



BREAKTHROUGH

Dads of Stillwater ✨

ANA ASHLEY

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Breakthrough - Dads of Stillwater

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Cover design: [Rhys, Ethereal Design](#)

Editor: Abbie Nicole

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When they say it takes a village, they're not lying.

Thank you Anka for the plot bunny, Mindy for the help with the medical questions, Abbie, my editor for the endless patience and making my books better and everyone else who's a touch point between the first word on the page to when I press the publish button.

May you always find your break in the clouds or the rainbow on a rainy day.

Ana

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ABOUT BREAKTHROUGH



A young single dad. An older man. An impossible love story.

Milo

I lost everyone I've ever loved, but there's one person I'm determined to keep. The baby I was left with when tragedy struck once more.

Now my life is all about surviving. I don't have time to date, or relationships.

That is until Ellis, the sexy, older, and kind primary school teacher who's currently living rent free in my head with no intention of moving out, gives me the second job I desperately need.

But why would he want a guy from the wrong side of town, who's barely paying the bills and comes with a plus one?

Ellis

Moving to Stillwater was the fresh start I needed after having my heart stomped on and my career practically destroyed.

Despite my family's best efforts, I'm determined that nothing shall break through the walls I've built around myself. No more relationships.

That is until I meet the much younger grocery store cashier with the warm brown eyes, and accidentally give him a job.

As I get to know Milo, brick by brick that wall is coming down and no matter how much I resist I'm starting to run out

of excuses as to why I shouldn't give in.

But why would he want anything with someone much older when he could have anyone else?

Breakthrough is book 2 in Ana Ashley's series, *Dads of Stillwater*. This story contains an age gap, a sweet nine-month-old baby everyone will coo about, all the feels and Ana Ashley's usual happy ever after.

TRIGGER WARNING

THIS BOOK CONTAINS on page mentions of drug use, violence, and suicide.

No actual drug use, violence or suicide happens on page.

MILO



MY MOM always used to say there are three certain things in life. Birth, the shit in between, and death.

“Milo, you just have to find that gap in the shit and break through. Then you’ll be free.”

Well, shit or clouds, whichever way the wind blew that day. Sometimes I got dreamy, happy mom. Other times, I got sad mom.

Regardless, I’ve held on to her words for as long as I can remember. It’s difficult when shit keeps piling, people keep dying, and there aren’t many clouds. At least not the white, fluffy kind.

I push my thoughts aside as I stare into the big brown eyes of the one person who makes all the shit in between worthwhile and makes me think my mom was right about the clouds. Sometimes there is an opening.

Like Sara.

She’s the gift life gave me when it took everything else away. The breakthrough in the middle of all the really hard stuff. She’s my fluffy white cloud.

“Hello, babydoll,” I coo, tickling her tummy. “Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

She does a long stretch from her nap and then kicks her arms and legs. I can’t resist taking her from the crib and into my arms. I love how she smells and how soft she is.

“Oh, someone needs a diaper change.” She blows some bubbles as her agreement, and my practiced moves take care of the rest.

Kissing the top of her head, I walk into the living area. Well, living area is a stretch. It’s more like my lounge-slash-bedroom-slash-kitchen, but never mind. It’s clean, tidy, and for as long as I can afford rent, it’s mine.

“You’ll spoil her rotten,” Florrie, my neighbor, says. “She needs to get used to waking up without you here.”

“I know, I know. I won’t do it tomorrow,” I say, kissing Sara on her cheek and giving her to Florrie, who’ll look after her while I’m at work. Sara doesn’t complain.

“You say that every day.”

“You also say every day this is your last babysitting day because you have your knitting club, your bingo night, and lord knows what else, and yet, here you are.”

She gives me a look that tells me not to sass a retired teacher if I know what’s good for me.

“Her dinner is in the fridge,” I say, “and I put a set of spare—”

“Clothes on the chair in the nursery. I know, I know. This isn’t my first rodeo, my boy. Now, off you go to work. Us girls have some important things to get on with. No boys allowed.” She ushers me out the door, and I let out a little sigh.

My heart breaks every time I have to leave my girl, even though I know she’s in the best hands.

God bless the day Florrie moved next door to the townhome we live in and needed help with the water pipe in her kitchen sink. Florrie, of course, fell in love with Sara while I fixed her problem. I got soaked in the process but gained a new friend.

She’s not from around here. You can tell because there’s no way she’d have moved to the south side of Stillwater if she knew better. Then again, on a teacher’s retirement salary, I don’t know if she could have afforded anything in a nicer part of town.

I look at my flip phone and see I have time to walk to work, so I save the bus money for the journey back.

Saving money is a bonus, but I enjoy the walk when it's a beautiful summer day like today. If I ignore the old houses with the broken window panes and the overgrown grass and broken swings on what used to be our playground, then it's not so bad.

The birds are chirping away, the sun is shining, and I know my girl is safe.

In a few more blocks, I'll be in the rich part of town. During the thirty-minute walk to work, I get to pretend I live in a nice house with two bedrooms, one for me and one for Sara. We'd have a backyard and a living room big enough for a play area.

Yes, we'd definitely have a garden.

I'd plant my mom's flowers there. Her favorite pink roses. And even though we probably wouldn't have the right weather for it, we'd plant tulips. Because she loved tulips and because it would be our house, so we could.

And Florrie would live next door to us like she does now, of course.

Before I know it, I arrive at the grocery store where I work, setting my dreams aside to make way for the real world.

"Milo," Pauline, one of the stockers, pulls me toward the break room when I'm barely through the door. She always knows everything. It's like she has ears everywhere in this place.

"Wow, are you trying to dislocate my arm?"

She looks around as if to check that there's no one nearby.

"Rumor is there's a new supervisor vacancy coming up," she says.

"And by rumor, you mean..."

She shakes her shoulders and straightens her work shirt, which is a hideous brown we all hate. "I was in Gerald's office earlier."

"Ew, are you okay? Do you need a shower? A Lysol spray?"

She laughs. “He didn’t get that close. Only close enough to notice the top two buttons on my shirt were undone, so he had a peek at the top of my bra.” She shudders. “Fucking pervert. Anyway, when I asked him about any jobs coming up, he sang like a canary. He thinks I want a promotion so I can be in the office with him all day. As if.” She rolls her eyes.

I give her a hug. “Thank you. Every time I ask for more hours, his excuses are budget cuts, his hands are tied, blah, always the same.”

“Bullshit. I don’t know why he’s got it in for you, but I’ll find out.” She looks at her watch. “Oh crap, I gotta go. My boyfriend is picking me up. We’ll catch up about this next time, okay?”

“Sure.”

Pauline grabs her bag from her locker and runs out the door. I love her for her tenacity. She’s moving to Florida in a few months, not that anyone else but me knows it, so she’s taking it upon herself to right all the wrongs in the store.

We all know Gerald, the store manager, has a thing for her. And by the looks of it, she’s using her powers for the greater good. The girl is crazy, but I’ll miss her when she goes.

I don’t have much on me. Only a sandwich to eat on my break and my phone, so I put those in my locker and get ready to start my shift.

The late shift is hard because I don’t get to read Sara a bedtime story and watch as she falls asleep for the night. But it’s the best shift at work.

As everyone finishes their jobs, they come in for their last-minute groceries, so we get busy. And busy means time goes by fast.

It also means there’s a chance I’ll see one of my favorite customers. Which is the highlight and one of the worst parts of my working day.

Ugh, it’s awful having a crush on someone and being so tongue-tied you could literally spit out a scarf.

I settle in at my usual register.

“Psst. Hey, Milo.”

I roll my eyes and turn around in my chair to face Jimmy, who should pay attention to the customer he’s serving. I point to the customer, and he shrugs, so I shake my head and turn back around. The last thing I need is Jimmy getting us in trouble because he’s bored and wants to chat.

Gerald has a way of sniffing out when someone so much as sneezes in the wrong direction, and then he’s there, in your face, ready to lord over his menials.

The store gets busy, and I lose track of time as I serve one customer after the next until they all blend into one. Well, almost.

Like my mom said, sometimes there are those breaks, and Ethel is one of them.

She always picks my checkout lane, and I adore her.

“Hey, sunshine,” I say as I scan her groceries. I do it slowly and help her bag everything up to ensure nothing falls out of the basket in her walker.

“Hey, gorgeous. Have you found yourself a good man yet?”

“Not yet, Ethel. I might just have to marry you after all.”

She gives me the biggest smile and takes out her purse to pay. I make sure she’s all set before she goes. I know her son or grandson is waiting for her in the parking lot. Ethel is nearly ninety, but she’s fiercely independent and says she can still do her own shopping. *Thank you very much.*

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she says.

“What’s that?”

She looks for something in her purse. “Oh, there it is. I’m practicing my crochet. I prefer knitting, but you’re never too old to learn something new, right, dear? Anyway, I learned how to crochet these little fish.” She takes it out and places it in my hand.

“It’s for your baby girl. I hope she likes it.”

I have to bite my lips to stop myself from laughing as I hold the gift to my chest.

“Thank you so much, Ethel. Sara will love this. She’s been really into...fish recently. I’m reading her a book about the ocean.”

Ethel nods, and off she goes with a spring on her step.

I jump when I see Jimmy right next to me.

“Christ. Warn a guy.”

“Dude, why did Ethel give you a crocheted butt plug?”

I snort as I look down at my hands, and he’s right. Okay, so it vaguely resembles a fish...if it was a butt plug going to a dress-up party dressed as a fish.

“Bless her. Her eyesight isn’t what it used to be. It’s the thought that counts, right?”

I see Gerald coming straight at us, and it’s too late for us to return to our respective posts. I only have time to put Ethel’s gift in my back pocket.

“What’s going on here? Are we on vacation? Is this time out?” he says, and I can smell his horrible tobacco-and-coffee breath.

“Not at all. We were just helping Ethel. You know how she is,” I say, pointing toward the parking lot.

“Yeah, she’s very stubborn, Gerald,” Jimmy says, retreating to his checkout lane.

Gerald narrows his eyes, clearly not believing a word we’re saying.

“Well, she’s not here anymore. Back to work, and I better not see you two messing around again.” He turns around with the air of superiority he likes to display.

He’s only the manager of a chain store. He’s as much of a nobody as we are. He’s just a better-paid nobody. But since he’s in charge, he loves to make sure we all know he’s the boss.

“Gerald?” I call, trying to gather my wits once again with the newfound information from Pauline. “I know you said you can’t give me more hours because of budgets. The thing is, I’m struggling to get by on just three days a week, you know, with trying to raise a baby and all. Are you sure you can’t stretch it? Just maybe an extra half-day?”

He puts his pudgy hand on my shoulder, and I almost recoil. “Sorry, Milo. It’s the powers above. You understand, right?” he asks, pointing up as if his boss is god herself.

“You’d tell me if there was a new job opening, wouldn’t you?” I ask, knowing he’ll never tell me what he told Pauline. “I don’t mind traveling to another store either.”

“Of course,” he says in a suddenly sickly-sweet voice without missing a beat.

The fucking bastard.

He leaves me to get back to work, and I struggle to find my usual spark. I like to be in a good mood when I talk to my customers. Sometimes people have bad days at work, and you never know if smiling and talking to them could cheer them up and turn their day around. But right now, I’m as deflated as a three-day-old balloon.

I’m looking down at my hands, lost in thought as I wait for my next customer, when someone clears their throat.

I stand up straight.

“Mr. Bradford...um...good day...well, it’s really evening, isn’t it?” I say, fumbling with my words like my brain has melted.

“Hi, Milo. You were in a world of your own. And what have I been saying about calling me Ellis?”

“Okay...Ellis.”

God, his smile does things to me.

“Yeah...um, I was just thinking about the library.”

“The library?”

I scrunch my face. He must think I’m an idiot.

“Yeah, I need to return some books I got for Sara and get some more. She loves them.”

He smiles again, and I melt a little inside.

“It’s good to get children used to touching books and listening to stories, even when we don’t think they can understand. They can take in a lot more than we think.”

