstalks after I tossed it out of the truck bed impatiently.

He tugs me down to sit on his lap as his back rests against the cab of the truck. I straddle him and smile.

This is exactly what I wanted.

My bra is gone as quick as his shirt and then there's the most blissful few seconds of skin on skin, soft breasts against hard muscle. We both sigh against each other and he winds his fingers in my hair, tilting my chin until my mouth is perfectly positioned for him. I want to keep kissing him until my lips

stop working, until they're so chapped that I can't even talk, but I want something else even more. I roll my hips against him like the beginning of a lap dance.

There's a deep groan from the base of his throat and it's like I just sparked a match. I like that sound. I want to coax that sound out of him again and again.

It's just us in this field with nothing but time. I kiss my way down his chest and then stand.

He stares up at me, and his expression does all the talking, replacing all the hatred Andrew filled my head with. His expression is love, and need, and adoration. His eyes are smoldering as I gently push my underwear down and step out of them.

The moon is nearly full and bright enough that I'm pretty sure he can see every inch of me.

I smirk and point down. "Your turn."

He laughs. "Oh yeah? So I have to put my ass cheeks on cold metal? Interesting how that worked out."

"Oh!" I snap. "That's why I brought the jacket!"

I'd almost forgotten about it.

He stands and I situate the fabric. He tugs off his boxer briefs and my mouth waters. I fist my hands by my sides and do a nice, slow once-over of him. It's a lot to take in, like a *whole* lot. He chuckles under his breath and reaches for my hand, tugging me down onto him again. This time, though, he spins me around so my back hits his chest. It's a new angle, and now we're both facing out to where the starry sky meets the horizon.

"Lie back against me," he says, easing me toward him until my head rests against his shoulder. He cradles me there with one hand around my waist and the other tugging my thighs apart. My knees splay out like butterfly wings and then he traces soft circles up the inside of my thigh.

Suddenly I feel exposed. Suddenly I feel like we're out in the middle of nowhere and anyone could wander up at any

second.

“Are you sure we’re alone?”

He chuckles. “It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?”

Oh god, what have I done?

He kisses my cheek. “Relax.”

The second half of that word coincides with his finger sliding inside me. My back arches and *can we get this man a slow clap because he really knows what he’s doing*. He adds a second finger while his thumb skims little circles across my most sensitive area, the spot where all my hopes and dreams live. I wrap my hands around his neck and hold on for dear life. His other hand (the one not currently BLOWING MY MIND) wraps around my chest and palms my breast. Details hit me from every sense: warm, floral summer air, callused hands, hard muscle, smooth wetness. Any residual shyness has flown out the window. I’m splayed out on top of him like I’m on a pool float, basking in the summer sun, but this is better. I’m basking in Jack and I tell him that. He laughs and his chest rumbles and then his fingers start sliding faster.

I was ready for him as soon as we turned off the main road. I was even more ready for him after we started kissing in our underwear. Now—*now*, I’m a puddle, barely sentient. I’ll come any second if he keeps moving his fingers, pumping them into me like that. My hands turn into tiny hooks as he drags his fingers out slowly and brushes soft circles. It’s like he’s giving me a preview of what’s to come. My toes are already curling. I can feel the warning signs—those first delicious sparks—and then I realize I’m speaking. I’m begging him to stop. I know what it feels like to have him bring me to the brink of oblivion like this. It’s so good—applause-worthy—but I will not be distracted from my end goal. I AM GOING TO HAVE SEX WITH THIS HOT COWBOY IN THE BED OF A PICKUP TRUCK LIKE IT’S MY CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT.

I tell him this, too, and now we’re both laughing, but I’m not distracting him enough, because he’s teasing my breast in a way that’s making it hard to form complete sentences. I know

what he's doing. He likes this position where he's in charge and I'm nothing but a gasping mess of want. He promises me he'll make me come again, but NO. I am done waiting. I push his hand away and spin around, reaching for his crumpled jeans.

“Please tell me you keep a condom in your wallet.”

If not, I'll fashion one out of something—a corn husk, perhaps woven grass.

My aim is to get his wallet from his back pocket, but I'm so impatient, I just end up pawing at his jeans like an animal who lacks opposable thumbs. We're laughing as he yanks them away from me and extracts the condom, tears it open, and rolls it on with such precision, such grace. He could go to the Olympics for condom application. It's obvious he's done this before, and I know I'm in for a treat. I'd rub my hands together like a little evil mastermind but they're currently occupied with his very tempting pectoral muscles.

I sit down on his lap and touch every surface I can get my hands on. Yes, I realize I'm so close to having him inside me. I can feel him beneath me, stiff and demanding, but now maybe I'm not in the same hurry I was a second ago. I have him right where I want him. All that hard, tan muscle is just sitting there waiting for me to touch it. That chest is just the tip of the iceberg. His shoulders are something else. I take hold of them and try to shake him. He doesn't budge. I move my hands down to his biceps and squeeze, trying to see if I can close my fist. I make it halfway around.

“It feels like you're trying to size up what part of me you want to eat first,” he says with a lazy smile.

I smile wickedly, and then I bend down and sink my teeth into his shoulder, not hard, but he still reaches around and grips my ass. I yelp and release him. It's tit for tat.

I go back to my exploration. I'm charting unmapped territory, staking claims with tiny Meredith Avery flags. It's important to be thorough. I don't let a single inch escape my notice, not his tight abs or the hair that trails down, down,

down. He's tan everywhere, warm everywhere, *hard* everywhere.

"Not in such a hurry now?" he teases, right before he skims his hands up from my ass and grips my hips. He uses his hold on me to drag me back and forth across his length, and I think one of my eyes starts to twitch. He's taunting me. He's wearing a devilish smirk I try to wipe away with a kiss, but that was a mistake, because now he's *still* dragging me back and forth *and* he's kissing me senseless. He slides his tongue into my mouth and this isn't even foreplay anymore, this is the best sex I've ever had and we aren't even doing it yet. A ripple shoots up my spine, and I pat his shoulder like I'm tapping out of a fight.

"No...no more of that."

There are heavy, hot breaths in between each of my words.

This is falling apart. I'm falling apart. I was the one to initiate this little bone-a-rama. I was supposed to be the one rocking his world, but there's no more delaying. We are having sex right now, and if it kills me, then so be it. I lived a good life. Adios.

"I was going to do this sexy thing where I tease you until you're weeping with want," I admit.

"Oh yeah?" he taunts. "Go ahead."

I spin a little circle on his chest. It's the manliest thing I've ever seen, a broad plane with a sprinkling of dark hair.

"Ha ha. Yeah, right. I think I've lost feeling in half my body. My heart is only pumping blood to my nether regions."

"If it helps, I think you're sexy as hell."

My brow perks up. "That *does* help."

He grinds his very hard, very erect length against me. It's a sure sign that he's as turned on as I am. Maybe my plan didn't backfire as much as I thought it did?

With a burst of courage, I reach down and grip him in my hand. It's, *ahem*, bigger than I'm accustomed to, but hey, that's what they say about things in Texas.

This is happening. He reaches up to grip my hips in his hands, holding some of my weight for me. It makes it easier to push onto one foot and angle myself over him so that together, we can guide me down until he slides into me the first few inches. I hiss, surprised by the tight fit. I ease off a bit, but the second he's gone, I crave him again.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

It's sweet, the idea that if I wasn't okay, we'd stop. He could crack my pelvis and I would demand he keep going.

"Here," he says, moving my free hand to his shoulder at the same time he lifts some of my weight off him. Now I have a better angle and I can ease down onto him gentler this time, bit by bit so it's not painful. It's earth-shatteringly sexy, being filled up while he stares into my eyes, watching for any sign of pain or hesitation. I clench. He groans. I exhale, relax, and he slides deeper.

I'm not all the way on him, but for now, I'm at my limit. I sink down on my knees and wrap my hands around his neck, kissing him and showing him how insanely hot this is, how perfectly right it feels to be here with him.

He brushes my hair behind my shoulder then wraps his palm around my neck. My pulse jumps against his thumb. "How does it feel?"

I don't answer him. Instead, I lean back and smile. The look I'm going for: moonlit goddess of the fields. The look I'm probably nailing: escaped sex addict, armed and dangerous.

I decide to turn the tables.

"How do *you* feel?"

He looks at me like I'm simple. "Are you kidding?"

"I can back off—"

With lightning speed, his hands move to my waist and he tugs me off him a little before lifting his hips and filling me again. My reaction is a wonderfully sexy eyes-rolling-into-the-back-of-my-head move.

“Again,” I demand like a spoiled toddler.
“*Moremoremore.*”

He lifts me up then drags me back down. I arch my back and my loose hair brushes the base of my spine. I’m staring up at the sky when his lips brush against one of my breasts. I’d forgotten all about my breasts. I’d forgotten they even exist, how amazingly sensitive they feel as he brushes his tongue across them. *Hooookay there.* This cowboy just became a *cowman.*

He keeps moving me up and down, on and off him, doing the heavy lifting so I’m left with nothing to do but enjoy the sparks of pleasure building inside me. My nails bite into his shoulders. I’m probably leaving crescent moon-shaped divots, but I don’t care, because my hips are relaxing and eventually, I slide down all the way onto him and his hip bones meet mine and now this is the point at which my brain can no longer translate simple messages. It exists solely to process his mouth on my breasts and his hand circling between my thighs and his hardness filling me up.

“Jack...*Jack.*”

I’m trying so hard to delay my orgasm, but it’s like trying to prop up a house of cards in a tornado. We press our foreheads together and our lips barely touch. I can feel myself clench around him and my shoulders sag as a jolt of pleasure runs down my spine. Another shock follows right after, and there’s no more holding off. I’m tipping, tipping, *tipping...* I want him to know what he’s doing to me, how sufficiently he’s shattering me from the inside out. I tell him, whispering single, choppy words against his lips as my orgasm wrecks me. I want to say more. I want to tell him I love him, but I won’t because that’s cliché and maybe he’ll think I only love him when he’s doing this to me, as if, for the rest of our lives, we’ll have to bone 24/7 to keep the love alive. *I’ll have a skinny almond milk latte—yes, YES!—and a blueberry scone—right there, harder!* But that couldn’t be further from the truth. I loved him before this moment. I loved him at the wedding, when he was sitting all alone in that pew. I loved him when he slept on the floor of the shack, scared I might not make it through the

night. I loved him when he kissed me right in front of Helen earlier, consequences be damned.

I could tell him that, but instead, I show him. My lips are on his throat and our chests are pressed together so tightly, you couldn't pry us apart if you tried. We're both damp now, sticky and hot. His fingers work their magic and he makes me come again and the second orgasm hits so quickly, I feel like he's cheating. He's memorized where I like to be touched, how I like to be touched. I tell him we're not playing by the same rules and he laughs huskily. It's the richest, happiest sound and I want to hear it again, but I want him to come even more.

I lean back and sink onto my knees so I'm kneeling over him. I like this position, this moment where he looks like he's on the brink of insanity too. I leverage myself so I can move on and off of him. I'm doing the work now and I feel seriously sexy. His head tips back and he watches me with a lazy, arrogant smile. He exhales a shaky breath as I press my hands to his chest and keep going, clenching around him when his hips buck up into me. He's been patient, a hell of a lot more patient than me.

"I want to watch you unravel," I tell him. "I want to see what you look like—"

I don't even get my full sentence out. My words push him over the edge. His hands dig into my waist so hard it's almost painful and his eyes pinch close. I can feel his orgasm surge through him, powerful and all-consuming. He's gripping me like I could slip through his fingers at any moment, like he's scared to let me go. As his shakes start to subside, I kiss his cheek, his chin, his throat. I feel like I just won a competition I didn't realize we were having. Sure, he made me come twice, but I made him come hard, and that should count for something.

He thinks my logic is flawed.

He tells me we could keep going as his hand skims down between us and *OKAY, is he honestly trying to kill me?* Because I'm like Céline Dion, except my heart *can't* go on.

I'm completely wrung dry. My knees are bruised from the bed of the truck.

"I need to hydrate and towel off. I need to sink into one of those giant ice baths athletes use after a hard workout."

He laughs and starts to uncoil me from my position on his lap. I protest.

"Let's sleep here."

"Not a good idea."

It's a great idea. I'm already half asleep on his chest right now. His shoulder makes a wonderful, albeit slightly stiff pillow.

I position his arm back around me. "Here, just hold still and don't move until I start to snore."

He doesn't listen and instead plops me onto the bed of his truck then tells me to hold up my arms. My dress is put right back on, sans bra and underwear. With the buttons undone, I feel seriously sleazy. One glance up at him proves that he likes the look a lot.

"If you keep looking at me like that, I'll maul you again," I promise.