I nod. I want to say that Sara loves touching her books and turning the pages. Well, mostly trying to chew them, but I’m afraid my brain-to-mouth function has been temporarily disabled.

A few months ago, I was going about my life. No need for relationships. Wasn’t thinking about boyfriends—let’s face it, Sara had just been born. I didn’t need anything else. Until Ellis Bradford moved to Stillwater and started to live rent-free in my brain.

The elementary school teacher with a gentle manner, who always has a smile for everyone and is far too intelligent and refined for someone like me.

But what can I do? It’s those kind eyes. The hair that already has a hint of salt and pepper on the sides.

He’s older than me. If I was to guess, I’d say he’s already forty, which would make him fourteen years older than my twenty-six years, but I don’t care. All I know is that my heart beats a little faster when he’s around, and that’s never happened with all the guys I’ve messed around with in the past.

He only has a bottle of wine and a box of chocolates today. I wonder if he’s going on a date, and my heart sinks a little.

“These aren’t your usual purchases,” I say before I stop myself. “Crap. I’m sorry. I mean...not that I notice what you usually buy.”

Yeah right. Or commit it to memory.

“That would be creepy,” I continue because my mouth has a will of its own. “I’m not creepy. I just notice things, and I see

everyone's shopping. Not that I remember everyone, although I remember yours because you always smile at me..."

I trap my lips between my teeth to force myself to stop talking before Ellis places a complaint against me to Gerald.

He tilts his head a little like he's simultaneously trying to figure me out and not laugh.

"My sister has invited me for dinner at her place. When I say invited, I mean she threatened to come over to my place and drag me out if I declined," he says, smiling in that way that makes it impossible for me not to smile back.

So he's not going on a date. It's messed up that my stomach does a little happy flip.

Yeah, definitely not a normal reaction to someone I barely know.

"I hope it's a nice dinner, and I'm sure she'll love these chocolates," I say, impressed that all the words come out in the correct order. Maybe it's because I'm scanning his items, so my brain momentarily restarts.

After he pays, he gives me another one of his nice smiles and leaves.

"You *so* have a crush on the elementary school teacher," Jimmy says.

"No I don't. Shut up. I'm going on my break," I say and close my register.

"Hey, Milo," Jimmy calls out. "You know it's pointless, right?"

"What is?"

"Guys like him will never even look twice at guys like us. We don't know enough about fancy stuff. I mean, what would you even talk about on a date? Guys like us should stick together, ya know. We come from the same place. This is as good as it gets for us."

I'm not sure if he means that in the general sense or if this is his weird way of asking me out, which wouldn't be the first

time.

As for the assumption that people from different worlds can't be together...maybe so...but all the romance books I get from the library tell me otherwise, so Jimmy can stick to his reality. I reserve the right to my own dreams.

I shrug noncommittally. "Doesn't matter because I don't have a crush on him, and I'm not interested in a relationship. My priority right now is Sara."

I *so* have an impossible crush on the elementary school teacher. Then again, my life is already full of dreams, so what harm can one more do?

ELLIS



THE DRIVE from the store to my place is filled with thoughts of the young man with the warm brown eyes that seem so out of place at the store.

I could use any other checkout lane, but if Milo is working, I can't go to another one. It's as if my body has a mind of its own, and before I know it, I've already unloaded my cart at his register.

He has these brown eyes that look at you with a mix of innocence and too much of the harsh reality of life. Like they've seen all the darkness there is to see. It's such a contradiction.

And then there's his sweet nine-month-old daughter, whom he seems solely responsible for.

I want to know more, but asking is inappropriate because we're not friends.

The only time I've seen him away from the grocery store was early in the summer at the end of the music festival.

I'd been trying to get the school approved as a GED testing center, and I guess the word got around town.

He approached me about the program while I was with a few friends watching my brother's rock band perform. But I check the school email daily, and I haven't seen his application for the summer preparation classes.

It's not my problem. I need to remind myself of that.

No matter how much I want to know what lies behind those young, sweet brown eyes.

Once home, I shower and get ready to go out again.

This time I walk to my sister's place. It's not far, and the evening breeze is a good reprieve from the warmer day.

I steel myself for the onslaught that is my niece and nephew before I ring the bell. When I moved to Stillwater, I stayed here for a few months, but I eventually found my own place, and I know the lovable little terrors miss me as much as I miss them.

I hug the bottle of wine to my chest in case they decide to climb me, just as the door opens and Alice ushers me inside.

She's wearing a nice dress...and heels. At home?

Are we celebrating something?

"You're early, but I'll forgive you because..." She takes the box of chocolates from my hand. "Yes! And this is why you're my favorite brother."

I roll my eyes. "How am I early? You said eight, right? Where are the kids?" I follow her, and as we pass the hallway toward the kitchen, I look around and see no trace of children.

The house is oddly tidy.

I'm getting a strange feeling about this.

"They're in bed already. Max took them to the park this afternoon, and they exhausted themselves. As soon as they had dinner and their bath, they were down for the count." She smiles like that was a carefully crafted plan.

I don't blame her. If you could produce energy from children running and screaming at a pitch heard by dogs ten miles away, my sister's kids could provide power to this town for weeks.

She goes around the kitchen island, where something is bubbling away on the stove.

"Smells nice. What are you cooking?"

“Italian beef ragu with pasta. I found this recipe online, and it had loads of great reviews, so I hope it turns out good,” she says.

The dinner table is fancier than usual, and it’s set for four, which means our brother Darius must be coming too.

“Are we celebrating something?” I ask, pointing to the table.

“Oh, that’s nothing. You know, it’s nice to get out the adult stuff sometimes. Unless you want to eat from Marnie’s *Paw Patrol* plate.” She raises a brow.

“No, you’re okay,” I chuckle. “Need help with anything?”

“All under control. Let me pour you a glass of wine. After all, you bought it.”

I shake my head. My sister. Scatty. A little crazy. A lot lovable.

I hear the front door open, and a moment later, my brother-in-law, Max, comes into the kitchen holding a cake box from Bittersweet.

“Hey, Ellis.”

I raise my glass, and he gives me a sympathetic nod. Sometimes you need a little fortification to handle my sister.

“Babe, I’ll put the cheesecake in the fridge until after dinner,” Max says to Alice. “Ty—” Alice interrupts Max with a kiss and sends him upstairs to check on the kids.

“Tying loose ends at work. He’s been doing that all day, poor thing. One more reason for this nice dinner.”

That’s...weird, but I don’t mention it. I pick up my glass of wine and walk to the window at the front of the house.

My sister lives in a friendly neighborhood. One of those places where you can leave your kids’ toys outside and no one will take them. Everyone knows everyone, and they even have monthly barbecues in each other’s backyards.

It’s sickly nice, and somehow it suits perfectly the girl who, like me, grew so tired of traveling around the world with our

parents that she made a life for herself in the small town we spent our summers in with our grandparents.

Sometimes I wish I'd been as courageous as she was and demanded to come back to Stillwater to live here permanently, finish school, and create some roots. But then again, I settled in Boston when I went to college, and I loved it there. I didn't consider not living in the city until...well...

I take a sip of wine. I hope it doesn't go to my head because I'm not in the mood to feel broodier than usual, and it's hard to put up an act in front of my family.

It's dark outside, and I can't even lie to myself. I love my sister, but I'm a creature of habit, and I'd rather be home planning next year's lessons.

A car pulls up to their driveway and someone gets out. A moment later, the doorbell rings and Alice rushes to the door, probably so it doesn't wake the kids.

"Hey, glad you could make it," I hear her say. "Follow me, and I'll get you a glass of wine. Dinner will be ready in a minute. We're just waiting for Max to come down."

Alice comes into the kitchen and behind her is a man who, from the look on his face, is as surprised to see me as I am to see him.

Where's Darius?

"I better do some introductions, right?" Alice asks, pouring a glass of my wine and giving it to the guy. "Tyler, this is my older brother, Ellis. He moved here a few months ago and teaches at the elementary school." Then she turns to me. "Ellis, this is Tyler. He's kind of a transplant from somewhere." She makes a zip motion over her lips. "Don't ask, he'll never confess, but he's lived here for so long I don't think anyone remembers a Tyler-less time."

Tyler holds out his hand, and I shake it.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

"Likewise."

Alice leads us to the dining room and insists on placing Tyler opposite me.

Thank you, sister, for not making this awkward at all.

I take the guy's features in. He's good-looking, but his eyes are weary. I notice we're about the same height, but he carries himself with some reluctant confidence. It's as if he's used to being in charge but doesn't know what to do when he's in unknown territory.

"So, Tyler, what sins did you commit to have to endure my sister's cooking?" I ask.

He runs his hand over his short scruff. "I don't quite know, but if you know your sister, you know there was no way out for me. So here I am."

I laugh. "Yeah, she certainly has a way of making you do things."

Max sits next to me and leans forward on the table with a pleading expression. "Please say the food is good. I have to live here. I'll buy you drinks next week."

Both Tyler and I share a look and chuckle.

I'm not one for stereotypes, but Alice insists on serving everyone herself like she's a fifties stay-at-home parent, which is so not her style. Tyler and I share another look. I hope the food is good because there's so much on the plate I don't think we could fake it if it's not.

It's not that Alice is a terrible cook. She's just very adventurous, and it doesn't always work out.

She raises her wine glass in a toast.

"To finding love in unexpected places."

And that's when Tyler and I stare at each other, realizing Alice has set us up.

"Babe..." Max pleads.

"What?" Alice asks with her most innocent voice. "Come on, let's try the ragu."

The food is superb—*well done, little sis*—and the conversation flows nicely. I always forget that without the kids, my sister is an actual adult sometimes.

Tyler and I share a few smiles, but I think we both know there's no spark.

Alice is delighted that we've cleared our plates and leaves us with the excuse to slice up the cheesecake and make us all some coffee, while poor Max is once again sent upstairs to check on the sleeping kids.

"I'm so sorry," I say to Tyler once we're out of earshot. "She's been trying to get me to start dating from the day I arrived here, but trying to set me up is a new level of crazy, even for Alice."

Tyler raises his hand. "It's okay. I was hoping for dinner with friends, and I can't say it was too bad. I'm sorry, and I don't want to be rude, but..." He shrugs and shakes his head.

"Yeah, me neither."

His relief is instant, and his smile returns to his face.

"She doesn't need to know though," I say.

"Oh, you're evil. I might change my mind after all."

I laugh. "So, tell me more about your work with the soup kitchen. I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know there are people who need that kind of support in such a small town."

"Yeah. There are people in Stillwater who don't want to talk about the poorer areas and even go as far as campaigning so that no funds go toward improving those areas," he says.

I'm shocked to hear it because Stillwater is a fairly small town. How many of my students come from those neighborhoods?

"How often do you run the soup kitchen?" I ask.

"Three days a week. I wish I could do more, but we spend the remaining days sourcing the food and preparing it. We rely on volunteers to help make it all work."

I reach out and touch his hand. “I’d really love to help, Tyler. I don’t know if any of my students are from those poorer backgrounds. I want to learn so I can help more.”

“All help is welcome. I’ll be happy to show you as much as you want to see,” he says.

Alice comes with the dessert just as I’m taking my hand back, but she doesn’t miss it, and her eyes go comically wide.

Great.

Tyler winks at me, and I relax. At least if Alice thinks we’ve hit it off, she’ll be off both our backs.

“I love you, honey, but if I was gay, I’d marry Julius tomorrow,” Max says, tasting the cheesecake he bought from Bittersweet, the coffee shop on Main Street.

“I wouldn’t mind being in a threesome with the two of you, babe,” Alice says, and I almost snort the coffee I’ve just drunk.

“How weird is it that the bakery in Stillwater only sells bread and cookies, but the coffee shop sells all the other baked stuff?” I ask.

“That’s Stillwater for you. It’s the town where The Academy isn’t a school but a bar and restaurant. Make it make sense.” Tyler says. “But to be fair, Liv from Lovely Buns only sells cookies because even Julius says hers are the best, and it would be a sin to deny the good people of Stillwater.”

I look at my watch. “Wow, I’m sorry I didn’t realize it was getting so late. I really need to go. I have an early meeting tomorrow for the GED summer classes.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Tyler says. “It’s getting a bit late for me too.”

We all stand from the table, and Alice is like a bunny on springs from excitement.

“Have you guys exchanged contact details yet?” she asks.

“Subtle, babe,” Max deadpans.

“We’re covered, you big meddler.” I give her a kiss and a hug and then pat Max’s back before heading toward the door.

Tyler follows me out.

“Where’s your car?” he asks.

“I walked. I only live a few blocks away.”

“Want a ride?”

I look behind us and see Alice trying, not very discreetly, to see how we part ways.

“Oh man. If you give me a ride, she’ll be planning our winter wedding by the weekend.”

Tyler’s deep laugh makes me feel something I haven’t in a long time. Companionship. Like someone is on the same page.

I go over to the passenger side of his car and jump in.

“Take me home, lover,” I say.

“Who calls their lover, lover?”

“Would you prefer mon amant? Amore mio?” I say, laying on my practiced French and Italian accents.

“God, no! And this is why we’re so wrong for each other,” he says with a hearty laugh. “But I really like you, Ellis.”

“I like you too, Tyler.”

He drops me off in front of my place. We exchange numbers and he gives me the address of the soup kitchen.

I knew early on that I wanted to teach because I can’t help caring about people and helping them get where they want to be. Especially young people. And I’ve never been afraid of working hard. Grading papers until midnight. Seeing all the little scribbles as the students try to write their first words. I love it all.

But knowing I can now also make a difference in my community makes me feel right and at home for the first time since I arrived in Stillwater.

Somehow the image of the young man that scans my groceries every week returns to me, with his reserved smile and his shy,

intelligent eyes that look back at me with so much untapped potential.

MILO



I STARE AT THE LETTER, but I'm not even reading it anymore.

A knock on the door forces me to look up.

"It's open."

Florrie walks in.

"You got it too?" she asks.

I nod, resting my head hopelessly on my hands with my elbows on my knees. How will I afford a rent increase? It's not a lot, and it's been a while since the last one, but ten months ago, I had a full-time job. Even without help from my brother's income, I would have easily afforded it and more.

"I don't know what to do, Florrie. I can't afford to put Sara in childcare, so I can get a full-time job. What employer will let me bring her with me?"

She sits next to me, and I feel her hand on my shoulder. "It'll work out. Life has a way of making things work. We just have to believe that if we put good energy out there, we'll get good energy back. In the meantime, I'll help you where I can. You know that."

A lump forms in my throat, and I have to take a deep breath to stop a stray tear from falling because Florrie sounds so much like my mom that it's as if she's here, speaking to me.

God, I miss her. And my dad. And my fucking brother. Even Sara's mom. I miss everyone.

“Look, there’s no point sitting here worrying about it. Why don’t we get all dolled up and go check out this month’s craft fair?” she asks. “I’ll drive us into town, and we’ll walk the rest of the way. How does that sound?”

She’s right. I look at her and smile. “Thank you. Let’s do it. And when we’re back, I’ll make you my mom’s tuna casserole for dinner. I promise it’s the best.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

It’s a hot day, so I put Sara in a cute little white dress I found at Goodwill. It still had the tag on it and everything. She looks adorable and smiles at me like she knows it.

“Yes, you’re so beautiful, aren’t you?” She kicks her arms and legs excitedly as I comb her short hair and catch it with a white bow. “You’ll be the prettiest girl at the fair. Yes, you will.”

Once Sara is ready, I make sure I have her bag with a change of clothes, diapers, snacks, and her bottle. I’m all kitted out like I’m moving to a different country.

“You girls are far too complicated,” I say to her, tickling her tummy as I walk past her crib to get her favorite toy. “Gone are the days when I only needed my clothes, wallet, and phone.”

She babbles back at me. Her bunny sits next to Ethel’s gift. I put it on the shelf since it’s pink and can kinda pass as a fish, sideways, of course. I’ll draw the line at taking it out with us, so I hope it never becomes Sara’s favorite toy.

“Are you ready?” I ask, and she holds out her hands to get picked up.

Florrie finds a lucky parking space in the shade, and we walk the rest of the way to the fair. This is a monthly event in Stillwater, and it’s becoming bigger and bigger each year.

Sara falls asleep in the car and wakes up a little cranky when I move her to the stroller, staring at me like I’m not her most favorite person.

I'm just happy looking at all the beautiful things people can create. It seems there are some people a little more talented than Ethel with crochet because we see a stand that sells anything and everything crocheted.

"I never had much patience to sit around doing that sort of thing," Florrie says. "My Tony used to say I had ants in my pants. Couldn't sit around."

I can believe that. When Florrie isn't looking after Sara, she's always walking to stay fit or working in her yard doing something or another.

We continue our way around the fair. Just because I can't buy anything doesn't mean I can't look or appreciate the effort and skill that goes into a lot of these crafts.

I particularly like the stand selling plants growing in recycled stuff. There's a half-dome made from recycled plastic growing a spider plant. It looks pretty and easy to look after. It will look great in someone's home.

"Oh look, Milo. Aren't those precious?"

I turn to see what Florrie is pointing at. "That's Arlo's stand. Come on, I'll introduce you."

We walk over, and as usual, Arlo crouches by the stroller to say hi to Sara.

"Hello, princess. Don't you look stunning." He says.

"Florrie, this is Arlo. He makes the most beautiful wings for children to wear on their back, like butterflies, bees, anything kids want, but he also does other pieces of art."

"Pleasure to meet you, Florrie," he says, taking Florrie farther inside the stand to show her some of his pieces.

We're in the shade, so I take out the water bottle to see if Sara's thirsty. She takes it happily without fuss, drinking until she's had enough. Even though she mostly drinks formula, she's starting to have some water. My baby girl is growing up too fast.

I wave one of her snacks in front of her to see if she's hungry, and she takes it immediately.

“All right, all right, little Miss Impatient,” I say to her.

“Is that your baby?”

It doesn't surprise me to see Ava at the fair with Arlo. She's Arlo's boyfriend's eight-year-old daughter, and she's as sweet as she is smart.

She's wearing her ladybug wings Arlo made for her.

“Yes, she is. Her name is Sara.”

“That's a pretty name. Do you have a wife or a husband?” she asks.

“Ava,” Arlo says from where he's standing with Florrie.

“Sorry, Daddy Arlo,” she answers but looks at me expectantly.

I smile and whisper. “No, I don't have a husband or a boyfriend.”

Ava's forehead crinkles as if she's thinking about a complicated problem. I notice Sara is about to drop half her now-soggy snack on her dress and catch it just in time.

Look at that, and I was even bad at sports at school. Who'd have thought I'd suddenly get Spiderman reflexes with the birth of a baby?

“I know!” Ava says, pointing her finger up. “My teacher, Mr. Bradford. He doesn't have a husband or a boyfriend. I know because my best friend, Megan, who was in my class, told me. Anyway, I think you and my teacher, Mr. Bradford, should get married.”

I stare at her, dumbfounded. As she waves her hand in front of my face.

“Hello? Didn't you hear me? I said you should marry Mr. Brad —” As if by magic, Arlo appears behind Ava, silencing her with his hand, which is just as well because in the stand next to Arlo's, I see Mr. Bradford—Ellis—with his sister and her kids.

“She has a knack for predicting these things,” Arlo says, “but...let's maybe allow destiny to do its thing first, shall we?”

He winks and then whispers something in Ava's ear. She runs off to the back of the stand.

Arlo leaves me to serve a customer that calls for him, and I don't see Florrie, so she must have moved on to another stall. We agreed to meet back at the car if we got separated, so it's not a big deal, but now I don't know what to do.

Do I acknowledge Ellis? Do I pretend I don't see him? Ugh, stupid fucking crush.

I stare at Sara, but she's just babbling away and playing with her toy. Not that I'd expect a nine-month-old baby to tell me what to do in this situation. Obviously.

By the time I decide to move on, he's already seen me.

"Milo, how nice to see you here," he says.

"Oh...er...hi, Mr.—Ellis." I hold on to the stroller, trying not to fidget. Usually, the checkout counter is my safety buffer, but now I don't know what to do with my hands, and he's close enough that I can smell his cologne.

"Oh my goodness, is that your daughter?" Alice asks.

"Um...yeah." I always forget that I know most people in Stillwater because they see me at the store, but they don't know me. They know nothing about me. At least those from this side of town.

"She's so precious. What's her name?"

"Sara."

"That's a beautiful name," Alice says.

"Thank you."

I look at Ellis, and he's staring at me like he's trying to figure me out. He seems to do that a lot.

"Milo, I'd like to talk to you about something. Would you be okay leaving Sara in my sister's capable hands for a few minutes?"

I waver for a moment. It's not that I don't trust Alice. She's raising two children, and they're a wonderful family. But

Sara...

“You know what? Never mind,” he says. “Alice, do you mind meeting me by the ice cream cart?”

“Sure.” She gives Sara one last goodbye and leaves us, taking her two children with her.

“They’re really well behaved,” I say.

“That’s because they know there’s ice cream in their future if they do,” Ellis says, laughing. “Come on, let’s get a cool drink.”

I follow him, pushing the stroller, unsure of what’s happening or what he wants to talk about.

There’s a cart nearby selling cold drinks. He stops, so I do too, and my stomach sinks, especially when I look at the prices. I wasn’t expecting to spend any money today.

“What would you like to drink?” he asks.

“I’m okay, thank you,” I say. “I have water in my bag.”

He turns around. “I’d like to buy you a drink. Is that okay? Would you like a cool lemonade?” My skin overheats as it becomes clear that he knows I can’t afford a simple drink at a fair, but I appreciate him asking away from the cart man’s hearing range.

“That would be nice, thank you.”

Ellis buys the drinks and then points to a bench under a nearby tree.

The cool lemonade gives me the boost of sugar and hydration I didn’t realize I needed after walking in the sun. I check on Sara, and she’s fallen asleep, so I change the position of the stroller so she’s lying flat.

“Milo, please forgive me if I’m stepping way out of line, but when I saw you at the summer festival, you seemed excited about taking the classes to do the GED exam in the fall.”

I look down at the cup in my hands. Why did I have to get overexcited about it?

I should have known it was an impossible achievement and left it at that.

“Talk to me, Milo. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

I shake my head.

“I just can’t do it right now, Mr.—Ellis,” I say, correcting myself since he keeps insisting I call him Ellis. I’m not at work, so I don’t need to be formal.

“You don’t need to give me any reasons, but trust me when I say there’s often a solution. Even when you don’t have it, someone else might.”

This would be one of those times when my mom would have something wise to say. She’d probably tell me to trust Ellis. But what can Ellis do?

“Thank you. I’ll think about it.” That’s all I can say because I don’t want to lie to him.

He gives me a smile, and I notice the small wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. They’re the lines of someone who’s smiled a lot in his life, even though I don’t see him smiling often.

“I should get back to my sister. I don’t want to break my ice cream promise,” he says. “The favorite uncle crown is mine to keep.”

Sara wakes up and starts getting fussy, so I pick her up and push the stroller with my free hand. The street where Florrie parked her car isn’t far and Sara has her hat on, so we make our way.

Before we get there, I see Florrie talking to a friend, so I approach slowly, not wanting to interrupt if it’s a private conversation.

“I can’t believe it. We need to fight this,” the other lady says.

“Count me in, Vera,” Florrie says, and the other lady walks away.

“What was that about?” I ask.

“Apparently, some rich woman in town is petitioning the mayor to turn the playground near us into a parking lot. Can

you imagine?” She’s so incensed you’d think she’d lived in Stillwater all her life.

“Nothing surprises me in Stillwater anymore.”

“Something to do with not wanting people to park on residential streets during the craft fair. I mean, hasn’t the fair been around for a long time?”

“Yeah, since before I was born.”

“Then why now? It doesn’t make sense.”

Sara starts fussing, so I gesture for us to head to the car.

“Wait, you don’t seem bothered about it. Didn’t you play there as a child?”