We somehow make it out of the bed of his truck and back to the farmhouse. We tell each other to be quiet and to stop laughing as we make it up the stairs to his bedroom. We manage a shower together in which he does most of the cleaning and I do most of the slack-jawed, fully satisfied staring.

"Can we have sex in here?" I ask, painting a heart on his chest with my wet finger.

"Tomorrow."

"Okay, it's tomorrow." It *is* already past midnight.

"As soon as we wake up."

"What is that?" I ask. "Six hours?"

Too long, in my opinion. What's the least amount of sleep humans can subsist on?

"I'll need breakfast first," he points out. "For energy."

"Fiiiine."

He presses a kiss to my cheek and cuts the water. I prove useless as he towels me off and gently pushes me toward his bed. I'm too happy and in love to sleep. Doesn't he feel it? The excitement in the air?

"Hey," I say once we're lying in bed together, face to face.

He smiles and there are adorable little crinkles around his eyes. He looks worn out. I should let him sleep.

"Never mind."

His gaze drops to my lips, where I'm nibbling away as I consider something.

"What? Tell me," he insists, dragging his hand beneath the covers to take hold of my hip.

"No. It's nothing."

I close my eyes and try to tell myself to go to sleep. One adorable fluffy sheep is counted off before he says my name.

"Zee-zee-zee-zee-zee, sleeping," I insist.

"Tell me."

He shakes my body.

"It's not important."

His finger hits my eyebrow and he tugs gently so my eyelid opens.

I laugh.

"I was just going to declare my love, but it can wait until morning."

Then I close my eyes again because I'm too nervous to see what his face looks like right now. If he looks horrified, I will shrivel up and die.

"What a little chicken," he says, scooting toward me.

I wink one eye open. “*Chicken?*”

“Yeah. What was that?”

I blink both eyes open now. “What do you mean?”

“‘I was going to declare my love’? That’s like saying ‘I’m sorry you were hurt’ instead of saying ‘I’m sorry.’ It doesn’t count.”

I poke his chest. “Hey! It took a lot of courage to say that much! I don’t hear *you* declaring your love.”

He chuckles and then plain as day, he says, “I love you.”

Damn. He said it so simply—didn’t even blink.

I’m the one tearing up, eyes misty with swoony emotion.

“Oh, okay. Zee-zee-zee-zee.”

He smiles and leans over to kiss me.

“See? *Chicken.*”

“I’m not a chicken!” I slap his chest playfully. “Look at what I’ve done in the last few months! I showed up on this ranch all on my own and demanded a job from the most arrogant devil I’ve ever met—that takes courage.”

“But now you can’t tell that same devil you love him?”

I press my face to the crook of his neck and say the words against his skin. He smells delicious, just like the body wash we used to rinse off. Maybe I’ll live here, right in this little, warm pocket between his head and his heart.

His hand brushes down my spine, soothing me as he speaks. “You don’t have to say it. It’s okay. I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

It should be easy to thwart his reverse psychology mumbo-jumbo, but it’s not. *He thinks I’m not ready to say it?!*

“Are you kidding?” I pick my head up and aim blue daggers at him. “I love you! I was going to say it first! You just leapfrogged me!”

“Let’s check the record.” He holds his finger up like he’s consulting imaginary referees. “Yup, I had the first official ‘I

love you’.”

I roll over and climb on top of him to smother him to death.

He cups my butt.

“Hold still,” I groan, hands around his throat. “I’m trying to kill you.”

He laughs and it makes my entire body shake.

“Kiss me,” he says.

“Admit you’re wrong, and I’ll let you live.”

“Kiss me,” he says again. This time his brown eyes meet mine and I realize this is futile. He’s going to win every argument we ever have—there’s no competing with those eyes.

“Kiss me and I’ll let you let me live,” he promises.

My lips are within millimeters of his. “I’m the winner,” I whisper.

He smirks. “Don’t you feel like in some ways, we’re both winners?”

He laughs at his silly joke and I groan. He rolls us over, crushing me with his weight. We lock eyes and the laughter slowly dies. A heavy emotion settles over us and the mood shifts. We aren’t teasing anymore. We’re stripping each other bare and getting to the heart of what matters.

“I wasn’t sure I’d even want to love a man after Andrew,” I admit. “I loved him, he knew it, and he used that love against me.”

His brows furrow. “Are you scared of me taking advantage of you like he did?”

I think about that question for a little while then heave a resigned sigh.

“Does it make me seem foolish if I say no? If I just trust you completely?”

“Love is supposed to make us fools.”

“Oh yeah? What does that make you?”

He smiles and tips his head down to kiss me. “The biggest fool of them all.”

EPILOGUE

Jack

Today is the grand opening of Meredith's new business: a yoga studio in Cedar Creek's town square. That's right, Meredith is bringing the ancient, south Asian practice of yoga to Tiny-town, Texas. She found studio space a year ago when we were walking along the square after dinner. She saw the FOR RENT sign in the window, squashed her face to the glass, and told me her grand vision.

"Front desk there, a small studio on that side, and changing rooms in that back corner." She turned back to me, eyes gleaming. "JACK! IT'S FATE! Just this morning, Leanna rolled her yoga mat out onto some of Alfred's poop! We can't keep practicing in the middle of a field!"

She had her work cut out for her. The space used to belong to a clothing boutique, and Meredith had to completely overhaul it to transform it into a studio.

It's been hard work, long days that stretched into long nights. She wanted to be involved in every aspect of the business, partly because she couldn't afford to outsource anything, and partly because she was too stubborn to give up any amount of control to someone else. She's the sole owner, something I know she's proud of. I could have helped her with the initial capital, but she wouldn't budge on that issue. She scrimped, saved, and worked with Dotty on securing a small

business loan. I hate that she's wasting money on interest payments, but there was no convincing her otherwise.

Some aspects of the business came easily: instead of charging a monthly fee, each of her yoga classes will be donation-based. That way there's no barrier to entry. "Yoga for the people!" as she likes to say.

Some aspects of the business took a little more thought, especially the name. She kept a journal with hundreds of options. She went back and forth on a few favorites, and then one night, while we were lounging on the couch with Alfred at our feet, she turned to me and asked how Blue Stone Ranch got its name. I couldn't believe I'd never told her. I also couldn't believe how perfect the timing was. She needed to know the story, and after being together for three years, I had a question I needed to ask her.

In the late 1930s, my grandfather immigrated to the United States from England. He was sixteen, on his own, and dirt poor, but he was determined to make something of himself. Work on the railroad brought him to Central Texas. He liked it here, especially after having spent a few winters up north, and the heat never bothered him like the cold did.

One day, while he was working and laying new tracks, he accidentally dug up a blue topaz. They're common in this area, but this one was especially large and the color was unique enough that he knew he'd found something special enough to keep. He tucked it in his pocket and forgot about it until he was playing a game of poker later that night with a few guys from the railroad and a few local ranchers. He'd already used up what collateral he had when one rancher decided to up the ante, but he knew he was holding a winning hand. Then he remembered the stone in his pocket. He bet the blue topaz, won the game, and in the end, he walked away with a little bit of cash and a few acres of that rancher's land. It was hardly worth anything at the time. The soil was rough and infertile, which is why the rancher had bet it in a card game in the first place, but my grandfather saw its potential.

When it was time for his crew to move on to lay the next section of tracks, he quit working for the railroad and stayed in

Central Texas. He had that land, but not much else. For two years, he cultivated it, trying to figure out a crop that could handle the clay-filled earth, eventually moving into raising cattle and acquiring more land. It was during those early years that my grandfather met Edith. She lived in the area with her family and he'd had his eye on her for months before he finally worked up the courage to ask her out on a date. Her parents weren't impressed by a poor immigrant farmer and made their opinions known, but after only a few weeks of dating, Edith loved him just as fiercely as he loved her.

Three months after that first date, he still hadn't worked out how to make the land flourish. He had no money to buy her a ring, but he had that blue topaz, so that's what he used to ask Edith for her hand in marriage.

Edith wore that stone on her ring finger every day until she passed it down to me on my one-year anniversary with Meredith. I was ready to marry Meredith then, but I knew she needed more time. So, I gave it to her—two more years. Two more years of us building a life together on the ranch. Two more years of Meredith sinking roots into Cedar Creek. Two more years of that ring burning a hole in my pocket until one night while we lounged on the couch she asked me why Blue Stone Ranch was called Blue Stone Ranch. I told her the story and then I got down on one knee and asked her to marry me.

Two weeks later, she and I got married at the courthouse downtown. She didn't want to spend a year planning an extravagant day when all she wanted was to be my wife as soon as possible, so we agreed to elope. We planned on it being a small affair with Edith, Helen, and Brent acting as witnesses, but when we arrived, we were shocked to find that it was standing room only in the courtroom. Every ranch hand and employee from Blue Stone had crammed into the small space. Leanna and a few of the other women from Meredith's weekly yoga group had decorated the room with flowers. Meredith didn't walk down the aisle toward me; we walked hand in hand through a crowd of our closest family and friends toward the waiting judge. Meredith stood across from me in an altered version of Edith's wedding gown and we said I do in the shortest ceremony known to man. Everyone whooped and

hollered and demanded a second kiss after the first. I dipped her low and she squealed with excitement.

Afterward, we celebrated in the park outside. Our friends have never fessed up as to who did what, but there were mismatched tables and chairs, flowers and decorations, and more alcohol and food than necessary. Every restaurant in the town had donated something so in the end we didn't have one meal, we had half a dozen: barbecue, hamburgers, pasta, sandwiches, and salad. We had three different wedding cakes from three different bakeries and Meredith enjoyed smashing a bit of every single one in my face while our guests applauded a little too loudly.

Edith tells me Meredith has softened my image, says because she believed I was good and decent, everyone else started coming around to the idea too. Maybe it's true; I don't know. We've been married seven months and my ranch hands are still pretty scared of me.

"Can you believe this crowd?" Edith asks as I loop my truck onto Main Street and the Blue Stone Yoga sign comes into view.

"I don't think I'll be able to find parking."

"Check around back, see if there's a spot behind the studio."

I end up having to block Meredith in, but it shouldn't matter. She won't be leaving the yoga studio any time soon anyway. It's packed when we walk in. Everyone we know is here, even the guys who've never attempted yoga a day in their life. Sheriff Pete, Chris, Daniel—they're all here to support Meredith. She's turned the grand opening into an all-day event. There're yoga classes in the back studio, free smoothies and snacks circulate around the lobby, and a bounce-house is set up outside for the kids and kids at heart. Edith bee-lines straight for it.

"Tell Meredith I'll be inside later!"

It takes me too long to make my way back to Meredith. I get pulled in a million different directions, greeting everyone I

pass. Finally, *finally*, I see her chatting with Helen, Dotty, and Leanna behind the front desk.

They're all oohing and aahing over her baby bump. I think I was happier than she was when it really became noticeable. Every morning for the last six months, she would turn sideways and ask me point blank, "If you didn't know me, would you think I look pregnant?" and every day until recently, I would lie and exaggerate. "Oh yeah, definitely—watch where you point that big ol' belly."

She spots me approaching and her face lights up. She excuses herself from the group and meets me halfway, where I press my hand to her stomach and lean down to kiss her.

"How's he doing?"

She beams. "Good. Moving like crazy! If you leave your hand there for a little while, you'll feel him. I think he's as excited about today as I am."

I smile, and sure enough, a second later, I feel a little thump against my palm.

"There! He just did it again," she says, eyes alight with wonder.

"He was giving his pop a high five."

She laughs and tips up on her toes to kiss my cheek. "Are you staying for a while?"

I had some things I needed to do on the ranch earlier, which is why I'm arriving a little late. "Until you leave."

She eyes my workout clothes. "Does that mean you're going to take a class?"

I nod. Admittedly, yoga wasn't my thing when Meredith and I first started dating, but she's convinced me to come around. I still get my down dogs confused with my up dogs, but I'm a hell of a lot closer to touching my toes than I was a year ago.

"Are you teaching soon?"

She's my favorite teacher, and not just because she's my wife.

She checks the clock mounted on the wall behind the desk. "I have a pre-natal class in forty-five minutes."

"All right, I'll man the desk for that one."

She grins. "Don't worry, I'm teaching a flow class right after."

We're interrupted soon after that. Everyone wants to say hello and feel her bump and congratulate her on the grand opening. Cedar Creek has really shown up to support her. Every class is full and Meredith is shocked by the turnout, though she shouldn't be.

The next few months are going to be tough for us. She'll have to take time off when Noah is born, but Edith and Helen have already volunteered to take shifts at the studio helping out as much as possible. On top of that, Meredith has trained a manager and four additional yoga instructors. She'll be able to tackle a lot of the day-to-day operations from home, and I'm not worried. I'll be taking time off too, and I can handle baby duty when she needs to come into the studio—I don't expect her to put her dreams on hold to raise our son. I fully expect that he'll end up growing up inside this studio. His first steps will probably take place on a mat somewhere in this lobby, and I'm okay with that. In fact, I wouldn't have it any other way.