It’s hard to explain the complex relationship I have with that playground, even though Florrie knows some of my family’s history.

We reach the car and I strap Sara into the car seat.

“It’s not that I don’t care what happens to it, but the playground hasn’t been used in years. At least a parking lot would be something.” I get into the passenger seat and put the seat belt on. “I can’t remember the last time there was any investment on our side of town.”

When Florrie doesn’t start the car, I look at her and find her staring at me.

“What?”

“Nothing...” she says unconvincingly. “Anyway, I bought these tiny angel wings from Arlo’s stand for Sara’s room. They’re so precious. He made them himself by hand. Can you believe it?”

“Thank you, Florrie, you didn’t have to buy anything for Sara. You already help me so much.”

She puts her hand on mine and squeezes it. “I know, dear, but I don’t have anyone else to spoil, so entertain the old lady here. Let’s get home. I believe you promised me a tuna casserole,” she says, letting go to turn the keys in the ignition.

“I did indeed.”

ELLIS



TYLER'S SOUP kitchen isn't hard to find.

I park by the church he mentioned and walk around to the back. It's late afternoon, but unlike the Stillwater I've come to know, this part of town looks sad, unattended, and forgotten in the dusky colors of the sunset.

There are few trees, no flowers, no life. I'm pretty sure the grass is dead, and people must have walked on it so often they've created their own clear paths because you can see the dry soil underneath.

I've seen worse, much worse. But I didn't think I'd see this in what seems like such a close-knit community and small town like Stillwater.

The way everyone supported the kids' Spring Fair after a fire in one of the school buildings destroyed everything we'd been working on was the kind of stuff you see in Hallmark movies.

That Stillwater doesn't match this one. Why aren't people getting together to improve this area?

"Ellis, hey, glad you could make it."

I see Tyler coming from behind a rusty white van that looks like the last time it saw better days was a few decades ago.

"Hey, I'm happy to help. Where do you want me?"

"Can you grab those two boxes from the back? They're big but light. Just rolls."

I do as he says and then follow him inside the building. We go straight into a kitchen, where there's a group of people busy around three stoves, chatting animatedly.

They don't notice as we walk behind them. Tyler puts his box down and then sets mine on top of his.

"Ready for intros?" he whispers as if I'm about to be induced into a super-secret society.

"Feed me to the wolves," I joke.

"Not quite, but," he says, looking me up and down, "you're easy on the eye, so I'd stay away from Emy. She's a flirt, but she keeps her hands to herself."

"So why do I need to stay away from her?"

"Do you have a particular interest in earthworms, fig wasps, or Star Wars fan fic?"

"No?"

"That's why."

Okay...

He turns to the group, and I take a second to process what he just said before Tyler makes the introductions.

"Hey, team, this is Ellis. He's a teacher at the elementary school, and he's helping us today. Be gentle," he warns, and they all laugh. "From left to right, that's Anne, Bob, Cathy, Dave, and Emy."

I smile and raise my hand in a collective hi.

"He likes to keep us in alphabetical order so he doesn't forget our names," Bob says. They all laugh again and return to the stoves where they're preparing the food.

"He's not wrong," Tyler says. "Come with me."

We walk through a set of double doors that leads straight to a hall with faded parquet flooring.

"This used to be a sports facility?" I ask.

"Yeah, a long time ago. Since they built the new high school years ago, this building became too far away and impractical.

The kids didn't have enough time to walk back to school between PE and the other classes."

Tyler shrugs as though that's just the accepted way of things, like a weathered man who's seen it all and is doing the best with the little he has.

There are a bunch of tables and chairs stacked up by the wall, so we line them until the hall fills up with rows upon rows, and it looks more like a school cafeteria than an empty space.

"We have a volunteer who comes in at night and cleans the floor, so we always stack the tables and chairs on the side to make it easy for him," he says. "Let's get back to the kitchen and see how they're doing. I think we have bean chili with rice, vegetable soup, some good old fried chicken, and mashed potatoes."

I'm impressed. And I won't voice it, but I also feel stupid that I assumed a soup kitchen would only serve soup.

Tyler sets up the serving table in the hall by the double doors for easy access from the kitchen. I'm given the task of putting rolls in baskets and then taking stuff out when it's ready.

It's organized chaos. Everyone works around everyone else like they can predict each other's moves. I feel like I'm mostly in the way, but everyone seems too nice to say anything.

While we're preparing the serving station, the hall fills with people. There's animated chatting and some heckling at Tyler, who taunts back without missing a beat.

It's almost easy to forget that these people are here because they're struggling financially. This might be the only meal they get today. Or the most nutritious one they get until the next time the kitchen is open.

When the food is ready, Anne, Bob, Cathy, Dave, Emy, and Tyler all line up, each in front of a station. Tyler rings a bell and people form an orderly line.

They pick up trays from one end and make their way along, choosing what they want.

I'm at the very end next to Tyler, just making sure they have cutlery and a roll and reminding them to pick up a plastic cup if they want water from the dispenser.

My job is totally superfluous, but it's giving me exactly what I want.

An opportunity to get to know these people.

And they're not people without housing wearing ragged clothes, looking dirty. These are the hardworking people who, for some reason or another, cannot afford to put food on the table, the system failed them, or they've had to make some really difficult choices.

As they come around, I recognize a face, and as soon as she sees me, she looks down and gets closer to the person in front of her as if to blend in. She doesn't even pick up a roll before she goes to a table on the far end and sits with her back to us.

"Tyler, is it okay if I go speak to that lady over there?" I ask.

"Do you know her?"

"She's the mother of one of my students."

He gives me a knowing look and nods.

I grab a roll and head over to her table. She looks up when she notices someone sitting in front of her, and her face is full of panic when she realizes it's me.

"Mrs. Salvador, you forgot your roll."

She stares at me and then the roll. Her hands shake as she takes it and places it on her tray.

"Do you mind if I talk to you for a moment?"

"Are you going to call child services?"

I'm taken aback by her question. "Why would I do that?"

She shrugs. "Isn't that what you people do when you think the kids are in a bad situation?"

"I'm not going to do that."

"Why not?"

“Because I’m not worried about your son. He’s a smart boy. He always did his homework, made friends easily, and never thought twice about helping one of his classmates. He’s a credit to you and your husband. I’m sure he’ll do just as well next year.”

She smiles, and I see the pride shining from her eyes before her expression darkens again.

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m here because I would like to volunteer, which means you may see me more often. I am not here to judge. If you ever want to talk, I’m an excellent listener, but please don’t be afraid when you see me.”

She nods, and I’m not entirely certain she trusts my words, but hopefully, we can build that over time.

On my way back to the serving station, a guy shouts, “Hey, new guy, next time, give us a proper portion. We ain’t kids here.”

“I wasn’t the one that served you, Geoff. Go complain to management.”

He looks a little shocked by my reply, and his friends are making fun of him, so I go over and give him a pat on the back. “I’m a teacher, Geoff. I’m good at remembering names and faces, and I know Cathy gave you a little extra rice under that chili.”

“You’re funny, Mr. Teacher. You can come back again,” another guy, Bill, I think, says.

“I intend to. And now I should get back to work before I’m fired on my first day, right?”

“Tyler runs a tight ship round here,” Geoff says.

On my return to the station, Tyler is arguing with someone.

“Joseph, don’t be greedy. You know the rule. One roll per person until everyone’s had a portion. If there are leftovers, you can have more.”

Joseph goes off mumbling something or another that I can't understand.

I lean closer to Tyler. "I saw Kay take two rolls earlier."

"I let her because she takes one for her friend, Brian, who's too damned proud to come here and get a meal. Usually, if there're leftovers, I'll give her a box to take away too."

I gesture at the room around us. "Tyler, this is an amaz—"

"Hey, Ty, sorry I'm—"

If my heart could beat any faster, I'd have a coronary because the last person I expected to see in Tyler's soup kitchen was Milo, in well-worn, slightly torn jeans and a faded T-shirt that might have once been red, but it's hard to tell now.

Milo's gaze shifts between Tyler, me, and the floor.

"Hi, Milo, nice to see you again," I say to break the silence because a glance at Tyler shows he's confused by Milo's reaction.

"Hi," he replies. "Um...Tyler, sorry I'm a little late. I'll go out back and start now, okay?"

"Sure thing. Anne left your favorite for you."

"Thank you."

Milo practically runs toward the kitchen without glancing back.

I look at Tyler, who's grinning. "Well, well. Looks like *he* is the one Alice should have invited over for dinner the other day." And then he leaves me to go clear the tables.

What does he mean?

Cathy and Dave clear tables too, so I help Bob and Anne make up some leftover boxes. Kay is the first to come up to get one for her friend, thanking us.

The double doors have round glass windows you can see through into the kitchen, so with the pretense of getting some napkins, I go to the other side of the station and try to look through them.

I see Milo leaning against the kitchen counter, joyfully eating a portion of rice and chili like it's the first meal he's had today.

My memory goes back to the day I bought him the lemonade at the fair.

It suddenly dawns on me. He didn't want to get a drink, not because he was shy or unsure. It was because he couldn't afford it.

I'm not sure if I want to be sick, run inside the kitchen and hold Milo in my arms, or scream.

"Sorry, guys, I need a breath of fresh air. I'll be back in a moment."

Emy nods and carries on with her work while I basically run to the door.

It's dark outside now. It's one of those mild summer nights that would be perfect with a breeze but feels sticky and stifling without one.

I lean my back against the wall and close my eyes.

Maybe I stay outside a little too long because I hear the door open, and when I open my eyes, Tyler's standing next to me.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Honestly? I'm not sure." I stare into his eyes. "What is Milo doing here?"

"He volunteers, just the rest of the gang."

"But it's not just that, is it?"

Tyler puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes tight. "That's a conversation you need to have with him."

I nod.

"I'm going to give a piece of advice because I've been doing this too long on my own."

"Okay."

"You can't help everybody. I've seen you talk to people today. It's good to be familiar with them. But you can't rescue them."

We're here to make today a little better than yesterday. Some people don't want to be rescued. Some people can't."

I nod, even though every cell in my body wants to fight it.

"But Milo. He's different."

Tyler smiles. "Milo is a special person. He's very guarded and has good reason to be. If you want to help him...gain his trust."

"I don't know how. He seems...flighty."

"Then catch him before he takes off."

MILO



I NEED to stop running into him. I need to stop running into him.

That's the mantra I keep repeating as I prepare to wash the large pots and pans the team used to make the meals.

I'm not sure how I can make it happen when he seems to be wherever I go.

I've been volunteering with Ty practically since he started the soup kitchen. I'm not that great a cook, but I can certainly do the dishes, which means the rest of the crew gets to go home early.

This is my community. Where I grew up. So I want to help.

Most of them knew my family, which is why I stay behind the closed kitchen doors, but it won't stop me from helping out.

I don't want to hear the stories or see the pity in their eyes. Or worse, the hatred at my brother for being part of what makes this area of town what it is now. Even if he paid for it with his life.

No. I just want to help. Doesn't hurt getting a free meal out of it too.

Anne's chili is the best, but since I've been on my own with Sara, I've noticed Tyler keeping food behind for me more frequently.

"We saved your favorite before it ran out," he always says. "Or there was too much because fewer people turned up today."

It's a silly game we play with each other. He pretends he doesn't know I need the free food, and I pretend I eat it just to make him happy.

The truth is, I do need it. Desperately.

I don't get paid till Friday, and the last of my money went toward today's groceries, which only covers the vegetables I need to make Sara's meals. I cook them in a batch and freeze them in little pots, so I know she'll have food for the next two weeks.

Anne's chili is the only thing I've had to eat today, apart from a piece of toast for breakfast.

I debated whether I should keep half of it to take home for tomorrow, but my gluttony won and I ate it all. Damn Anne's cooking skills.

With renewed energy from my meal, I tackle the pile of dishes. I start with the big pans because they dry quickly, and I can put them away to make space for the smaller stuff.

The problem with this job is that it doesn't require much thought. At the store, I need to pay attention to what I'm doing. I don't want to overcharge someone because I accidentally scan an item twice.

But washing pans requires no brain work. Which means my mind is totally switched to the man on the other side of the double doors.

Ugh, even casually dressed, as he is today, he still looks so good.

Did anyone notice how he usually wears dressier clothes but today he's wearing jeans and an untucked shirt? I bet not.

That's the kind of thing I notice because I have a stupid crush on him. He's not wearing cologne. His shoes aren't polished. He's not trying to blend in. He wants people to be at ease around him.

I don't know him that well, but even I know that's what he does.

It must be a teacher thing.

Except when it comes to me. There's no easing or relaxing around Ellis. Just lots of blood flow, feelings, breathlessness, lightheadedness—I should probably see a doctor.

At least he was outside when I had my dinner. I'd be mortified if he knew that chili was my only meal today.

It's stupid, I know. It's obvious we come from different worlds.

Maybe Jimmy is right.

Ellis is older, educated, well spoken, while I'm...just Milo.

But even just Milo still has a little pride left.

"I think that pot is as washed as it's ever going to be."

I jump at the sound of his voice, sending a big splatter of water everywhere.

"Oh my god. I'm sorry," I say, grabbing a dish towel and trying to pat his shirt dry.

He laughs. "It's okay. It's only water. I've been under the rain before and lived."

I stop, unsure of what to do. "I'm still sorry."

"I'm the one who should apologize. I shouldn't have come from behind you like that."

My cheeks heat at the thought of Ellis coming from behind me for a totally different reason, and I have to try really hard to push away the butterflies in my belly and send signals to my dick, who's starting to have ideas.

I rinse the pan before putting it on a table to dry and grabbing another pot.

"Have you been volunteering here long?" he asks.

"Yes, since Tyler started it."

"That's nice of you, especially when you're already busy with work and raising a baby."

I stop scrubbing the pan for a moment and look at him. "I live right around the corner, so it's no big deal."

“You’d be surprised how many people can help and don’t or won’t, so don’t sell yourself short,” he says.

“Why are you here?”

Ellis is as taken aback by my question as I am. What the hell has gotten into me? I almost want to take it back, but I’m curious. What brings him to this side of Stillwater? How did he come to know Tyler in the first place, anyway?

He folds his shirt sleeves and starts washing the cutlery in the smaller sink next to mine.

“I’m embarrassed to say I didn’t know there was such a class divide in Stillwater.” He laughs to himself. “Even saying that sounds so wrong.”

“It’s the truth though. A lot of folks from here, especially the older ones, used to work at the old mill factory in Chester Falls. When it closed down, everyone lost their jobs.”

A pang of sadness hits me as I still remember the day it happened.

It’s one of my earliest memories.

“A small town like Stillwater would never have enough jobs for everyone,” Ellis says.

I rinse the pan and grab the last one.

“Some retired. Some went on disability. There were...a lot of men who took their lives thinking their insurance would provide for their families.” I can hear my voice break as it all comes back to me.

My mom crying while cradling her pregnant belly. Me holding my favorite teddy and asking her why she was crying. My dad was home during the day. He was never home during the day.

I clear my throat.

“Anyway. How did you meet Tyler? He’s not usually the sociable kind, and he doesn’t have kids, so it can’t have been at school,” I say, changing the subject.

When the hell did I get so chatty around Ellis? Where’s tongue-tied Milo who doesn’t ask inappropriate questions?

Ellis lets out a laugh that makes me forget everything and reawakens the butterflies in my belly. The small lines in the corner of his eyes return, even as he's rolling them.

"Believe it or not, my sister tried to set us up on a date."

"Oh." That's the butterflies all gone. Puff. No more.

Thankfully, he's still washing the cutlery and doesn't see my reaction, so he carries on. "I don't know what even possessed her to think Tyler and I would be a good match."

I look at him. A flicker of hope—well, more like keeping my little dream alive—rises in my chest, but he's still distracted.

"He's a great guy, though, and I'm so glad I met him. I think we could become good friends. And I would never know about the support he's giving the community. I mean, how many of my students come from this part of town, and I don't even know it?"

"There's a lot of good people in this part of town," I say.

He turns to me and his eyes are on mine, capturing them, holding them hostage because I can't look away.

"From what I can see, there's at least one good person in this part of town."

He slowly removes his gaze from mine, which is just as well so he doesn't see me blushing or my infatuated smile.

The rest of the team comes back after a while, having gotten the hall ready for the cleaner, and with Ellis's help, the dishes are done in half the time.

"Good effort, team. Thank you all for coming again. See you for more fun and games in a few days," Tyler says. "Now, skedaddle off home. I'll lock up."

"Yes, boss," we all say and spill out of the building through the kitchen door.

I wave everyone goodbye, but I'm not sure what to do with Ellis.

"Um...I guess I'll see you when you're next shopping...or maybe here?" I ask, putting my hands in my jean pockets.

He smiles. “Do you want a ride home?”

I point at the street behind me. “I really do live just around the corner. It would take you longer to drive me there.”

“Oh.”

He half-turns to go but doesn't, and I'm not sure what to make of it. It's like he's disappointed.

Nah, the chili must be going to my head. Or maybe it's spending time with Ellis and managing several complete sentences without breaking down in a pile of goo that has clearly messed with my brain.

“Well, as you say, I'll see you around,” he says and then walks away.

I wasn't lying when I said I live nearby because, in just a short walk, I'm turning onto my street.

I hear Sara crying and screaming, and I run toward the house.

Florrie is holding her, and I see her go-bag is ready.

“We need to get to the hospital. Sara's temperature is too high, and I can't get it down.”

“Have you given her anything?” I ask, knowing it's a stupid question because Florrie looks after Sara well.

“I've given her Tylenol and used some cold compresses, but her temperature hasn't gone down.”

My hands shake as I hold Sara in my arms.

She's burning even through her clothes. Thankfully, Florrie thought to change her into something lighter and easier to remove than her one-piece pajamas. I strap her into the car seat while Florrie goes to the driver's side. I get in on the other side of the car next to Sara.

“It's okay, baby. We're going to the doctor, and they'll make you all nice and better, okay?” I know she's probably not listening to or understanding what I'm saying, but I say it for my sanity because right now, I'm close to losing it.

Florrie is driving as fast as she can. We're not talking. I know she's as worried as I am. We can talk as soon as we see a doctor.

She drops us outside the hospital, which I'm not even sure is allowed, but I don't care. I grab the car seat and run to the reception desk.

"Hi, my baby is running a really high fever. I need to see a doctor or a nurse. Please, can you help?"

My hands shake as I expect the woman behind the desk to tell me I have to wait a long time to see someone. Sara is crying so hard her face is red and streaked with tears.

"I'm no doctor, hun," she says as she types on her computer. "Hold up."

She's looking at her screen and then at sheets of paper. Behind me, the waiting room is full of people. Babies have priority, right?

Please, god. Let babies have priority.

The receptionist looks up, "Hey, Darius, be a sweetheart and help this gentleman over here." I turn and see a tall guy approaching. He's wearing scrubs, so he must be a doctor or a nurse.

He looks straight at Sara and touches her forehead. "Hey, gorgeous. Wanna be my date for the night?" He has a deep, calming voice that seems to have an effect on Sara. Then he looks at me. "I'm Darius. I'm a nurse practitioner, and I'll be looking after your baby. Follow me."

"Um...my friend, she's my babysitter. She's been with Sara all night, so she might know more about when the fever started. She's parking the car."

"What's her name, hun?" the receptionist asks.

"Florrie."

"Leave it with me."

Darius takes us into a room.

"How old is she?"

“Nine months. She’s just started eating solids but still takes formula,” I say.

“Eating well?”

“Yeah, she likes her food. Drinks some water too.”

Sara’s been a healthy baby, and we’ve never had to come to the emergency room before. I really hope this isn’t something serious. The thought is too painful, so I push it out of my head.

Darius removes Sara’s clothes until she’s in only her diaper and starts checking her over while having an adult conversation with her about how hard it is to find cheap vegetables these days and how criminal it is that they still haven’t invented a bubble gum-flavored twinkie.

She seems completely fascinated by his deep voice, and I feel calmer now that she doesn’t look so distressed.

He turns to me. “Her lungs are clear. It looks like it might be an ear infection. I’m going to give her an antibiotic and connect her to an IV to give her some fluids for dehydration.”

His voice seems to have the same magical effect on me because all I can do is stare at him. He looks familiar, but I can’t place him, and I know for sure I’ve never met him before.

“Will she be okay?” I ask.

“I’m sure she will. She wouldn’t be doing her job right if she didn’t give you a few white hairs before she’s one. I’m still going to take a blood sample and send it for analysis to make sure the cause of the fever is just the ear infection and nothing else. It could take a couple of hours for the results to come through.”

I nod. “Thank you so much for helping us.”

He puts his stethoscope around his neck and smiles. “I love my job, and it’s not a hardship when the patients are this adorable.” He tickles Sara’s tummy, starting another one of their conversations as he connects the IV line.

“See ya later, alligator.” He says when he’s finished, and then turns to me again. “I’ll be back in a while to check on her

fever, okay? If you need anything, just press that buzzer on the wall.”

He leaves us, and a moment later, Florrie comes in with the receptionist.

I explain what the nurse did, and we finally take a moment to breathe.

“She was fine all evening. When I put her to bed, she didn’t even complain,” Florrie says. “Then she suddenly started crying, so I checked on her, and she was burning. I tried to get her temperature down with the Tylenol and a wet cloth, but it wasn’t working.”

“Thank you, Florrie. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She gives me a hug, and we wait. I hate seeing my baby girl with the needle attached to her tiny hand, even though I know it’s making her better. Sara’s fever goes down and her bloodwork comes back clear, so Darius is happy to send us home a few hours later.

By the time I get to bed, I’m so exhausted that I put Sara’s baby monitor on the loudest setting to make sure I can hear her if she wakes up again.

I look at a photo of my mom that was taken when she and my dad got married. She looks happy and carefree. Like she has her whole life ahead of her.

“I miss you, Mom. Keep an eye on her for me. She’s all I have left. Love you.”

ELLIS



I DON'T KNOW what possessed me to say yes to meeting up with a couple of my students' parents for Thursday night drinks at The Academy a couple months ago. I knew it had bad idea written all over it.

Okay, so after Harrison and Fletcher helped me with the school's Spring Fair, we kinda became friends. When I say friends, it's more that they decided I need to be taken under a wing as a single gay newbie in town.

No amount of insisting that I spent plenty of summers in Stillwater convinced them I wasn't much of a newbie. And it didn't help that my sister—God rest her soul when I eventually kill her—sided with them.

Apparently, I need to have a social life.

Apparently, Thursday is the new Friday.

Thank god the summer break came soon after their “new” tradition because teaching a classroom of energetic seven-year-olds after a late night is definitely not on my list of favorite things to do.

Each Thursday seems to bring out a different set of parents and friends, so my need for predictability and stability goes well out of the water every week.

When I arrive at The Academy, Fletcher and Harrison are in a booth at the far end of the bar, sitting as close together as two humans possibly can without risking being arrested for indecent behavior.

They're drinking their usual, so I head up to the bar and order a glass of wine for me and a new round of drinks for them before joining them in the booth.

It turns out Levi isn't working behind the bar this evening. His daughter, Ava, is having a sleepover with Fletcher's and Harrison's kids at Harrison's ex's place, so he and Arlo squeeze into our booth shortly after I arrive.

"First round of shots is on me," Levi says and then waves at his best friend and fellow server, Penny, as she walks past with a tray of empty glasses. "Hey, Pen, can you bring us a round of Spiky Roses?"

"Sure can, gorgeous."

"Not wanting to state the obvious here," Harrison says, pointing to all the drinks in front of us, "but that's not our first round."

"What's a Spiky Rose?" I dare ask.

"It smells nice but stings like a motherfucker on the way down," all but Levi say in unison.

Levi waves them off. "It's a little something I've been working on to update the drinks menu...it may need a few tweaks."

Arlo gives him a side look. "That thing should be illegal."

"I suppose I could make it smoother, but some people like it a little rough sometimes."