It feels like we're right in the middle of the good part of life, the part you usually don't realize you're in until it's over. We have so much to look forward to that I keep wanting to jump ahead. I can't wait to be a father. I can't wait to raise Noah with Meredith. I can't wait to take him down to the creek and teach him how to do a backflip off the rope swing. I can't wait to see Meredith pregnant with our second child, and possibly a third if I can convince her it's a good idea. If I brought it up to her now while she's still pregnant with this first one, she'd probably sock me square in the jaw.

I'm not worried though. Wherever our path takes us, I know we'll always have each other. After all, I made that

promise to her way back when she first came to the ranch. I told her if she wanted us, if she wanted to make a deal, Edith and I could be her people.

Even though I've been described as a devil by more than a few people, the name does have one redeeming quality: when you make a deal with me, you know I'll keep my word, forever.

THE END

Yeehaw! I hope you enjoyed that little taste of Texas. If you love olympic athletes behaving badly, keep reading for an extended excerpt of my #1 Bestselling Sports Romance **THE SUMMER GAMES: SETTLING THE SCORE**.

SYNOPSIS

As an Olympic rookie, Andie Foster has spent far more time in her cleats than between the sheets. For 21 years, her Friday nights have consisted of blocking shots rather than taking them. But now that she's landed in Rio, she's ready to see for herself if the rumors about the Olympic Village are true:

- The athletes are all sex-crazed maniacs...
- The committee passes out condoms like candy...
- The games continue long after the medals have been handed out...

As Andie walks the line between rumor and reality, she's forced into the path of Frederick Archibald, a decorated Olympic swimmer and owner of a sexy British accent—too bad he's unavailable in a way that “it's complicated” doesn't even begin to explain.

In other words: *off limits*.

It doesn't matter that he has abs that could bring peace to the Middle East and a smile that makes even the Queen blush; Andie fully intends on keeping her focus on the soccer field. But the Village is small. Suffocating. Everywhere Andie goes, Freddie happens to be there—shirtless, wet from the pool, and determined to show her a whole new meaning of the phrase “international affairs”.

**THE SUMMER
GAMES**

SETTLING THE SCORE

CHAPTER ONE

A *ndie*

EVERYONE HAS HEARD the rumors about the Olympic village—not the details of the world-class amenities and supercharged meal plans, but the whispers about the trouble athletes get into once they’re off the track and in the sack.

The committee passes out condoms like candy.

The athletes are all sex-crazed maniacs.

The games continue long after the gold medals are handed out.

In 2000, the IOC officials dished out 70,000 condoms. They must have felt the walls shaking harder than expected, because they reportedly ordered 20,000 more after the first week of competition. For the Sochi and London Games, they upped the ante to over 100,000 prophylactics for the 6,000 competitors in attendance. If you do the math, that’s 16 to 17 love gloves *per* athlete, for an event that lasts less than a month. So, whispers or not, the message rings loud and clear: *when the flame is lit, let the games begin.*

Kinsley Bryant, my mentor on the women’s soccer team, assured me that all the rumors about the village were true. She’d competed in the last summer games and lived to tell the tale, but this was different. Her first games had been in proper London-town. This time around, we were in sunny Rio de

Janeiro, Brazil, a city well acquainted with debauchery. The moment we stepped off the plane, I could feel the excitement in the air. Tourists and athletes flooded into customs. The crowds were alive, in a rush, and speaking a million different languages all at once.

Outside the airport, I drew in a heavy breath, trying to make sense of the circus. Street vendors shouted for our attention (“*Pretty necklace for a pretty girl!*”) and taxi drivers promised low fares (“*We take you where you want to go! Cheap! Cheap!*”). My first five minutes in the city proved colorful, loud, and intoxicating.

“This way, ladies!” our team manager said, waving her hand in the air to usher us toward a row of waiting shuttles. I hiked my backpack up on my shoulder and dragged my suitcase behind me. I wanted to take my time and soak it all in, but they were already dividing us into groups and shoving us into the shuttles. We were heading toward the Olympic Village and my body hummed with excitement. What would it be like? Would I even be able to walk outside my room without coming face to face with some German rugby player’s *überdong*? Would they be shooting condoms at us with a t-shirt cannon like at basketball games, or would there be an attendant in each room with a silver tray full of magnums? “*Boa tarde, here’s your room key and some lube.*”

Surely they’d be more discreet than that.

“If we have to sit for much longer, my legs are going to shrivel up and I won’t be able to compete,” Kinsley said, drawing me out of my obsessive thoughts.

She turned from her perch in the middle row and assessed the three of us crammed into the back of the shuttle. Nina, another rookie, sat beside me, quietly working away on a Sudoku puzzle. Michelle was on the other side of her, checking her phone. So far, they’d both proved to be bumps on a log. I had tried to get them out of their shell during the long flight from L.A., but it was no use.

“I agree,” Becca said, turning around and propping her elbows on the back of her seat. Kinsley and Becca were both

veterans on the team, but at that moment they looked like two detectives about to interrogate us. “I think we need something to entertain us until we get to the village.”

Kinsley suggested a round of fuck-marry-kill, but since the other rookies lacked both homicidal and matrimonial tendencies, we ended up just going around the shuttle and choosing which athlete we would have sex with if the opportunity presented itself.

“What about you?” Kinsley asked me, wiggling her brows for emphasis.

I smiled. “Sorry, I don’t have a dick-directory going.” I figured there would be enough good-looking guys roaming the grounds that I wouldn’t have to worry about preparing a hit-it-and-quit-it list beforehand. “Old fashioned, I guess.”

She arched a brow. “Seriously, not *one* guy comes to mind?”

I shrugged. “I’m sure I’ll find one soon enough.”

“Boo! You suck,” Becca chimed in. “Who’s next?”

“Freddie Archibald!” Michelle exclaimed, finally glancing up from her phone.

“Mmm, Freddie,” Nina agreed, pausing her Sudoku game long enough to stare wistfully out the window.

I scrunched my nose. “Who’s that?”

“He swims for Great Britain,” Michelle explained with a look of horror on her face. Apparently I should have already known who he was. “His full name is Frederick Archibald and he’s like British royalty or something. Total package.”

With a name like that, I pictured a stuffy prince with a royal stick up his ass.

“Okay then, what about you two? Who would you pick?” I asked, turning the tables on Kinsley and Becca.

Kinsley flashed her left hand with the big fat diamond sitting on her ring finger. “Sorry, can’t play if I’ve already won.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. Kinsley was married to Liam Wilder, a soccer god and an assistant coach for our team. They'd met when Liam started coaching her college soccer team before the last Olympic Games. Becca was also married to a soccer player—one of Liam's old teammates—and between the four of them, they were quite a photogenic bunch. Every time I checked out at the grocery store, there was a sports magazine with at least one of their faces plastered across the cover. When I'd been called up to the Women's National Team, they'd enthusiastically adopted me into their fearsome foursome. Moving from Vermont to L.A. had been a rocky transition, especially when paired with Olympic training, but Kinsley and Becca had proven to be the older sisters I'd never had but always wanted.

“So do those rings mean you guys can't come to a party with me tonight?” I asked with a sly smile.

Kinsley narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“The Brazilian swimmers messaged me on Facebook. They're hosting a themed party and I was planning on going.”

“Count me out,” Nina said. “Jetlag.”

Michelle nodded. “Same here.”

Shocker.

Becca and Kinsley exchanged a worried glance over my party plans, but that wasn't surprising. Over the last few months, I'd tried to convince them that I was an adult, but they still saw me as the wide-eyed rookie from Vermont.

I understood their worry; I didn't have much experience with partying and I'd only really traveled abroad during the qualifying matches a few months prior. Not to mention, we'd all been fed the same spiel about Rio's crime rates during a “Safety at the Games” seminar, but it wasn't like I'd be out walking the streets alone at night.

“Ever since you moved to L.A., you've been like a little sister to me,” Kinsley had said on the way to the airport. *“I feel responsible for you.”*

Technically, I *was* Kinsley's little sister on the soccer team, and though I appreciated her concern, I was ready to live a little. For so long I'd focused all my energy on soccer, but we had one week until our first match and I was ready to see for myself what kind of mischief the village had to offer. *Viva Brazil!*

THE VILLAGE WAS spread out over seven compounds with high-rise condos and apartments lined up along one main road. The shuttle drove us toward the entrance of our building, and I counted the amenities along the way. There was a coffee shop beside a flower shop. Cafes were sprinkled in among a doctor's office, banking center, salon, and post office. Anything we could possibly need was within walking distance.

We arrived at a crosswalk and our shuttle paused to let the crowds cross in front of us. It looked like move-in day on a college campus. Athletes spilled out of cars and vans, sporting their national colors. Everyone was weighed down by their suitcases and duffel bags, tired from hours of travel. We were all there to work hard and represent our countries in the games, but now that we were all mixed together, there was an undercurrent of excitement in the air.

"There he is!" Michelle shouted, tapping her finger against her window. "Freddie! Look!"

I followed her finger, trying to discern a British athlete in all the madness.

"Where?" Kinsley asked, shoving past Becca to get to the window.

"That's my boob, jerk. Get off!" Becca said, pushing her back.

I tried to find him, but the sidewalk looked like an explosion of color. Athletes were weaving between one another and the second I'd spot what looked to be someone sporting British colors, they'd disappear back into the crowd.

"I don't see him!"

Michelle groaned. “Look! He’s the tall guy with the brown hair!”

“Right, Michelle, because that really helps,” Kinsley said, giving up and falling back onto her seat.

I laughed, prepared to give up as well, but then Michelle screamed and pointed out the front window. “THERE! HE’S RIGHT THERE!”

I wedged myself in between Becca and Kinsley and froze as Freddie came into view, framed in the center of the windshield as he crossed the street.

God save the queen.

“Damn,” Nina whispered, clawing her fingers into my arm so she could push herself up for a better view. Damn didn’t begin to cover it. Damn was a word for ugly peasants. This Freddie? The sight of him begged a rousing “good heavens” with a polite undertone of “new pair of panties, please”. His face was so handsome I blinked three times before letting myself believe I was looking at a real live human.

“Look at his jawline,” Nina said in awe.

“Look at those lips,” Michelle whispered.

“He’s so tall,” Nina replied. “Oh my god...he’s *so* much better in real life.”

I tried to ignore their assessments so I could take in his features for myself. He had rich brown hair and a pair of eyes that looked to be a few shades lighter. *Caramel*. His skin was tan and clean-shaven and anyone with a pair of eyes could see the muscles hidden beneath his button-down. But for me, it was the slow-spreading smile he aimed at the media liaison leading him across the street. *That* was the moment my stomach flipped.

“I forget,” Becca said, turning around to look at the three of us in the back seat. “Is it ‘The British are coming’ or ‘The British are making me come’?”

Kinsley laughed. “We never should have declared independence. Do you think we can take it back?”

“Where do you guys think he’s going?” Michelle asked, ignoring them completely.

“Probably to an interview,” Nina answered.

There was no doubt he had the looks for TV, but more than that...he was intriguing. Frederick Archibald was an entity unto himself, and as the shuttle pulled forward, I stared back at him through the window and wondered if maybe Michelle and Nina were right. There was definitely something about Freddie Archibald, and if I were going to make a list of sexy athletes in Rio, it’d start with him.

CHAPTER TWO

F *reddie*

“**WELCOME TO GOOD** Morning America. I’m Nancy Rogers, joined this morning by Frederick Archibald, the enigmatic British swimmer with no less than sixteen gold medals to his name.”

The camera panned to me and I waved to the audience. The studio lights made it hard to see five feet from my face, but I could just make out Thom, my teammate, standing beside the cameraman having a laugh.

“Welcome to the show, Freddie,” Nancy continued, angling her body toward me. “When did you first arrive in Rio?”

“Just two days ago, actually. Flew over with a few of my other teammates.”

“I would have thought you all would just swim over! Kidding of course!” she screeched, drawing from the well of manufactured enthusiasm only available to middle-aged morning show hosts.

I took a patient breath before offering a small smile. “Would be a bit cold, that.”

“Well nonetheless,” she started, eying my physique. “I’m sure you would have been able to manage it. Your workouts must be so *very* grueling.” *Is she hitting on me?* “Tell us, do

you plan on breaking the records you set during the London games?”

Fucking hell, I'd forgotten the kinds of questions they asked over in the States. What did she suppose I wanted to do? Lose?

“You've got it, Nancy. That's the plan,” I said, deadpan.

She smiled, a fake sort of grin that made her face lopsided.

“You know, Freddie, your reputation definitely precedes you—even ‘across the pond’,” she tittered. “You're known to everyone as the ‘bad boy’ of swimming.”

The camera zoomed in on my face as I glanced to Nancy and frowned. “Was that a question?”

She stammered and adjusted the lapel mic on her blazer. I wasn't making the interview easy. It was thirty seconds in and I was having a go at her, but there was no point in dancing around it. I didn't like press. I didn't want to do interviews. My manager had insisted I take the interview, so this was what she'd get—ten minutes of awkward air time.

“You're right. Silly me. I meant to ask, how does it feel to be the ‘bad boy’ of swimming?”

I laughed. “You'll have to ask my mate, Thom. He chats up ladies far more than I do.”

It was a lie, but I needed some way to diffuse her question. Who actually refers to someone as *the bad boy of swimming*? I'd never get laid again if I went about saying that.

“Oh, I'm sure you're being modest.”

I didn't reply and she had to rifle through her cue cards to find the next question.

“Uhh, Freddie...” she stammered, eyeing the camera tentatively before turning to me. “It's been four years since your last Olympic games and I understand that a lot has changed for you since then. Would you mind going into a bit of detail about the announcement of your—”

I shook my head to cut her off. I knew my manager had passed along a specific list of topics that were off-limits. “Nancy, this interview was meant to be about swimming.”

She smiled wider. “And it will be! I promise, it’s just that our viewers are dying to know what your plans are with the lovely *Caroline*.”

I stood and reached for my mic. “Sorry Nancy. Until my races are done in a few weeks, my focus will be in the pool and nowhere else.”

I passed my mic to the cameraman as I walked off the studio set. Thom wouldn’t stop laughing until we were back outside—the wanker. They probably couldn’t air the segment. It was less than two minutes, but I didn’t care. The media were vultures. They’d write what they wanted to whether or not I pretended to be a well-mannered gentleman.

“Freddie, do you think you’ll try to swim *even faster* this time around?” Thom echoed, doing his best impersonation of Nancy.

“Exactly!” I laughed and shoved his shoulder. “Of course I’m here to break my bloody records.”

“Did you really mean what you said to her?” He looked concerned. “About only focusing on the pool?”

“What? Have you already got plans for us or something?” I asked, reaching for my mobile. There were already three missed calls from my manager—she’d want to berate me for walking off the interview—but I skipped over them, content to ignore her.

“There’s a few swimmers heading over to Brian’s place, but I think we should stop in at this party the Brazilian swimmers are having. Blokes’ve got a theme and everything.”

Sounded ridiculous. “What’s the theme?”

“Says ‘Rubik’s Cube’ on the Facebook invite.”

I paused and turned to him. “Are they taking the piss?”

CHAPTER THREE

A *ndie*

WE'D ONLY BEEN in Rio for a few hours, but Kinsley, Becca, and I had already begun to settle into place. We were sharing a condo on the same floor as the rest of the team and though the three of us each had our own room and bathroom, we'd probably be joined at the hip the whole time anyway. Even then, they sat in my room watching me rifle through my clothes instead of unpacking their own things.

“What exactly is a Rubik’s Cube party?” Becca asked.

“It’s simple: everyone wears different colors—red shirt, blue shorts, green socks, whatever—and once you get to the party, you have to swap clothes with people until you’re wearing all of the same color.”

Kinsley tsked. “Sounds like an excuse to see people in their skivvies.”

I tossed my luggage onto my bed. “Yes, well, isn’t that basically the meaning of life in the first place?”

I didn’t have to look over my shoulder to know they were exchanging one of their trademarked worried glances. They weren’t used to seeing this side of me. In L.A., I hadn’t gone out much, but that was because my entire day—6:00 AM to 6:00 PM—had been dedicated to soccer.

“Do you guys have any purple or orange clothes I can borrow?” I asked, reaching for a blue tank top and pairing it with red shorts. There was enough red, white, and blue gear stuffed in my suitcase to last a lifetime. They basically shelled it out to us in bulk as soon as we were called up for the national team.

“I think this will look better,” Kinsley said, reaching around me for a giant white fleece I’d packed as an afterthought. It was technically winter in Rio, but it felt more like a mild L.A. summer.

She laid the fleece out over the blue tank top and then offered me a proud smile. “Yeah, see. That’s adorable.”

Ten minutes later, I had the outfit I wanted to wear: blue tank top, red shorts, white knee-high socks, and a yellow trucker hat I’d picked up at the airport. It had *Rio de Janeiro* spelled across the front in scrolling cursive. On top of that outfit, Kinsley and Becca had laid out their choices for me: black track pants that covered every inch of skin from my navel to my ankles, the white fleece, and a red scarf they dictated should be worn like a burka.

“Oh, and you can keep the white socks,” Kinsley said, like she was doing me a big favor.

Becca nodded. “Yeah, and maybe just wear the hat over the scarf?”

“I think I can handle it from here.” I started to usher them to the door, sweeping my arms back and forth so they’d get the picture. “You guys have helped enough.”

After they left, I used my suitcase to barricade the door. I changed quickly, pulled my blonde hair out of its ponytail, and shook it out. Loose, long waves framed my face, and when I put the trucker hat on backward, it took the edge off my feminine features. I smirked at my tan reflection in the bathroom mirror. Night one in Rio was going to be a good one.

“ANDIE! Let us in!” Kinsley yelled, banging on my bedroom door.

Or not.

I grabbed my phone from my bed, pushed my suitcase aside, and pulled the door open to find Kinsley and Becca changed and ready for the party. *No. Just no.* They looked absolutely ridiculous in matching red Adidas track suits, black hats, and sunglasses. Either they'd just walked off the set of an 80s music video or they were now officially part of my security detail. Either way, I wasn't going anywhere with them.

"What the hell, you guys? I'm not walking into the party with you two dressed like that."

They followed me out of the condo, adjusting their hats and assuring me they'd blend in just fine. I knew better. Sure they were still sexy, confident, kickass soccer players, but they'd lost a little of that edge. Once Liam and Penn had "put rings on it", there was nothing left to keep them from becoming *real adults*. (They literally got excited over a Friday night spent watching *Parks and Rec* reruns before turning in at 9:00 PM.)

"What about your husbands?" I asked, reaching for some legitimate reason to block them from coming with me. "Surely they don't want you two mingling with a bunch of eligible bachelors."

"While you're correct in your assessment that I've still 'got it'," Kinsley said with a gesture at her bright red tracksuit. "I'll have you know Liam trusts me and made me promise I wouldn't let you go alone."

I groaned. *Liam too?! How many parents did I have on this trip?* I tried to walk faster, hoping that if I took four steps for every one of theirs, I'd eventually lose them. No such luck. They picked up the pace and linked their arms with me, successfully shackling me to my embarrassment.

"This will be fun!" Becca said with a little skip in her step. "Girls night!"

Kinsley nodded. "We don't have practice until noon tomorrow so we should be able to let loose."

Kinsley and Becca were only four years older than me, but when we arrived outside the party, it felt like I was walking in with my parents.

“Whoa, a disco ball!” Becca said, pulling us through the door. “Who packs a friggin’ disco ball for the Olympics?”

The Brazilian swimmers ushered us inside with big smiles.

“Good evening, ladies,” one of them said with practiced English and a heavy accent.

“Sorry! Liam Wilder already put a ring on it,” Kinsley said, waving her left hand in the air like Beyoncé. Becca did the same, and since they had death grips on my arms, I couldn’t slink away. Their wedding rings formed a veritable force field of chastity around us that no one seemed to notice but me.

“Should we get some punch?” Becca asked.

“We should really only be drinking water this close to competing,” Kinsley said.

Dear god, I needed to get away from them.

“Guys, I’m going to head to the bathroom,” I said, sliding out of their grips.

Becca looked alarmed, as if needing to pee was an admission of some untold guilt. “Oh, should we all go?”

“NO!” I shouted, then lowered my voice to a whisper. “I, uh...I need to poop.”

“Oh, someone’s *neerrrvouuuuss*,” Kinsley said with a knowing smirk.

“It’s her first Olympic party, of course her bowels are moving Kins!” Becca laughed.

I closed my eyes, took two deep breaths, and then slapped on a fake smile. “Honestly, I’m so glad you guys came with me. I’m just going to head over to the restroom and when I get back, we can party together the rest of the night.”

My fake speech threw them off, so much so that they let me go to the restroom all by myself; as a twenty-one-year-old, I never thought that would be an issue. Fortunately, the second I was out of their sight, I finally saw the party for what it really was: *a playground*.

The Brazilian guys had a condo that was at least twice the size of ours. The living room was packed from wall to wall with a multinational bevy of Aphrodites and Adonises. Kinsley and Becca were holed up in the foyer, and as I wove through the party trying to find a restroom I didn't actually need, I realized it wouldn't be hard to steer clear of them for the rest of the night.

Everyone was shouting over the music, and I couldn't distinguish one accent from another. I caught passing words in English, but by the time I turned, I couldn't tell who'd said what. I made it past a rowdy group of guys who were blocking my path to the drinks table, but I weaseled my way through, mostly unnoticed thanks to their gargantuan stature.

"Oy! Where you going?" one of them asked with a heavy accent as I pulled a beer from the table and tried to slink back into the madness.

"Oh." I laughed. "Just grabbing a drink."

I wiggled the can back and forth and they all broke out into smiles. Clearly, they approved of alcohol. Between their stature and thick beards, they looked like a group of Vikings who'd accidentally time traveled to 2016. One of them had on a rugby shirt that looked big enough to cover my whole body, which made perfect sense. They were definitely part of a rugby team.

"All right, well you guys have fun," I said, trying to shimmy past them.

The one who was closest to me—a giant with a red beard that stretched down past his chin—clapped me on the shoulder. My knees buckled under the weight. "Stay! Drink!" he bellowed.

I thought it over for a second. Drinking with a bunch of rowdy rugby players hadn't really been in my vision for the night, but if I stuck with the Vikings, Kinsley and Becca would never be able to find me. I scanned across them again, and wide cheeky smiles flashed back at me. Crooked or missing teeth were par for the course, but they seemed fairly harmless—so long as none of them thunder-clapped me on the shoulder again. *It literally felt like getting hit by car.*

Ten minutes later—the details were fuzzy—Gareth (bearded dude) had hoisted me up onto his shoulders and was parading me around the party like a piñata. His teammates formed a scrum around him, and they all taught me a drinking song, one that sounded like a sea shanty borrowed from pirates in the Victorian era.

“What will we do with a drunken sailor? What will we do with a drunken sailor? What will we do with a drunken sailor early in the morning?”

I didn't actually know the words, but I was singing along with them at the top of my lungs just the same.

“What shall we do with an all-i-gat-or? Something-something drunk James Taylor...EARLY IN THE MORNING!” I bellowed, tilting back and forth on Gareth's shoulders. I'd chugged two beers and the alcohol was sloshing around my stomach in the worst way possible.

“Keepitup, lassie,” Gareth said, tilting his head back to look up at me.

“Oh my god! You just called me lassie!”

I threw my head back to laugh, which in hindsight wasn't the most genius move. Shifting my weight back threw off Gareth's equilibrium. Picture a tipsy raccoon on the shoulders of a bear. Sure, he weighed five times what I did, but he couldn't counterbalance my weight and before I knew it, I was sailing for the ground in slow motion. There was a distinct moment when I thought, *This is where a sexy man would catch me if I were a Disney princess.* That thought concluded right as I collided with the ground with a heavy “oomph” and the air whooshed out of my lungs.

The music faded and the laughter died down as people formed a wide circle around me. Did they think I was dead or something? *Wait, am I dead?*

I blinked, and blinked again, trying to make out some definitive sign that I was still alive. The lights overhead swung back and forth, but that could have been the angels calling me to heaven—or y’know, hell, since that’s honestly where I was headed for lying to Kinsley and Becca about needing to poop.

A face leaned over me, blocking the heavenly (or hellish) light. I caught caramel eyes, dark hair, a defined jaw, and a pair of dreamy lips.

Was it God? Or...

“Are you the devil?” I asked the floating head. “Because I swear I was going to clean up my act really soon.”

The face laughed and I focused on the lips that had been moving and now stretched across a seriously cute face. If Satan was this handsome, I’d probably be able to handle the eternal damnation business.

“All right, I’m going to lift you up. Just give a shout if something hurts,” said the devil with a very cute British accent.

Hands wrapped around my shoulders and lifted me up to a sitting position. I could breathe again, and I didn’t feel any pain. I patted my elbows and my head. I surmised that I’d managed to fall very gracefully, like the princess I’d imagined earlier.

“All right?” the British voice asked again, coming around to face me.