Fletcher snorts as Arlo tries to hide his reddening cheeks behind his hands.

"Here you go, boys." Penny sets down a tray with five small shot glasses containing a pinkish drink.

"I'm not sure about this," I say, already feeling tomorrow's regret.

"Come on, Ellis, it's summer break. It's like spring break, but without boobs or dick. You know I was an equal opportunity kind of guy." Fletcher says, raising his glass and then downing his shot before sounding like he's about to cough up a lung.

“Good save, baby,” Harrison says before taking his shot, and Fletcher laughs.

“Yup, no boobs for me now,” he grins. “Just your big, fat—” Harrison shuts him up with a kiss, which we’re all thankful for.

Levi looks at me expectantly.

I groan and close my eyes as I take the shot. I’m not sure what hits me first, the sting as the drink goes past my throat or the overwhelming smell of roses. “How much...alcohol”—I cough—“is in this?”

My question remains unanswered as Fletcher calls Penny and asks for another round.

At some point, I start questioning my life choices or my choice of friends before remembering I didn’t choose them. They picked me, so for their sins, I get them a couple of rounds.

Of course, with my not-quite-drunk-yet state of poor judgment, I forget the rounds include me. At least the last time I drank wine was a while ago, so I’m not mixing drinks...I think. There are so many glasses on the table, I’m not sure anymore.

“How do you do it?” Harrison asks, staring at me.

I shrug. “It’s easy. You hold it like this, and then you raise the glass up to your mouth and drink the poison inside. You’ve been doing well so far. Four out of five because you spilled a little on your shirt earlier.” I give him a pat on the head.

“No, you dumbass,” he says before covering his mouth with his hands in the same way his daughter does in class when she says something she’s not supposed to. “The kids.”

I point at his chest. “I don’t have no...any kids. You have two.”

“Nah, dude, you have like...”—Arlo stares at the ceiling—“fifty, sixty kids in your class?”

“Feels like that sometimes, but it’s twenty. Why are we talking about my work? You,”—I point at all of them—“said I need to

chill. No work talk. Besides, it's bumper seak...summer break."

"Fletch is feeling broody," Harrison says.

"Broody as in..." I prompt.

"He wants a baby because we bumped into Milo last week at the craft fair and he got to hold his baby daughter for a millisecond."

Fletcher nods fiercely.

"How did he get his baby, anyway?" Fletcher asks. "As far as I know, he's single, and he didn't have a baby, and then boom... baby."

"You do know how babies are made, right?" Levi asks.

Fletcher holds out his hands, arguing back, "Yeah, but he's gay."

I'm staying in my corner and away from the conversation between them because Milo's personal life isn't my business. What does it matter if he's single or gay or how he got to have a baby? That's surely his business.

"Hello," Levi waves. "I'm also totally one hundred percent gay."

"I can vouch for him," Arlo interrupts.

Levi gives him a kiss and continues, "And I have a kid. All I'm saying is...I don't know, I need another frink...drink..."

"And all I'm saying is, we've been together for two months, Fletch," Harrison argues. "I'm not ready to be interrupted by a crying baby when...you know...every five minutes."

"You have sex every five minutes?" Arlo asks and then whispers, "Do you take like...medication?"

"What? Fuck no."

I laugh at Harrison's shocked expression that his manhood might be questioned even if what's at stake is an impossible five-minute refractory period.

“Aw, the baby phase is the best,” Levi says, leaning against Arlo, who’s giving him a weird side look. “That’s when they’re all cute and smell nice.”

“And puke all over you when you’re about to go into a meeting to ask your boss for a raise,” Harrison interjects.

Levi waves him off. “Pfft, it’s when they learn words and use them to ask you for a tartant...turt...tarantula.” He punches the air when he gets it right. “It’s when they ask you for vemonous pets that you have to worry.”

Arlo rolls his eyes. “Ava didn’t ask for a *venomous* pet. She asked for a brother because Megan now has George.”

Penny brings more drinks I don’t remember anyone ordering, but they look different from the Spiky Roses.

Fletcher downs a shot of something that looks vile and then kisses Harrison to the point he has to not-so-discreetly adjust himself in his seat, probably far too gone to remember he’s sitting right next to me, and then points at Levi. “My son is not a vemo...nous pet.”

“He does have a new sister though,” Harrison adds, and the way Fletcher looks at him could melt the most frozen of hearts.

Not my heart though. Mine has been signed, sealed, and delivered to the ice caps. Lost forever. At least as far as love is concerned. And I’m not drunk enough to consider admitting to myself that I may be a tiny bit jealous of them and their perfect relationships.

“This is all your fault,” Levi says.

“Who? Me?” I ask since he’s pointing in our general direction and it’s hard to tell.

I raise my hand to get Penny’s attention and ask for a new round for the table. If I’m going to be blamed for poisonous pets and extra children, I need more alcohol. In for a dime, in for a dollar.

“No. Them,” Arlo says. “They had to go and get together, and now Megan and George have each other.”

“So, are you having a baby?” Fletcher asks.

“We said we’d get married first,” Arlo says pointedly.

Levi gasps and brings his hand up to his mouth. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“I guess I am,” Arlo says.

Penny rolls her eyes as she sets the tray with the new round.

“Are they proposing to each other again?”

“Yup,” Fletcher says.

Harrison adds, “At least they’re not proposing to anyone else this time.”

“This is true.” Penny puts a cocktail in front of me and gives me a sympathetic look.

When did we switch to cocktails?

“Penny, bring me some water, please. Someone needs to sober up enough to stop them from heading over to the town hall to get married in the nude,” I say. “They’ve all mentioned it before, and at this rate, I’m not even sure they’re sober enough to marry the right person.”

She laughs. “Meh, worse things happen at sea. Let your hair down, honey.”

“Yeah, Ellis, let your hair down,” Fletcher says, imitating Penny’s voice.

I take a sip from the cocktail Penny just brought.

Let my hair down. *Isn’t that what I’ve been doing tonight?*

“How about Milo? I bet he’d help you let your hair down,” Fletcher says, leaning over Harrison to get closer to me. “He’d mess it all up and then mess it all up again.”

“That makes no sense.”

He stares at me, but whatever he’s looking for seems lost, so he leans against Harrison, who puts one of his muscly arms around him and kisses his hair.

“Yeah, what happened between you and Milo?”

Levi and Arlo look at each other and then at me. “Something happened between you and Milo?” Levi asks.

Arlo adds, “I knew I thought I saw you two together at the fair after Milo’s neighbor left.”

I feel my skin warm up.

Fuck. The wine, those Spiky Roses, and whatever else I’ve had are going to my head.

Correction: have gone to my head.

“No. I don’t know what they’re even talking about,” I say.

“Oh come on, Ellis,” Fletcher says, wiggling his eyebrows, “You can tell us. You like Milo, don’t you? Who wouldn’t? He’s so adorable and smiley and cute.”

“No point denying it. We all saw it,” Harrison adds.

Huh? Saw it?

“Yeah. Why are they wasting their time?” Fletcher asks the group, totally ignoring my presence or state of confusion.

“I’m sorry. What are you talking about?” I ask.

Fletcher gesticulates like it’s supposed to mean something. “You know, at the summer festival. That thing between you two when he came to ask you about something, and he was all shy, and you went all red.”

I stare at him.

“Oh come on, you said, ‘How many times do I have to ask you to call me Ellis?’ And then he goes, ‘At least one more time.’ Come on, Ellis. That’s so romantic that I could have painted you on canvas right there and then.”

Fuck, maybe Fletcher isn’t as drunk as I thought.

I look at Harrison for help.

“He’s not entirely wrong,” he says, being no help at all.

The change to this topic is enough to sober me up a little.

I shake my head. “No, that’s ridiculous. Yes, he’s a nice young man, and he needed help with his...stuff. That’s all. Nothing

else. That's it. Besides, I'm forty-two, and he's all of twenty-something. What a ridiculous idea that something would happen between us."

"So you admit you like him. Ha!" Fletcher says, a little too loud. People from a few tables down look at us, and I pray to god no one knows Milo.

"How come we missed that?" Arlo asks.

Levi thinks for a moment. "I think we were working real hard on that brother for Ava."

"Ahhh, that time. Wasn't it the time when you did that thing where—"

"Please don't finish that sentence," I plead. "I'd like to keep all the drinks I've had inside my stomach...at least until I get home."

He raises his hands as a form of apology.

"I'm tapping out, guys," I say.

Getting out of the booth when I'm in the middle of two couples presents a challenge, but when I offer to pay for another round of drinks and their cabs home, they let me out.

I drink two full glasses of water and take two Advil as soon as I get home, hoping it'll make tomorrow a little less painful.

With any luck, everyone's memories of tonight will be erased, and there will be no further questions about the nothing that is happening between Milo and me.

Because there isn't and never will be.

ELLIS



FOCUSING on next year's lesson plans when my brain is pounding from last night's hangout is a challenge.

Now I know two Advil and water before bed no longer works. And I shouldn't trust Levi when it comes to trying out new drinks.

The teacher has learned the lesson.

I'm definitely sitting out next Thursday. They can pick a new victim.

I close my eyes and rub my temples, taking a deep breath, willing my headache away.

I'm also willing away the recall of all conversations involving Milo.

Where the hell did they get those ideas? I'm only trying to help him.

Okay, yes, Milo is an attractive young man, but what does that have to do with anything? Can't someone find another person attractive and still keep a friendly relationship?

That's probably what Milo needs more right now. A friend.

He has a daughter to raise, and from what I saw in the soup kitchen, he may have other problems too. If getting his GED helps him get to where he needs to be, I'll be there for him.

My phone dings with a notification, and I don't need to read it to know what it is.

I groan, which makes my headache worse.

Picking up my phone, I pull up the teacher's group and type a message before getting up from my desk to get ready.

Ellis: I'm on my way. Not feeling a hundred percent.

Jan: Oh dear. We'll order your coffee.

Ellis: I love you.

Jan: Of course you do. I'm awesome.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrive at Bittersweet, where a few of the teachers arranged to meet up for a midsummer-break catch-up over lunch. Except I haven't even had breakfast.

Jan's curious gaze peers at me from the top of her pink-framed glasses as I sit across from her on the empty chair with the full cup of coffee in front of it. The secretary is the most lovable person in the school, but also the nosiest and sharpest. I better keep my mouth shut until I have more caffeine in me.

"Hey, Ellis, partying hard this summer?" someone teases.

"You know it. Me and my wild ways." I take a sip of the coffee and lean back on the chair, closing my eyes and waiting for the caffeine to reach my bloodstream. "Thank you to the angel who brewed this coffee," I mutter.

"Anytime, Ellis." I open my eyes and see Julius, the owner of Bittersweet, clearing a nearby table. "You look like you need a couple of painkillers to go with that." He laughs.

I raise the cup. "I'm good on painkillers, but I'd murder for one of your lemon muffins."

"Coming right up."

Julius goes inside, so I turn to the faces around the table. "Sorry I'm late. What did I miss?"

"Looks like we're the ones missing something. Our summer has clearly been a lot less interesting than yours," Sonya, the PE teacher, says, raising a brow.

“If you want to subject yourself to liver failure”—*and years of therapy*—“I can tell you where to be next Thursday evening.”

“I hear you’re volunteering at the soup kitchen,” Jan says.

A change of topic. *Thank you, Jan.* “Yeah. It’s been a real eye-opener, but I’m enjoying supporting that community.”

“There’s a rumor going around that Mrs. Martin is pushing the mayor to turn the playground by the church on the south side of town into a parking lot to stop the tourists that come to the craft fair from parking on the residential streets on the north side of town.”

“Hold up,” someone else says. “Sonya, doesn’t your girlfriend work closely with the town council?”

“Yes, she does.”

A lot of eyes meet in a silent conversation.

“I’m a little lost here, people. Does anyone care to fill in the newbie?” I ask.

Sonya looks at everyone. “At the moment, this is just a *rumor*.” The way she emphasizes the word makes me wonder if this is more than a rumor. “But yes, it seems Mrs. Martin has moved on from crafts into town planning.”