The bobbing head was connected to a very, *very* handsome body. I took my time scanning over him until I reached his face and realized all at once that I recognized the devil.

“You’re Frederick Archibald,” I said with a small, shocked voice.

“I prefer Freddie—”

A slow-spreading smirk took hold of my heart just as Gareth rushed forward.

“Lassie!” Gareth boomed. “I’m sorry, but you’re too slippereh!”

The rugby team was all there surrounding me, probably awaiting my cue to send me off for a proper Viking funeral. I waved him away and pushed to stand. “I’m fine, really.” My wrist hurt, but that wasn’t from the fall. “I swear.”

There was another five minutes of them picking up my arms and turning me around to confirm I didn’t have a bone sticking out or something.

“I think she’s fine,” Freddie said, hovering just behind the rugby guys.

I stared up and smiled, finally getting my first real look at him. Either he was stealing my breath, or I’d lied about being okay earlier. Had I punctured a lung? Dislodged my heart?

The rugby team agreed that I was stouter than I looked, or that I looked like I needed another stout. Either way, they departed and I was left standing a few feet from Freddie, trying to work up something witty to say. He was wearing blue jeans and a red t-shirt. I couldn’t tell what color his boxers were, but if I swapped my pants for his, I’d be one step closer to completing my Rubik’s cube.

“Feeling better?” he asked, taking a step toward me.

I smiled. “Yes, but I need you to take your pants off.”

CHAPTER FOUR

F *reddie*

“**YOU NEED MY** trousers?” I asked, confirming that she had in fact said what I thought she’d said.

This girl was cute—more than cute, really. Her blue tank top rode up an inch or so on her trim torso, and one look at her long legs proved she played a sport in which she ran—loads. Her bluish gray eyes were hard to ignore, even with the lopsided yellow cap covering half of them.

She looked like that type of American girl blokes dream about: pale blonde hair and sun-kissed skin, as if she’d just walked off the beach. I told myself this was the reason why I wasn’t leaving her alone. She’d had an entire team of titans more than ready to keep her occupied for the night, and yet my curiosity had gotten the better of me.

She pointed to her red shorts and I caught another glimpse of her long legs. “Yes, we have to swap so that I can have blue pants and a blue top. It’s for the game. We have to leave the party wearing one color, and I guess my color is blue.”

I had no clue what she was going on about, but there was no way we were swapping trousers. Her shorts would hardly fit around my ankle.

“C’mon, you have to play,” she said, jutting out her bottom lip. Something told me she got away with murder having a

pair of lips like that.

“I can’t give you these,” I said, “but my boxers are blue.”

Freddie, you dim perv. She doesn’t want your boxers.

Her brows rose in shock, but it didn’t last. The surprise faded into a smile and she reached out for my hand. “C’mon, we can change in here.”

I’d braced for a slap for even suggesting the idea, but maybe American girls were different. She led me past the drink table and we turned a corner down a long hallway. The party was less crowded back there, and every person we passed took one look at us, her hand in mine, and assumed the worst. The lads clapped me on the shoulder and the girls flashed jealous stares.

“Wait, I don’t even know your name,” I said as she knocked on one of the doors at the end of the hallway.

She turned and smiled at me over her shoulder. “Andie.”

I knew that name. “Andie Foster?”

“How’d you know?”

“You and the other football girls are the talk of the games.”

She arched a brow and nodded, not bothering with a response.

The room she pulled me into was an unoccupied bedroom. It had the same furniture as all the other rooms in the Olympic Village: standard queen bed, chair, and dresser. There wasn’t a suitcase or bag in sight.

“Looks like we’ll be safe in here,” she said, turning to face me. “But you’ll have to turn while I change.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she was already working on the waistband of her shorts. I turned and stared at the opposite wall, trying to talk down the excitement in my pants. I could hear her pushing down her shorts. I pictured them sliding down her tan legs and I shoved my hands into my pockets and pinched my eyes closed. I had as much willpower as any bloke, but this was pushing it.

“Hey, I don’t hear you taking your boxers off over there,” she said with a laugh.

Oh, right.

I unbuttoned my trousers, pushing them down to the ground.

“Rest assured, I put these boxers on right before the party,” I said with a smile.

“I don’t care,” she said. “Here.”

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and then something landed on my shoulder...a red, silky something.

“Jesus.” I groaned under my breath. She’d tossed her panties at me, a red, lacy pair that felt like heaven in my palm.

That’s it. I’m moving to America after the games. It’s such a beautiful, beautiful country.

“Ahem!” She cleared her throat. “I need those boxers. My butt cheeks are cold!”

I’d survived more high-pressure situations than most blokes have by the age of twenty-seven. I’d competed in two Olympic games and swam in hundreds of races at the international level. None of those situations were half as difficult as facing away from Andie in that moment. I knew she was standing behind me. Her bare skin was right there, all I had to do was turn around; she probably wouldn’t have even noticed.

“Freddie!”

Bloody hell.

I pulled my boxers off, ignoring the slight tenting situation occurring in the front. I walked backward, trying to hand them off to her like a gentleman. It seemed like a good idea right up until my hand brushed against her bare ass.

“HEY! Hands off the tush,” she said, yanking the boxers out of my hand.

“Ah, sorry,” I said with a cheeky smile. “My mum told me never to throw my knickers at a girl.”

She laughed, though I was more focused on trying to push aside the memory of how soft her skin had felt. I pulled my jeans back up and buttoned them.

“All right, they’re a little big, but it’ll work.”

I turned to find her rolling up my boxers so they wouldn’t fall down her hips. They were rather large on her, but by the second roll they seemed secure enough.

“How do I look?” she said, adjusting the hat over her hair.

Un-fucking-believable.

“ANDIE!”

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“ANDIE FOSTER! We’re coming in!”

Fists pounded on the bedroom door right before it crashed open. Two girls jumped forward, one with pepper spray and the other with a bottle of beer poised to strike.

“We’re too late!” The brunette one had zeroed in on Andie’s knickers still clutched in my hand. “HE ALREADY HAS HER PANTIES!”

CHAPTER FIVE

A *ndie*

I WOKE UP to Kinsley and Becca standing over my bed, doing their best impersonation of FBI agents. Their arms were crossed and their glares would have sliced me in half had I not been burrowed safely beneath my covers.

“What do you two want?” I asked, clutching a spare pillow beneath my chin.

“Sleep well, Andie?” Kinsley asked with an arched brow.

Apparently they had practiced the good cop, bad cop routine.

“Or was it pretty...*drafty* down there?” Becca asked, yanking the covers back to expose my blue tank top and matching pair of boxers—the pair Freddie had given me. They were loose around my hips, but I liked the feel of them and, SUE ME, I didn’t see the point of taking them off before going to bed.

“Planning on wearing those things to practice as well?” Kinsley asked, eyeing the boxers like they were contagious.

A quick glance at the bedside clock revealed I’d slept right through breakfast. I felt like total shit, but I wouldn’t let them know that. They wanted me to suffer after what I’d put them through the night before, but I wouldn’t.

I shooed them out of my room and changed into my soccer gear, taking care to shove Freddie's boxers safely into my suitcase. I dragged my shin guards and cleats out into the living room and tossed them near the door before rifling through the cupboards for something of substance. The food court would have been my first choice, but I didn't have time to go down before practice.

"Finding anything, Andie?" Becca asked.

The committee had filled the cupboard with snacks and food prior to our arrival. I reached in and grabbed the first thing my hand touched...a bag of kale chips, salt and vinegar flavored. "Yup. Mmmmmmm. I love the taste of vinegar in the morning."

Kinsley held a granola bar between her thumb and pointer finger. I snatched it without a second thought. It was a peace offering of sorts, and as I trailed them to the bus waiting on the first floor of the condo complex, I decided to push the subject.

"You guys can't be mad at me forever. I didn't do anything wrong!"

"You went off by yourself!" Kinsley said.

"Fraternizing with the enemy!" Becca added. "When you were supposed to be pooping!"

All right, they were being ridiculous, so I had to take extreme measures. I took my seat at the back of the bus beside Kinsley and dialed her husband's number. Most people knew Liam Wilder as the rowdy ex-professional soccer player who'd been forced to retire due to a knee injury, but I knew him as Kinsley's husband, the man who donned a chef's apron on Sunday mornings to whip up enough eggs and bacon to feed a small village.

He answered on the third ring and sounded genuinely happy to get my call. "Andie!? What's up? Are you guys headed to the practice field? I'm already here."

"Oh, yeah, yeah we're on our way LIAM."

"What?" Kinsley tried to reach for the phone, but I pulled it out of her reach. "LIAM—don't talk to her, she's a traitor!"

Fortunately, he didn't hear her. "I just spoke with Kins earlier—"

"Yeah, that's great," I said, cutting him off. "Listen, Liam, when you were in London for the last Olympics, did Kinsley ever go to any parties?"

He laughed, this long, drawn-out laugh that definitely proved my point without him having to say a word. "Ask her about the Russian gymnasts. That's all I'll say."

"HA!" I shouted at Kinsley and hung up. "I rest my case."

She was already firing off a text to Liam, no doubt threatening divorce.

"Was it fun partying with those gymnasts, Kinsley? Did you have so much *fun*?"

By this point, nearly half our team had turned around to listen to our argument. It was in Kinsley's best interest to nip it in the bud to preserve her reputation as team captain.

"What I did in London is beside the point. Becca and I had Liam and Penn to protect us, but since you are basically an old spinster that nobody loves—"

"I'm twenty-one."

"Right. Even still, we love you, and you've left us no choice but to be your chaperones for the remainder of the games. Every step you take, Becca and I will be there."

"Every breath you take and every move you make," Becca continued.

"Every bond you break, every step you take, we'll be watching you."

"Every single day and every word you say."

I covered my ears. "Oh my god. STOP SINGING THAT SONG."

But they wouldn't stop. I had to listen to them going on and on until the bus pulled up outside the practice complex. I ran for it as quick as I could and decided then that I probably needed new friends. Maybe the Russian gymnasts would be

down to hang out. I'd tower over them, but that'd be okay. Everyone needs one tall friend for reaching things on the top shelf.

Liam and Coach Decker were standing just inside the entrance of the stadium looking like the start of a bad joke. Coach Decker was fifty-three with short white-blond hair and a face that promised she hadn't laughed since the Nixon era. She'd worn the same pair of thin black-framed glasses for as long as I could remember and she was a damn good coach, even if she did scare me a little. Liam stood by her side, tattoos exposed down his arms, dirty blonde hair short and fussed up. He and Kinsley made quite an adorable pair, though I refrained from telling them so as their perfectly proportioned heads were already close to exploding.

"Good morning, Liam," I said, tipping an imaginary hat in his direction.

He eyed me curiously and then glanced back to Kinsley and Becca walking into the stadium a few feet behind me.

"Are you three fighting?" Liam asked with what he probably thought was a chastising glare. It never worked the way Coach Decker's did.

"No fighting," I said, holding up my fingers. "Scout's honor. Although your wife is a little crazy. You should have her head examined."

"Liam! Do not talk to her about the gymnasts!" Kinsley shouted.

Coach Decker shook her head and clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"All right everyone. I know we're all excited to be here for our first practice in Rio, but it's time to focus. Kinsley and Becca, show the girls where to stash their bags and then Kinsley, I want you to lead warm-up." She paused and turned toward me. "Andie, there's a trainer over there ready to tape your wrist."

I followed her gaze and found a group of trainers stationed near benches off field. They'd propped up a small black table

and as I walked closer, a small girl with black hair knotted on top of her head stepped forward to greet me. Her khaki pants didn't fit well, but her team shirt was fitted and embroidered with her name under a soccer ball and an American flag.

“Lisa,” I said, reading her name off her shirt and holding out my hand. “I'm Andie.”

She nodded and ushered me toward the trainer's table. “Good to meet you, Andie. I'll be your trainer here in Rio and I'll be with you at every practice and every game. We'll set up times for you to come to the training center for some physical therapy exercises as well, but for now, hop up onto the table and I'll take a look at your wrist.”

I did as she said and then started to walk her through the injury. It wasn't career threatening; I'd just sprained it back in high school and it flared up every now and then. I'd gone through physical therapy for it multiple times, but unless I laid off it for a sustained period of time, it would never truly heal. Unfortunately, time was not a luxury I could afford.

“How does it feel?” Kinsley asked.

I glanced over my shoulder to find her watching the trainer as she worked. She flexed my hand, working the tape over and around my wrist so that it'd be supported during practice. I tried not to wince at the stab of pain, but Kinsley caught my mask slip. She shook her head and crossed her arms, but I shot her a death stare as the trainer bent to grab another roll of tape from her bag.

The trainer finished up and stepped back to examine her work. “Tell me if it's secure enough,” she instructed.

I flexed and curled my hand, twisting it in a circle one direction and then the other. I could still feel a dull ache, but with the tape in place, it was more tolerable.

“How does it feel?” Kinsley asked again.

I nodded and shot her a thumbs up. As far as our coach and team trainer knew, my injury was minor and I was having it wrapped as a precaution. Kinsley knew the truth—that I was stepping into dangerous territory—but she also knew why I

was downplaying it. Bones and tendons and ligaments all heal with time, but with the Olympics only occurring every four years, most athletes consider themselves lucky to earn a spot once or twice. So unless my wrist fell off, I'd stay on the field.

“Listen, I'd like to talk to you about Freddie for a second after practice. Seriously, wait for me.”

I promised her I would, though I really had no intention of sticking around for another Kinsley and Becca lecture. How quickly they'd forgotten what it was like to be young and single during the Olympic games. For years, my life of training and preparing for the games had left little time for anything outside of soccer. Sure I'd had a few random dates through the years, but nothing compared to what other girls my age were doing.

Giving up boys to play soccer on a professional level was hard, but in the end it was an easy decision. Growing up in Vermont, the only time I ever saw real action was on the soccer field. It thrilled me in a way no boy ever could. Most of the popular girls in my high school had assumed I was a lesbian because I preferred Adidas over Tory Burch and I didn't know the difference between “beach waves” and “curls”. *No, really, someone tell me what the difference is.* To put the rumors to rest, I'd forced my first kiss behind the bleachers of my high school's soccer stadium with pimple-faced Kellan who was a year younger than me and had the breath of a walrus. He was tall and spindly, and when he pulled away, he accidentally bonked his head on the bottom of the stadium seats and had to get three stitches. Once that story had spread, no other guy in school thought I was worth the risk.

Fortunately, college was better after I completed the duckling-to-swan metamorphosis that often graces early adulthood. (Goodbye braces, acne, and pudgy cheeks.) College guys weren't so intimidated by my talent and I'd managed a boyfriend here and there. Still, nothing serious. Dating didn't exactly go hand in hand with competing at the Olympic level. For so long, I'd dreamt of going to the Olympics, not only to win gold for Team USA (duh), but also because I wanted the

chance to meet other people who *got* it. Just like me, they'd dedicated their lives to a sport they loved, and they understood the sacrifices that came with the territory.

Kinsley and Becca could lecture me all they wanted, but at the end of the day, how could they blame me for wanting more than gold? I would be in Rio de Janeiro for nearly a month and I wasn't going to waste it. I'd work my ass off on the field, but in my free time I was going to make memories that would last a lifetime. And, *sure*, if Freddie Archibald somehow worked his way into those memories, then so be it.

CHAPTER SIX

F *reddie*

I WOKE UP thinking of Andie, trying to recall the bits and pieces of her I'd found so appealing the night before. She wasn't like any of the posh British girls I was used to. They'd have willingly thrown themselves over a bridge before tossing their knickers at my head, and yet Andie had done it without a second thought. I was intrigued, but I couldn't pinpoint what exactly made her so different—the light behind her grayish blue eyes, her confident laugh, or her body. *Her body*. It'd taken all night to tear the image of her standing in my boxers out of my mind. Now that I was awake, I wanted to selfishly cling on to it, just for memory's sake.

My mobile buzzed on my nightstand and I rolled over to find I already had two missed calls from my mum, three texts from my sister, Georgie, and one voicemail from Caroline.

I pressed play on Caroline's voicemail first, hoping it would realign my world and push thoughts of Andie to the side.

"Freddie! My gorgeous sportsman, I've missed you so much. I hope you're doing well. Give me a ring later. Kisses, Caroline."

Andie was nothing like Caroline Montague, though maybe that wasn't a bad thing. I knew exactly what I was getting into with Caroline. She'd grown up in British high society, beloved

by everyone. There wasn't a utensil she couldn't name, nor a duchess she didn't know personally. I'd grown up alongside her and knew her to be polite, quiet, and predictable—quite possibly the exact opposite of the enigmatic goalkeeper I'd met the night before.

I pressed delete on her voicemail and then read Georgie's texts.

Georgie: Mum is LOONY. She's phoned Caroline and told her you'd LOVE her to join you in Rio. I tried to pry the mobile from her hand, but you know how strong those bony digits of hers are. I think I've strained my wrist...

Georgie: She's absolutely mad. I'm putting myself up for adoption. Think anyone will have an adorable, house-trained eighteen-year-old?

I smiled and sat up in bed. Georgie had been dramatic from birth, though she'd never admit it. I rang her and then reached for my laptop to glance over the day's itinerary: practice, workout, phone interview, more workouts. I'd be running round the village until supper.

"FREDDIE!" she squealed after picking up on the third ring.

I smiled at the sound of her voice. "Morning Georgie."

"You sound dreadful. What have you been doing all night?"

"Nothing. Honest. I just woke up and listened to a voicemail from Caroline."

"Oh."

There was a pregnant pause before she spoke up again.

"Well let's not talk about that. How's Rio? Has it given your pale English arse a tan yet? Or have you been loitering in the shade of Christ the Redeemer all day?"

I wiped sleep from my eyes and pushed the blankets aside.

"Honestly, I haven't seen much of the place."

She groaned. “What a bore. At least give me some details about the village. Is it just as barking as London was?”

“I’m sure it will be. Last night was...”

I mulled over my previous night, trying to compartmentalize the image of Andie that was fighting its way back to the forefront of my mind.

“Last night was what?”

“I’ve met someone.”

Silence.

More silence.

I pulled the mobile away from my cheek and glanced down to check she hadn’t hung up on me.

“Georgie?”

“What do you mean you’ve *met* someone?”

Her usual charm was gone, replaced by a serious tone I didn’t much care for.

“It’s nothing,” I said, trying to backtrack. Maybe it’d been a mistake bringing it up.

“Well ‘nothing’ sounds quite like *a girl* to me, Freddie, and you haven’t mentioned any of *those things* in four years. FOUR YEARS. And you think I’m going to let you drop this?”

My stomach clenched. “Just forget I’ve said anything.”

Georgie wouldn’t let it go. “Spill it, Freddie. Who is she?”

I stared up at the ceiling and acquiesced, actually sort of glad to confide in her about Andie. What would it hurt to tell Georgie about her?

“She’s an American.”

“Is her last name Kardashian?”

“No, she’s called Andie. She’s a footballer. You’d like her, Georgie. She’s got a natural thing about her and she’s really talented.”

“Good lord Freddie, you sound like a smitten schoolgirl.”

I smiled. “You’re the one who asked, Georgie.”

“Are you in love already?” she laughed.

My smile fell and suddenly it wasn’t fun to talk about Andie any more. The silence was back, louder than before. Neither one of us was going to utter the words, because we didn’t need to. The idea of Caroline spoke loudly enough on its own.

Finally, she laughed. “Blimey. It’s rotten luck.”

I’m glad one of us can laugh about it.

“Yeah, well. Really, it’s nothing.” I checked the clock on my bedside table. “Listen, I’ve got to run and get ready for swim practice.”

“Fine. On the contrary, I require a little lie down. Between our nutter of a mum and your dramatic love life, I’m feeling faint.”

I laughed and promised I’d phone her later.

“Wait, Freddie,” she said, just before I hung up.

“Yeah?”

“What are you going to do about Andie? Will you see her again?”

I hesitated before answering.

“It is a rather small village.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A *ndie*

“LET US IN, Andie!”

Jesus Christ. I reached out for a pillow and pulled it over my face to keep from yelling at Kinsley and Becca to go away. I’d had four, maybe five minutes of alone time since returning from practice. I’d showered and changed, but I should have savored it more and really reveled in the silence before Kinsley and Becca polluted it. On the bus ride home, they’d tried to corner me, but I’d put on my headphones and tuned them out. My plan had worked temporarily, but now, it seemed they weren’t going to take no for an answer.

I’d arrived in Rio less than twenty-four hours earlier and the dust had yet to settle. I hadn’t finished unpacking, I hadn’t called my mom, and I hadn’t had a full uninterrupted minute to consider what had happened with Freddie the night before. Had that encounter actually happened? Had I really slung my panties at his head like a bachelor party stripper?

“ANDIE! Let us in, we have a present for you.”

I groaned, shoved off my bed, and opened my door to find Kinsley and Becca—my team captains and the two people I should have respected the most—standing in my doorway dressed in matching unicorn onesies.

“Here, we got one for you too,” Kinsley said, shoving a limp, horned onesie into my hand and then stepping past me into my room.

“The three amigos!” Becca confirmed, running and jumping onto my bed. Between the two of them, there was never a dull moment, hence why I’d bonded with them the first day of tryouts.

“I think your mattress is better than mine,” Becca said, bouncing up and down in an attempt to confirm her theory.

“They’re all the same,” I laughed, setting the onesie down on my suitcase.

“What are you going to do for the rest of the day?” Kinsley asked, taking a seat beside Becca.

I shrugged. “Unpack, get settled, finally call my mom.”

She nodded. “We were thinking of going down and scoping out the first floor if you wanna come. Our complex has the biggest food court, so I think most of the athletes will be hanging out there.”

“I really need to call my mom. She’s already texted me like thirty times.” Honestly, she had. The woman was clinically insane.

“It’s okay, we can wait,” Kinsley offered with a smile.

Since neither of them made a move to leave, I stepped out onto my room’s balcony to give my mom a call.

My parents, Christy and Conan Foster, were robots. Sweet, well-meaning robots. They grew up in Vermont, my grandparents grew up in Vermont, and my great-grandparents grew up in Vermont. Somewhere during all those generations spent in harsh winters, their personalities had been replaced by good-natured gobs of maple syrup. Their idea of fun was layering a cashmere sweater over a gingham button down and taking a picnic to the park. They belonged to our small town’s country club and spent their free time flipping through L.L. Bean catalogs; needless to say, they were shocked to have produced a daughter like me.

Those first fourteen years were a real struggle. My mother had insisted I stay in dance but I'd insisted on playing soccer. It wasn't until I earned a spot on the U-17 National Team at only fifteen years old that she let me tear down the dance posters in my room. Throughout high school, I'd replaced them with soccer stars like Ashlynn Harris, Hope Solo, and Cristiano Ronaldo. Admittedly, Cristiano was there mostly for eye-candy. Also, I liked to rub his abs like Buddha's belly for luck before a big game.

"Andie, are you using that hand sanitizer I packed in the front left pocket of your bag?" my mom asked as soon as the call connected.

That was the first question she asked. Not, how the hell is Rio? The Olympics? Practice?

"Yes." I sighed. "But did you honestly have to pack a sixty-eight ounce bottle in my carryon? I had to shove it in my checked luggage and it spilled on half of my underwear."

"Brazil is *different*." She whispered 'different' like it was derogatory. "Besides, it can't hurt to have *extra clean* underwear."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah Mom, that is priority number one as I, y'know, compete for a gold medal."

She mm-hmmed cheerily, accepting my sarcasm as truth.

"Well, just let me know if you need any more underwear."

I edged closer to the balcony, embarrassed by the conversation. "No Mom, don't send me more underwear." I tried to change the subject. "The condos are fun. I'm sharing a space with Kinsley and Becca."

"They've put you all in a *condo*? How can that be safe?"

"Security only allows athletes and coaches to enter. Guests have limited visiting hours and they—"

"Oh! Sweetie, guess what I watched this morning while I was walking on the treadmill!" She didn't even notice she'd cut me off.

"What?"

“I try to walk at least a mile or two every morning. I even put on some Taylor Swift sometimes, but don’t tell your dad because he thinks her music is just—”

“MOM. What’d you watch this morning?”

“Oh! It was this little special on the CBS.”

She loved saying “the CBS” like it was a thing.

“Have you heard of Frederick Archibald? They did a feature about his upbringing and his special path to the Olympics.”

My stomach dropped at the mention of his name. Was there no escaping his celebrity?

“Apparently he’s a prince or something in England!”

I laughed and shook my head. “Mom, he’s not a prince. He’s just on the swim team.”

She shushed me. “No no, believe me. Hold on, let me open up the Google.”

Oh Jesus.

Ten minutes later—after she’d accidentally restarted her computer and updated her antivirus software twice—she pulled up the article.

“All right! It says here—” She paused and shuffled around, and I knew she was finding her tortoise shell reading glasses. “His father was the Duke of Farlington and before he passed away, Freddie was just called Lord Frederick Archibald, but now he is His Grace, Frederick Archibald, Earl of Norhill and Duke of Farlington!”

Wait. *What?* I laughed. That couldn’t possibly be right. She made it sound like Freddie was living in Middle Earth. I didn’t even know dukes were still a thing that existed.