“I’m even more lost now,” I say.

“Mrs. Martin is basically Stillwater’s Wicked Witch of the West, or whatever they call it. If you want to know more, ask Arlo and Levi. You taught their kid, Ava, right?”

“Yeah, she was in my class last year.”

“One thing is for sure. If Mrs. Martin’s really got it in for that playground, it’ll take the town or a very strong-willed mind to change the course of action.”

If I was already struggling to get Milo and yesterday’s conversation off my mind, it’s even worse now that I know there’s a chance the playground he may have played on growing up could be destroyed.

There’s not much I can do right now, so I park the information I’ve just learned to one side and join the conversation as we

start talking about classes for next year, activity plans, and teaching schedules.

When I go back home, I realize lesson planning isn't going to happen, but there are a few other jobs that need to be done around the house. Or maybe I could stop by Birchcraft, the craft store where Arlo works, and ask when he might be free to talk. Or willing.

If this Mrs. Martin woman is as bad as Sonya made her out to be, Arlo may not want to talk about her. It's worth a try anyway.

The rest of the day goes by quicker, and Julius' lemon muffin must have magical powers because my headache subsides considerably afterward. At home, I look at the new posters I ordered to put up on the classroom walls and go through my school supplies to see what will make it into the new year and what will go in the spares box.

By the time I look at the clock again, it's too late to go to Birchcraft and speak to Arlo, but I still head out because I need to stop at the grocery store to get a few things for dinner.

It's funny how my shopping habits have changed. When I lived in the city, I did one weekly trip, and it was rare that I needed to supplement it with anything extra.

In Stillwater, I enjoy buying fresh food more often. It's nice having better meal options and changing my mind because I don't have to stick to the ingredients I bought a week ago.

It's also because you like seeing Milo.

Yes, fine. It's because I like seeing Milo. So what? I'm only human. When you connect with someone, you should hold on to it, right? I might ask him how Sara is.

That's what friends do, right?

As if by luck, the first person I see in the vegetable section isn't Arlo, but his boyfriend, Levi. He's adding a few items to his cart when he sees me.

“Hey, Ellis. How are you feeling after last night?”

“A lot worse than you look. Have you got some kind of special medicine, or is just age on your side?”

He laughs. “It just takes practice, my friend.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“At least it’s summer break so you didn’t have a class full of kids to teach today.”

I laugh. “There’s that, but I do miss them. I’ve been to the school for a couple of meetings, and the classroom feels too empty.”

“Maybe next year I’ll take photos of them to stick in their chairs so you can still look at their faces. It’ll be my contribution to your summer break wellbeing.”

I laugh. “Photos aren’t quite as noisy. But I like the idea. How’s your photography business going, anyway?”

Levi is a photographer, but when he returned to Stillwater after years away, he took a job as a bartender at The Academy bar and restaurant while he started up his business.

“It’s good, thanks. I’m still working up to what I really want to photograph, but in the meantime, just getting people from Stillwater to come to me is...well, quite a miracle, considering.”

I scratch my day-old stubble, unsure how to approach it.

“Actually, Levi. I...um...I’m looking for some information, and I was told you and Arlo might be able to help.”

“Sure.”

“Who’s Mrs. Martin?”

Levi’s expression changes immediately. He’s holding a tomato in his hand and places it carefully in his cart.

“She’s the person responsible for the lies that took me away from my family for twelve years. She was also on the craft fair committee until earlier this year when she refused to give Arlo a stand at the fair.”

“What? Why? He’s super talented and everyone loves his stand.”

Levi smiles proudly. “He is. Which is why the town stood by him when her lies came out. The craft committee stepped down, so at the moment, there’s nothing in place, but Arlo is working with the other stand holders to come up with a solution.” He adds more things to his cart. “Why are you asking about her?”

“I hate gossip, but I heard there’s a chance she may be involved in plans to transform the playground by the church on the south side of town into a parking lot. Does she really have that much influence with the mayor?”

He looks around as if to ensure there’s no one listening.

“Stillwater is one of those funny places. On the surface, it’s very accepting, open, the perfect place to live. But underneath it all, there’s still some old money trying to influence where they can bring back the ‘old values,’” he says with speech quotes. “Sometimes they get their way, sometimes they don’t.”

I pick up a couple of peppers and roll them in my hand. Maybe this is all a hearsay and nothing will actually happen.

“Thank you for the information, Levi. I’m sure she’s not the most pleasant topic of discussion for you, so I apologize but appreciate the information.”

“Don’t worry about it. If there’s anything Arlo and I can do to help, let us know. Now I gotta go before Arlo and Ava destroy our kitchen. They’re making dinner together, and Ava is the chef.” He looks at the contents of his cart. “I should probably grab some frozen pizzas just in case.”

I wave him off and continue shopping. The peppers go in my basket, along with a couple of onions, tomatoes, and a few more vegetables before I check out the fruit section.

“That’s quite a healthy basket you have there.”

I turn around and see Fletcher and Harrison, who also look as fresh as two daisies in the spring. I really must find out what their secret is.

“Hi, guys. How’s it going?”

Harrison just nods, but it’s Fletcher’s smile as he stares at my basket that scares me a little.

“We’re good. Shopping for movie night with the kids,” Fletcher says. “And you? Just...buying extremely healthy food?”

“Fletch...” Harrison warns, but it goes totally ignored, so he rolls his eyes.

“Or maybe...” Fletcher continues. “Is it because this is the best vantage point to watch a certain cashier?”

I feel my skin warm even though I didn’t see Milo when I came in, but he’s not wrong when it comes to my other shopping trips. My fruit and vegetable consumption has increased. Which is a good thing for a man my age. It’s healthy.

“Not this again.”

“All Fletcher is saying, in a very bad and totally roundabout way, is that if you’re attracted to Milo, it may not be totally unreciprocated. We all see it. But you do what you want with that. Also, add some protein to that basket if you don’t want to be too obvious about your shopping...habits.”

“And ice cream,” Fletcher adds before Harrison pulls him away to do their shopping.

Ice cream might be an excellent idea since it means staying in the frozen aisle long enough for my body temperature to self-regulate.

I still need to handle looking into Milo’s eyes while trying not to wonder if Harrison and Fletcher are right.

MILO



“HEY, MILO, WAIT UP.”

I stop and turn around. “What’s up, Jimmy? Did I forget something at work?”

It would be unusual since I never carry much on me. I pat my pocket, feeling for my phone. My sandwich is long gone since I had it for lunch, and I also have my keys.

“No, um...I just thought we could go home together. I finished my shift.”

“Oh, okay, sure.”

I wait for him to catch up before I resume walking past the cars in the store parking lot.

“Where are you going? The bus stop is that way.” He points in the opposite direction.

“I only take the bus if there’s bad weather or it’s too late in the day. It’s three o’clock in the afternoon on a nice day. No point wasting money on the bus fare.”

He stares at me like what I’m saying is ridiculous, but then I see understanding dawn in his eyes and he walks beside me.

We grew up in the same neighborhood, but Jimmy was one of my brother’s school friends. One of the few that got out of the bad life early enough to change.

“You have a lot on your shoulders, don’t you?” he asks.

“Everyone has, Jimmy. Last time I heard, your mom’s health hasn’t miraculously improved.” I catch him from the corner of

my eye as we walk.

He's not a bad guy, but we're not close enough to be considered friends. I'm not even sure we have anything in common other than being gay.

"She has her good days," he sighs. "But it's different, man. Mom can call me if she needs help. She doesn't need a sitter. I know Gerald has been giving you a hard time lately. He's a dick."

I shrug. What can I say? It's true. Gerald is a dick, but talking about him in my free time is something I don't want to do.

We're walking past some of the most expensive houses in Stillwater. Some have high surrounding walls like they're hiding some super-secret mansion. Others have lower walls, showing the beautifully manicured front yards with green lawns and carefully curated flowers.

What Florrie told me about the playground has been playing in my mind, which annoys me because it's not like I even care about it. But now, instead of thinking about my dream house when I walk by, I wonder which of these big houses belongs to the person responsible for wanting to change the playground.

For the past twenty years, no one's looked twice or cared about the south side of Stillwater. Why now?

And why am I giving it brain space? Maybe it's just some kind of morbid curiosity.

"What do you think it looks like inside those big houses?" Jimmy asks.

I shrug. "Who knows? Probably lots of expensive things. Maybe old furniture that is so ancient you can't touch it because you'll ruin it, uncomfortable couches that make you sit straight and give you a backache. I don't know."

He laughs. "I'm not sure what I'd do with so much space. Would you spend your day going from one room to another, just sitting there and thinking, 'I fancy spending some time in my third bedroom today,'" he says in a posh voice. "And now I'm going to the living room with my extremely large

television because I need to compensate for the small size of my dick.”

We see an old lady on the other side of the road staring at us like she clearly heard Jimmy. He crouches next to a parked car, laughing so hard he’s holding his belly.

“I think she’s gone now. You’re safe,” I say a moment later after waving at the lady in the form of an apology.

When he stands, I see his green eyes are watery from laughing.

He stares at me, and for a moment, all I see is the innocence of a young man. His freckles are more pronounced, and I remember Mikey used to make fun of them. I think they’re quite adorable.

“You’re staring at me,” he says. His voice is breathy, and I realize we’re standing too close.

I take a step back. “I’m sorry. It’s just…” I look down at the ground, searching for my words. “You just reminded me a little of Mikey, you know, from before…but also after he came back.”

Jimmy puts his hand on my shoulder. “He really was trying to turn his life around, wasn’t he?”

“In his own way, yeah, I think he was.”

I want to believe that because it’s the only way I can carry on day after day. Pretending what happened to my brother wasn’t meant to happen. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that single moment changed my world forever.

We walk in silence until the houses become more working class. Closer together. Smaller. Familiar.

“Do you think they’ll really turn the playground into a parking lot?” Jimmy asks, breaking our silence.

“Don’t know.”

“We should do something about it. Florrie was visiting with my mom the other day and talking about starting a petition to stop it.”

I snort. “Like that’s ever worked.”

“Why are you so cynical about it? If the entire neighborhood gets behind this, we can make a difference, Milo. Come on, this is where we grew up. Don’t you want Sara to have somewhere to play when she’s old enough?”

The intensity of his feelings about the playground takes me by surprise. As does the anger that suddenly comes over me.

“Since when did you start caring about all this? When was the last time you were there, Jimmy? Answer that question, and then tell me why you want the playground to be saved. Because all I have is bad memories, and if the place burns down or sinks into a hole, it’s not a day too soon.”

I don’t realize I’ve sped up my pace until Jimmy grabs my arm.

“I’m sorry.” I can see it in his eyes. He’s been here for all of it. He feels it.

But those two words aren’t enough.

All the sorry in the world won’t go back in time and stop Jimmy, Mikey, and their friends from using the playground as their personal drug playpen.

All the sorry in the world won’t bring my brother back from the dead just as he’d turned his life around.

“Look, I just want to get home to Sara so Florrie can go to her knitting club,” I say, trying to find some calm inside the storm swirling in my heart.

He nods, and we walk the rest of the way in silence.

His place is a few houses down from mine, so I’m opening the front gate I share with Florrie when he says, “I guess you’d probably say no if I asked you out now, wouldn’t you?”

I smile. “I would, but not for the reasons you’re thinking, Jimmy.”

He shakes his head. “How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“We work together, which is a bad idea from the start. We have nothing in common, and I’m too busy with Sara to even consider dating right now.”

“Not to mention you already have a crush on a certain elementary school teacher.” He puts his hands in his pockets and stares at me. I see the defiance in his eyes.

“I need to go inside, Jimmy. I’ll see you at work.”

“That wasn’t a denial,” he says, walking away.

No, it wasn’t, but I don’t owe Jimmy or anyone an explanation about my feelings for Ellis. As long as Jimmy doesn’t say anything inappropriate at work, I don’t give a crap if he thinks I have a crush on Ellis.

When I walk inside my small house, Sara is standing on Florrie’s lap.

“Look, Daddy, we’re doing our exercises so we’re good and strong for when we start walking,” Florrie says, holding Sara’s hands. “Isn’t that right?”