I turned away from the window and pressed the phone closer to my ear. She kept rambling on about the CBS special, but I couldn’t wrap my head around what she was saying. Freddie was a DUKE? He’d touched my hand! He’d touched

my *butt!* He'd basically knighted me and I'd tossed my panties at his face like a commoner. Jesus.

"Mom, I have to go," I said, overwhelmed by the discovery.

"Oh? So soon? All right, okay. Just use that hand sanitizer and try to find Frederick. I'd love to show your meemaw a photo of you with British royalty."

Oh my god. "Okay Mom. Sounds good."

"Oh wait! It's also says here that three weeks ago—"

I hung up before she could continue to ramble. I loved her, truly I did, but once she got going, there was no stopping her. It was either cut her off midsentence or turn into a mummified corpse out on that balcony.

By the time I made it back inside, Kinsley and Becca had exchanged their unicorn onesies for jean shorts and t-shirts. We started making our way down to the food court, and though my stomach was rumbling nonstop, I couldn't help but focus on what my mother had just told me. If Freddie really was British royalty—wait, are dukes royal? *Who cares.* If Freddie really was a *duke*, the chances of him and I ever getting another moment alone were slim to none. He probably wouldn't be hanging out around the Olympic village like other athletes. He'd be off sipping tea with baby George.

"Are you thinking about Freddie?" Kinsley asked as we stepped out of the elevator on the first floor.

I shrugged and lied. "No."

"Because there really is something you should know before—"

I held up my hand. "Honestly, could everyone please stop talking about him?"

Between my mom and Kinsley, I'd never get him out of my head. I was in Rio to play the field, not get hung up on a guy after day one.

I'D GROWN USED to Kinsley's popularity back in Los Angeles, but walking around with her in the village felt like accompanying Taylor Swift to the Grammys. When we stepped into the food court, heads snapped in our direction. Athletes, families, friends, coaches—it didn't matter what country they were from—they all knew who Kinsley Bryant was, thanks to her marriage to Liam Wilder and her meteoric rise to soccer fame.

I slipped behind her and let her take the brunt of the attention. She delighted in it in a way I knew I never would. I liked the sponsorship opportunities and perks that went along with being an Olympic athlete, but I also enjoyed walking through the grocery store in sweatpants without having to worry that the paparazzi would be waiting to snap photos of me outside. Kinsley didn't have that luxury.

“Better get used to this,” Kinsley said, glancing back at me over her shoulder. “Once you carry the flag in the opening ceremonies, people all over the world will know who you are.”

I bristled at the thought. When the Olympic committee had asked if I'd like to be one of the flag bearers during the opening ceremonies, I'd been honored and had agreed without a second thought. Now, as I followed Kinsley past tables and noticed the curious stares, I wondered if maybe I'd made a mistake. I wasn't quite ready to exchange my relative obscurity for fame.

“Woah, watch it,” Becca said, pulling me out of the way just before I collided with a group of athletes weaving in the opposite direction.

The food court was a bona fide watering hole for sports stars of all countries. We headed toward a juice bar nestled near the back wall and I scanned over the crowd, taking it all in.

It was remarkably easy to spot the different sports; the telltale signs gave each one away. The rugby and weightlifting guys made their way through four or five different lines, stacking up their trays with enough sustenance to last a normal human a full year. A group of Serbian basketball players had

taken up residence in the corner of the food court, towering over the crowd and making the team of Australian gymnasts sitting beside them look like hobbits.

Though there were clearly differences in body sizes, there was no denying one fact: every single person was young and in the best shape of their lives. It was no wonder there were so many rumors about the Olympic village; hundreds of attractive athletes with energy to spare were bound to get into a little bit of trouble.

“What kind of juice are you going to get?” Kinsley asked, pulling me out of my survey of the room. We were nearly at the front of the line and I hadn’t even glanced over the menu.

“I think I want a smoothie.”

She laughed. “Well there’s like fifty of them, so—”

Kinsley was cut off when the girl behind us in line squealed so loud I nearly lost hearing in my left ear.

“HOLY SHIT,” she squealed, nudging her friend’s arm. “There’s Freddie!”

“Shut up! *Shut up*,” her friend chimed in.

My gut clenched as I glanced over my shoulder. The girls were a good deal shorter than I was, and when I spun to face them, the faint smell of chlorine spiked the air. They were definitely swimmers, and judging by their identical mannerisms, I guessed *synchronized*.

“Oh my god. He’s coming this way,” the first girl said. “Do I look okay?”

If Freddie was coming their way, he was coming *my* way. My heart pounded in my chest as I scanned past the girls to see Freddie walk up to the back of the juice line with what looked like a few other guys from his swim team. He hadn’t noticed me yet, which was for the best, because I couldn’t drag my gaze away from him. At the party the night before, it’d been dark, and the alcohol had cast him in hazy soap opera light. Here, now, in the food court, there was no denying his appeal.

I stood immobile, accepting the punch to the gut that came with the realization that Freddie's good looks hinted at years of mischief managed through sly smiles and charming words. His kind brown eyes and endearing smile suggested he'd never been grounded a day in his life, but the chiseled jaw and sharp cheekbones whispered that he probably should have been.

He was trying to look over the menu, but there was too much excitement surrounding him. A line of athletes began to form to the side of him as if choreographed beforehand.

"Could I get an autograph for my mum?"

"Freddie! Where are you staying for the games?"

"Can I see your abs?"

Question after question came his way, and I realized that whatever popularity Kinsley had, it didn't hold a candle to Freddie's. He drew attention like he was born for it, and as he smiled down and graciously signed autographs, I remembered that might well have been the case.

I used the crowd to conceal my gaze as I continued watching him, or at least I thought I did. I was openly gawking at him as he handed off an autograph and turned in my direction. His eyes locked on me and he smiled out of the right side of his mouth, a slow, cheeky smile that grew the longer I stared.

"Andie," Kinsley hissed, trying to break through the spell.

I blinked once, twice. Freddie offered me a subtle wave, and then I spun around with cheeks on fire and embarrassment coating my skin.

"Holy shit," I said, exhaling a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "How long was I staring at him?"

Kinsley gripped my hand and squeezed it, hard. "I thought you went catatonic there for a second."

I squeezed my eyes closed and groaned under my breath. Then, a hand reached out and tapped my shoulder. It was the girl from before—the swimmer with the nails-on-a-chalkboard squeal.

“Um, excuse me. Do you *know* Freddie?”

Before I could answer, her friend chimed in.

“If you do, could you introduce us? It’s just that—”

Kinsley held up her hand to stop them. “She doesn’t know him. He was clearly waving at the juice man,” she said, motioning to the elderly Brazilian man behind the counter.

I forced myself to move forward in line and I kept my eyes trained ahead of me, but the excitement behind me was too hard to ignore. People whispered, girls squealed, and cameras flashed as Freddie took photos with his fans. I moved forward and ordered a strawberry banana protein smoothie, and as I turned to find a seat with Kinsley, I ignored every urge to look in his direction as I passed. It was painful to deny myself that simple pleasure, and I was still lamenting that fact when he bent out of line and reached for my hand. His palm touched mine and my heart stopped. He gripped my hand tightly, just for a moment, then let it go.

Hhhhoookkkkaay. I was definitely having a heart attack. *This is the end. I’m going to die in a smoothie line.* I couldn’t breathe and my chest hurt, and then he smiled and started speaking, but I couldn’t hear him over the sound of my heart.

“I’m sorry,” I accidentally shouted. “What?”

He smiled wider, reveling in the fact that he’d knocked me off my senses. I could only focus on his eyes, at the exact shade of light brown that promised to be my demise.

“Your smoothie,” he said with a smooth British accent. “You’ve left it.”

I whipped around to see a girl behind the counter waving my smoothie in the air like a metronome. “Don’t you want this?” she asked, confused.

I cringed. Had I not grabbed it already? Apparently not. I hid my face as I walked back and took it from her hand. Every single person in line trailed my movements, either because they thought I was a little off my rocker, or because Freddie Archibald had just reached out and held my hand. His touch

had been warm and his palm was massive, wrapping around mine with no effort at all.

I'd stood in line for a smoothie for a solid twenty minutes and then I'd walked away empty-handed, too dumbstruck to care. All because of Freddie-freaking-Archibald—who, by the way, was still watching me.

I forced myself to make eye contact with him as I passed, and he smiled a secret little smile I knew I'd be dissecting for hours.

“See you around,” he said, and the words felt more like a promise than a dismissal.

Kinsley and Becca didn't say a word as we took our seats at a table far, far away from Freddie and his adoring fans. I purposely positioned myself with my back to him and stared at my smoothie.

“Honestly, Andie, you need to cool your jets with Freddie —”

Kinsley started rambling on again, but I wasn't listening. She was going to tell me to “focus on soccer” and “stay away from boys” and “don't party” and “keep your head in the game”, and I didn't want to hear it.

I pulled my phone out of my purse to find a text message my mom had sent right after I'd hung up on her. I swiped it open much to the dismay of Kinsley.

“Andie!” Kinsley said. “Are you listening?”

Mom: You didn't let me finish! Frederick is betrothed. Can you believe it? Maybe if the two of you become friends you'll be invited to a royal wedding! Or maybe he has a friend... another duke perhaps! Meemaw would be so excited!

NO! Betrothed? *Betrothed?* No. No. No.

My stomach hurt. This wasn't right. He was supposed to be single. We were supposed to touch hands and exchange sly smiles and...

“He's betrothed?” I asked, hearing the shock in my voice.

I dropped my phone on the table and Kinsley leaned forward to read the text message. When she was done, she glanced up at me with a pitiful frown.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all morning. Freddie is set to marry some girl named Caroline Montague. The betrothal was announced a few weeks ago.”

That made no sense.

Who the hell was Caroline Montague?

CHAPTER EIGHT

A *ndie*

AFTER HEARING THE news of *Frederick's* betrothal, I sat immobile, absorbing the news in shocked silence as my smoothieless stomach began to grumble. My mother had attached a Daily Mail news story to her text message and though I didn't want to, I read it. It highlighted the life and love of Caroline Montague and chronicled her high society British upbringing. Her father, while not titled himself, had invented the software used in most vending machines, and subsequently leveraged his earnings to put his hand in just about every business operating in London. She was worth more than most countries and the news story hinted that their betrothal would unite two illustrious European families, from the old world and the new.

There was a photo of Freddie and Caroline from their teenage years at the very bottom of the article. Apparently they'd been friends since childhood and it had come as a shock to no one when their families announced the betrothal. Caroline Montague was beautiful with delicate features and long blonde hair. She was styled "The People's Princess Diana", beloved by all and philanthropic to the core. How lovely.

I wanted to feel heartbroken and betrayed by the news. My gut told me I'd been wronged, but then common sense chimed in and leveled with me. I was *not* in love with Frederick

Archibald. People do not fall in love overnight. I was merely excited by the idea of Freddie the same way I got excited by two-for-one ice cream sundaes at McDonald's. I couldn't fault myself for it. I had working lady parts and a pulse, therefore the sight of Frederick Archibald had seemed alluring. No big deal. I could move on. There were plenty of other fish in the sea (probably the most applicable that phrase would ever be). The games were filled with sexy athletes whose only baggage was of the carryon variety. Sure, Freddie's jaw was chiseled from Grecian marble and his boyish grin had topped a BuzzFeed poll in 2014 entitled "Panty-Melting Smiles", but there were plenty of attractive people in Rio. Thousands of them, in fact. On to the next.

"Andie, yoohoo! Earth to Andie."

I glanced up to find Kinsley staring at me over the back of the couch. Becca sat beside her, flipping through TV channels at a rate that made my eyes water.

"Becca and I found this really good Netflix documentary series about baby arctic whales, and if we start it tonight, we can probably finish all the episodes before we head back to L.A."

She seemed really excited about the prospect, but there was no way I was joining them. I was putting the finishing touches on a sandwich in our condo's tiny kitchen, and instead of replying, I took a giant bite and offered her a vague head nod.

"Wait. Why are you dressed like you're going out?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

Becca turned back to assess me as well and I swallowed down the glob of peanut butter lodged in my throat.

"Oh. Well." I glanced down at my jean cutoffs and a cream, off-the-shoulder blouse. "Because I am."

Kinsley threw up her arms. "But Liam will be over here soon, and you are supposed to be our little baby beluga."

"I thought you loved whales," Becca added.

They knew I had a love for whales and they'd likely picked the series because they thought I needed cheering up. They assumed I was upset about Freddie's betrothal, but I couldn't have been further from upset. I didn't need to mope around our condo like my love life was over, because in fact, it was just getting started. I'd received an invitation on Facebook to a poker night hosted by a few members of the Portuguese men's soccer team, and there was no way I was going to pass up that opportunity. They were all tall, tan, and ridiculously handsome. I hadn't played poker in years, but I figured I could skirt by on luck long enough to find a replacement for my Rio boy-toy. I mean, what isn't cute about two soccer players in love? Nothing, as evidenced by Kinsley and Becca's storybook romances.

"As fun as the documentary sounds, I think I'm going to go out."

They frowned in tandem.

"Look, I don't expect you guys to understand. You're both married, and well, boring."

"Hey!" Becca said.

I threw them an apologetic smile. "I mean, it's the truth. If you guys were single, you'd be coming to this poker night with me."

"Not true," Kinsley argued.

I laughed. "Right. Let's see. Remember when you broke the rules to date Liam Wilder even though he was your college soccer coach?"

Becca burst out laughing, but Kinsley turned and narrowed her bright blue eyes on me. "That was different."

I shrugged. "It just seems strange that you're so adamantly against me going out and meeting a cute guy here when you both have had your fair share of fun."

Becca hummed in thought. I knew I was making a valid point.

“I just think I should get the choice to make the most of being in Rio.”

Kinsley nodded. “You’re right. But just so you know, you’re gorgeous, Andie. And I’m not just saying that because I like you. You could be betrothed to a million Freddie Archibalds if you wanted to be.”

I shook my head. “Thanks for your confidence in my polygamy skills, but really, I’m not even thinking about that—*him*—any more.”

“And if you want to go out and have fun, be my guest, but I’m not going to stop being overprotective of you. I made a promise to your mom that I’d watch out for you while we’re down here.”

“My mom called you?!”

Kinsley shot me a glare. “Christy has me on speed dial.”

Of course. I should have known.

I grabbed my small clutch from the dresser in my room and then slipped on my favorite pair of brown leather flip-flops. When I walked back into the living room, Kinsley and Becca stared up at me, assessing my outfit.

“You’re wearing a bra right?”

I rolled my eyes.

“And underwear? Are they *your own* this time?” Becca asked.

I ignored them and walked to the door.

“Stay safe. Text us and don’t stay out too late. We have an early practice tomorrow.”

“Wow you really have been talking to Christy lately,” I teased over my shoulder just as a knock sounded on the door. As anticipated, Liam stood on the other side with a bag full of takeout clutched in hand. He’d just showered and his hair was damp and mussed up a bit. Kinsley had definitely gotten lucky with him. I smiled and stole a handful of French fries as I sneaked past into the hallway.

“Hey! Wait. Aren’t you watching the documentary thing with us?” he asked.

“No, unlike you losers, I actually have plans.”

“Stay safe!” he shouted as I leaned forward to press the elevator call button.

Staying safe wasn’t really hard to do. While Rio at large had issues with crime, the village in contrast was secure and locked down after 8:00 PM. Athletes were free to roam as they pleased. The Portuguese guys were assigned a condo two buildings down from mine. The breeze from the ocean picked up my hair and blew it every which direction. I twisted the long strands in a low bun to keep them from sticking to my lipstick. I’d kept it simple in the makeup department. I still had a tan from outdoor practices back home, so I didn’t have to worry about foundation. I’d swiped on a subtle shade of red lipstick and mascara, and felt confident as I rode the elevator up to the third floor.

The noise from their condo could be heard even before I stepped off the elevator. I double-checked the Facebook invite and confirmed that the rowdy, bass-filled condo was the one I was supposed to be heading toward. 312. I offered a soft knock on the door though I knew it would go unheard. After another try, I turned the handle and stepped inside, surprised by the butterflies that swarmed my stomach as I entered.

Though the music was blaring, the condo was far less crowded than the Rubik’s Cube party had been the night before. There were a few guys in the kitchen mixing up a batch of sangria in a cooler on the floor. They waved me in and pointed to the living room where the rest of the party unfolded before me.

The soccer guys had pushed all the furniture aside to make room for three poker tables. I was running a little late, so the first two tables were already full of people drinking and talking and waving at me as I passed. I slid through the gaps in the chairs and headed for the last table where four empty chairs were waiting to be claimed.

I was about to take a seat when a hand reached out to grab my arm. I turned over my shoulder and came face to face with a tan, smiling guy I recognized from the Facebook invite. I couldn't remember his name, but he was definitely on the Portuguese national team.

“Hey,” he said warmly.

He looked handsome, but it was hard to tell with the throwback green visor on his head—a prop for poker night. A few other guys around the living room had them on as well.

“Hey. I'm Andie.”

He shook my hand and did a poor job of concealing his gaze as it slid down my body.

“Andie Foster,” he said with a smile. “I was hope to having you here.” He spoke in choppy English with a thick, seductive accent.

He pulled my chair out for me and took one of the open seats beside me.

“I'm Nathan Drake.”

My brows rose in shock. Nathan Drake was a popular name and though I hadn't noticed him at first—probably because of his visor—I'd definitely seen him on a few commercials; he was a heavily sponsored European soccer player in the same stratosphere as David and Liam.

My reaction to his name made him smile wider, revealing a pair of perfectly straight teeth and a single dimple that rimmed the edge of his lips. I was staring there as he spoke up again.

“You have done poker playing before?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not recently, but I'm hoping I can keep up.”

I glanced around the table to check out my competition. Poker was a wise choice for an international party, as the game could be played primarily with universal hand signals and gestures. Fortunately, no one seemed like they'd be taking the

game too seriously, and Nathan assured me we wouldn't be playing with real money.

Our table was split evenly between three girls and three boys.

“That is Tatiana and Sarah,” he said, pointing to two girls across the table. “Eric and Jorge.” I waved and smiled as he introduced everyone I'd be playing with for the next few hours. The majority in attendance were Portuguese athletes, but Eric was an American rower and Tatiana was a Russian diver.

Nathan started shuffling the cards. “We will starting soon. There is a few people still to arrive.”

“Sangria estará pronto em breve!” cheered the guys mixing the fruity wine in the kitchen.

They started passing out small cups filled with the concoction as more guests filtered inside, filling the empty seats. The sangria looked good but smelled like equal parts brandy to wine, so I politely declined a cup. Kinsley, though overbearing at times, was right about our early morning practice; I didn't need to be throwing up liquor while we did our workout.

“*Sabe* Frederick?” Nathan asked. “The swimmer?”

I pulled my attention from the room and glanced over. Nathan was beaming over at me, proud of himself for something.

“Um, yeah I know him, sort of. Why?”

He smiled wider. “He's coming. Is the guest special for the evening.” He hesitated through the sentence, trying out the words for what seemed like the first time. Freddie was going to be a special guest?

My gut clenched at the thought and I stood from my chair like someone had lit a fire beneath me.

“What is wrong?” Nathan asked, staring up at me.

I shook my head and frowned just as the front door opened again. One of the British swimmers I'd seen in the food court

walked in with Freddie right behind him. Everyone greeted them excitedly, but my heart rioted in my chest at the sight. He could slip on a pair of jeans and a gray Henley t-shirt. He could put a baseball cap on and pretend like he was Freddie, not Frederick, but I knew better. He had a certain charm about him—a faultless charm he was fully aware of—and when he glanced across the room and leveled me with his dark gaze beneath the rim of his hat, I knew it'd be a hopeless cause to try and get over him by flirting with a few soccer players.

There was *no* getting over him.

I wasn't surprised when he slipped past open seats at the other tables and made his way toward me. I wasn't surprised when he stopped at the seat beside mine, standing a foot away and stealing my comfort, my resolve, and my senses as he pulled the chair out from the table. I tried to focus down on the green felt, but it was no use. I still caught a whiff of his cologne—or maybe it was his body wash; I couldn't tell. It was subtle but strong, and I found myself wishing for a stuffy nose so I wouldn't have to keep smelling it. *We get it. You're a duke and you smell divine.* Did he need to keep rubbing it in?

“I should have expected to find you here,” he said with a smirk I couldn't see but knew was there. “Poker definitely suits you.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, finally turning to face him. MISTAKE. It was much easier to put up a barrier against Freddie when he wasn't sitting inches away from me, smiling like the devil himself.

“Yeah, you've got quite a good poker face,” he continued.

I tilted my head and tried to get a good look at his eyes under the brim of his hat. Who was he trying to hide from in that thing? There wasn't a person in the room who didn't know who he was.

“Why do you think that?”

“You seem wholly unaffected by me.”

I smiled, glad I at least appeared that way on the outside.

“I am.”

He smirked. “Are you?”

It was a textbook example of dry British banter with just a tinge of good-natured provocation, but rather than giving him the satisfaction, I decided to go on the offensive.

“Congrats on the betrothal,” I said with an arched brow. “Caroline’s really pretty.”

The blow clearly found its mark as his jaw tightened. “She’s just a friend.”

“A friend that you’re *engaged* to marry,” I reminded him.

“My family set up the betrothal. It wasn’t any of my doing.”

I shook my head. “Clearly I don’t understand your archaic English traditions. To be honest, I didn’t even realize betrothals were still a thing. In America, we like to be in control of our own destinies.”

His light brown eyes met mine beneath his cap and for a moment I thought I caught a glimpse of the real Freddie, not the teasing London playboy, but a man faced with a future he might not want.

He opened his mouth to speak just as Nathan slapped the deck of cards down on the table in front of me.

“Everyone is here! Ready to play?”

CHAPTER NINE

F *reddie*

I HADN'T BEEN into the idea of poker night. I'd told Thom to bugger off a half dozen times, but he'd guilted me into attending with a sob story about how he "used to do this sort of thing with Henry all the time." He'd have moaned on about it all night, and I didn't want to hear about how my brother had been ace at poker, so I grudgingly accepted with strict terms: we'd go for a little bit, Thom would play a few hands, and then I'd get back to the flat and rest up. I had an early morning workout and I was still a bit jetlagged from traveling halfway around the world.

Of course that plan was tossed out the window as soon as I walked into the flat with Thom and spotted Andie across the room. She was standing up, looking a bit peaky, like she was ready to bolt at the mere sight of me. Maybe I should have given her space, but I didn't. I slipped past a few blokes and made my way toward her table.

Our banter was easy, her presence was welcome, and though it'd surprised me to hear her speak of Caroline, I'd ended the discussion quickly. I didn't want to talk about her, not when Andie was so close.

She enthralled me. I sat watching her out of the corner of my eye as Nathan passed round the cards and went on about the rules. It was dull, but I nodded along and watched Andie,

taking in her delicate features and the hair pinned just at the nape of her neck. The pale shade of blonde reminded me of the summer sun. Her shirt fell off her shoulder closest to me and there were a slew of freckles dotting her tan skin there, just at the top.

“Freddie, if you keep trying to look at my cards,” she said, “I’ll have to ask someone to switch spots with me.” She kept her focus on her obscured cards, but I could see the smile she was trying to hide.

“Right.” I pretended to glance over my cards. “I was just wondering if you play poker often?”

Everyone was taking their time arranging their hand and assessing their odds, but it wasn’t bloody rocket science. I’d been playing poker for years and I didn’t have to concentrate hard on the game. I could play *and* focus on Andie; the two weren’t mutually exclusive.

“No, actually,” she replied. “I like to play games of skill, not luck.”

I nodded. “I’m afraid it’s not my strong suit either. I tend to wear my heart on my sleeve.”

“And where do you keep your spades and diamonds?” she asked with a soft smile.

Her smiles never lasted long enough. She was back to focusing on her hand, worried over the cards that had yet to be overturned, but I wanted her attention. I leaned closer and whispered in her ear.

“What if you and I have our own little wager?”

Her brow arched with curiosity, though she kept her focus on her cards. “Like a side bet? I didn’t bring any money.”

I nodded as I rearranged my cards. “Nothing serious. Just some fun since we’re both novices.”

She didn’t answer right away and when I glanced over, I found her eyeing me suspiciously, as if she was trying to see through my disguise. I watched as she brought her full bottom

lip between her teeth, mulling over the bet, and for a moment I was worried she'd say no.

"I've not known an Olympian that was afraid of a little competition," I taunted playfully.

She let go of her lip and straightened up. Just the mere mention of a competition lit a fire behind her gaze and I knew I had her.

"All right, you're on Mr. Viscount of WhateverItsCalled. What are we playing for?"

I smirked.

"We both have to workout, so I propose a 'turf war' of sorts. If I win, you join me in the pool tomorrow, and if you win, I'll join you on the pitch."

She tilted her head, still inspecting me as if she'd find my true intent written across my features. I arched a brow and she reached out to shake my hand.

"You're on."

We shook on it and I didn't let go until I was good and ready.

"I hope you packed a bikini."

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AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you to all my readers, especially the Little Reds. I know there are so many books to choose from these days, and I don't take it for granted that you all chose to spend a day or two reading mine.

If you have a minute, or even, say 20 seconds, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon for ARROGANT DEVIL. Reviews help indie authors so much!

XO, Rachel