Sara calls out Dada as she’s been doing more and more. It breaks my heart as much as it fills it with joy and love.

“Hello, beautiful. Did you have a good day?”

I take her from Florrie and relish in her baby smell as she grabs hold of the neck of my shirt and continues babbling.

“Oh, that busy, huh?” I joke. “Sounds like I’m missing out on all the fun.”

“You definitely missed out.” Florrie laughs.

“What happened?” I squint my eyes, almost afraid of what’s coming.

“Oh, nothing much, just Little Miss Independent wanting to wear her snacks rather than eating them.”

I give Florrie an apologetic look, but we both know this comes with the territory.

“Righty-o, I better get ready for my club,” she says, getting up. “Oh, by the way, I saw something in today’s newspaper that you might be interested in and made a phone call to inquire.”

She points at the paper on the table as she leaves.

I look at Sara and poke her tummy. “What trouble is Florrie getting us into this time, sweetie?” But when I see the paper, I know it’s far from it.

It could be the solution, even if temporary, to my problems.

ELLIS



I STAND in the middle of my backyard and stare at the mess, struggling to see its potential.

The grass, or what I think is grass, is dead. Well, everything that looks like it may have once been a living plant is dead. Or at least looks dead.

There's a shed at the far end of the backyard, but it's got so many parts missing that I'm not sure I can call it a shed anymore. It's more like an assembly of wooden planks, precariously joined by rusty nails and a collapsing roof.

I don't dare approach it and see if there's anything useful inside.

Even though I have a sizable backyard, there are properties on all three sides divided by tall wooden fences.

I like that it offers privacy, but I can't imagine how much work it will take to make this into a semi-decent backyard I'll actually want to spend time in.

Not that it's a priority for me right now. I've been working on the inside of the house since I moved in because I'd rather spend the summer focusing on the part I use. But my meddling sister had to go and place an ad in the local paper to hire someone to fix the backyard for me.

The doorbell rings, so I go back into the house. All Alice said was that the guy she spoke to would be here at some point in the morning, so that might be him.

I open the door, and I'm wrong. So wrong.

“Wow, you could be happier to see me,” Alice says, following me inside.

“Yay, how nice to see you,” I say sarcastically.

She goes straight to my coffee maker, which was her housewarming present for me. I’m sure she only ever comes to visit so she can use it.

“You’re cranky. Things aren’t going well with Tyler?” she asks. “You seemed to really hit it off.”

“Like a hammer on a nail.”

She scrunches her face. “I don’t need the details, thank you very much. I just want to know if you’ve had any dates. If he’s...the one...?”

I laugh. “Christ, Alice. I met the guy a week ago. Even if we hit it off in the way you’re hoping, don’t you think it’s a little too early to be talking about ‘the one?’” I ask, making quote signs.

She scoffs, adding cream to her coffee. “Max was my one straight away.”

“That’s because you’re slightly deranged, and he was way too slow on the uptake. He’s been plotting his escape since.”

She throws her stirring spoon at me after licking it and hits me even as I try to dodge it. “Damn you.”

She grins at her victorious throw, but then her expression changes. “So, what did you mean? You didn’t hit it off with Tyler? You seemed to get along so well.”

“We did...do.” I walk over and give her a one-armed hug because no one gets in the way of her coffee. “Tyler and I hit it off as friends. We both agreed during dinner that we didn’t feel right for each other.”

“Why not?”

I shrug. “Sometimes, you just know these things. But you did something really amazing, little sister.”

“I did?”

“Yes. I helped Tyler in the soup kitchen this week, and it was a really enlightening. I’ve wanted to help the community here for a while. I didn’t know how, but I guess volunteering with Tyler is a start.”

She smiles. “He’s a really good guy. Does so much for others, but I don’t think anyone ever does anything for him.”

“Alice...” I warn.

“No, I’m not playing Cupid again. I’m just saying.”

The doorbell rings again.

“You expecting someone?” She waggles her eyebrows as if she doesn’t know and doesn’t totally intend to interfere with the plans for the backyard.

“Yes. Santa,” I say and give her what she calls my teacher look. “Please be...just, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

I open the door, and for the second time this morning, I’m faced with an even more unexpected visitor.

“I see the face, but I know inside you’re smiling, right?” Darius, my younger brother, says, enveloping me in a bear hug that almost lifts me off the floor.

He’s wearing a T-shirt that shows his tattoo sleeves. The collar has been stretched enough you can see more tattoos underneath, and he’s wearing jeans I would have thrown out years ago. But this is my brother. One coin. Two very different faces.

“I’m ecstatic.”

He ignores me and, like my sister, goes straight to the coffee maker.

“What’s up? Is Bittersweet closed today or what?” I ask.

“Yes,” they say in unison.

I cross my arms. “You’re both here because the coffee shop in town is closed. Nothing to do with Alice having a big mouth and you being nosy?”

“Uh-huh. Do you have any of those French sweet buns you always buy?” Darius asks.

“In case you didn’t notice the lack of signage outside, this isn’t a coffee shop.”

He ignores me and starts going through my pantry.

“Bingo. Want one, sis?”

“Is it those brioches with the cream inside? Hell yeah.”

Darius grabs two and throws one at Alice, who catches it expertly. I was never the sporty sibling in this family.

“Hold up. What happened at Bittersweet for Julius to be closed on a Saturday?” I ask.

Bittersweet is the best—well, only—coffee shop in town, and everyone adores the gentle giant owner, Julius. He’s also a super-talented baker, but he can’t catch a break with trying to find someone to help him out.

“Has one of his new baristas tried setting his kitchen on fire again?” I ask.

“No, I think it might be a family thing this time,” Darius says. “And before you panic, don’t worry. I’ve already checked with the hospital, and he’s not there, nor is anyone from his family.”

There’s a collective sigh.

“Well, this has been great. Thank you for drinking my coffee and raiding my pantry, but you probably have a load of stuff to do, and as you know, I’m expecting someone,” I say, trying to not so subtly get them out of my place before the guy turns up.

“D, is he kicking us out?” Alice asks Darius.

“I think he is, Al. Question is...why?”

I put my hands in the pant pockets and calmly stroll toward my siblings. I even whistle a little tune for good measure.

“Is it almost August already? Oh my, it’ll be Christmas soon... let me think...whose turn is it to have Mom and Dad over for Christmas this year...”

Alice and Darius say each other's names, followed by a semi-heated discussion about Christmas being for the children and Alice having the bigger house...I tune out after a while.

If I'm right, they'll argue for another three minutes and then go their separate ways.

"Wait up," Alice says, raising her hand and narrowing her eyes.

Dammit.

"Good try, bro," Darius says. "Three out of five on the distraction tactic. Why don't you want us to be here for your gardener, helper, whatever he is? Or are you expecting someone else?" He winks and then elbows Alice.

"Ugh, I tried to set him up with Tyler, but now they're just friends." She sulks.

Darius laughs. "Tyler? Seriously? Anyone could tell from a mile away those two would never work."

"Anyway. It doesn't matter. You know I'm expecting this guy Alice apparently contacted, and I want you both out before he comes."

"Why?" Alice asks.

"Yeah, why?" Darius repeats.

"Oh for the love of god. I know you'll both butt in with your...ideas, and even though I didn't start it, this is something I'd like to do on my own."

"How boring. That's all you had to say. But I want a fire pit," Darius says.

"And fairy lights," Alice adds.

They both start walking to the door when the doorbell rings.

To give them credit, I can see how restrained they both are when they want to open the door to see who the guy is. I roll my eyes as I get past them.

As they say, third time's a charm. But the last person I expect to see when I open my front door is Milo.

“Ellis,” he says, clearly as surprised to see me.

He looks around and then down at a piece of paper in his hand.

“Um, I think I’m in the wrong place. I’m sorry,” he says, looking a little flustered, probably because of the additional sets of eyes on him. I elbow my siblings.

“I’m looking for 10 Rosebush Drive. Maybe I wrote it down wrong. There was a Rose Street a few streets ago.”

He’s pushing Sara’s stroller back and forth.

“You’re in the right place. Come on in. Let me help you with the stroller and get you out of the sun,” I say.

I practically have to push Alice and Darius out of the way to let Milo in.

“Hey, this is my girlfriend from the other night,” Darius says. “How has she been? Fever went down, okay? She’s eating and drinking well?”

Milo looks confused.

Darius looks down at his clothes and laughs. “Sorry, I’m the nurse you saw at the hospital. I don’t usually wear scrubs outside of work.” He winks, and Milo smiles.

“Ah, of course. Sorry, that night was a bit of a blur. I didn’t recognize you. Thank you. Sara has been a lot better. The antibiotics must be working because she hasn’t shown any signs of pain or discomfort.”

“Sara was sick?” I ask. “When?”

“That night after the soup kitchen. When I got home, she was running a high fever.”

I look at Sara in the stroller, and she’s alert and smiling at the attention she’s getting from Darius.

“Anyway, Darius and I were just leaving. Weren’t we?” Alice says, poking our younger brother in the ribs.

“Ouch. Yeah, yeah, we were leaving.”

“By the way. Bittersweet is closed, so make sure you get coffee and a brioche out of this one.” Alice points at me, and

then they're both out, closing the door behind them.

I let out a deep breath.

"Siblings, eh? I'm sure they were born to terrorize me. Do you have any?"

Milo looks at Sara and runs his hand over the pretty yellow dress she's wearing today. "No."

The way he says it makes me wonder if there was ever a brother or sister in Milo's life that is no longer around.

"So, are you really the person from the advertisement? You need someone to do your backyard?"

I smile. "I really am the person from the advertisement, although calling that jungle-slash-junkyard a backyard is a bit of a stretch."

"Can I see it?" he asks.

"Let's go, but I won't blame you if you run without looking back."

He laughs, and dammit, I want to hear more of that sound coming from Milo.

"I hear there's coffee and some other thing I can't pronounce but might be delicious, so I'm not running anywhere. I can easily pretend your junkyard is the most beautiful backyard in town for coffee."

His smile is infectious and is doing things to me that a smile from a twenty-something-year-old man shouldn't do.

Keep your walls up, Ellis.

MILO



I FOLLOW BEHIND ELLIS, still trying to process that one, I've kinda just flirted with him. I mean, that was flirting. Could be construed as flirting, right?

Ugh, stupid crush.

And two, that he is the ad person and might become my future boss, which means I'll see more of him, which is going to be awful for my delicate heart but so good for my greedy eyes that are checking out the way his ass fits perfectly in the pants he's wearing.

Or how even though it's the weekend, he's not wearing jeans or sweats. He's still dressed like he could be going out at a moment's notice, like someone who has places to go, like meeting with friends, a brunch, a drive in the country...I don't know, just things people like me don't do.

"Is it okay for Sara to stay here?"

"Huh?" I look up at his face, and I'm sure he's caught me staring at his ass.

"It's hot outside. Besides, I'm not sure the yard is totally safe. If you're happy for her to stay inside, you can leave her in the stroller or maybe set a blanket on the floor."

The job. You're here for the job you desperately need. Focus, Milo.

"She'll be okay in the stroller."

Ellis turns the TV in his living room onto the baby channel and faces the stroller toward it. Sara makes a face like she

doesn't like it at first, but then, as they play a song, she smiles and shakes her arms and legs.

We don't have a TV because I had to sell my old one to pay some bills. Maybe one day, when I can save enough money, I can buy another.

I want to tell Ellis that he's just witnessed one of Sara's rare life experiences since she only watches TV when Florrie takes her to her place, but I'm too embarrassed, so I turn to him instead. "The yard?"

"Right. This way."

Ellis wasn't lying when he described his backyard. It's not in great condition, but it has so much potential.

First of all, it's huge. He can have flower beds, grass, a deck for barbeques, and a chill-out area with some outdoor furniture.

"This is amazing, Ellis."

"Are you running a fever? This is chaos."

I laugh. "You have to see past that. Pretend none of that is there and replace it with what you want to see."

He puts his hands in his pockets and takes two steps away from me, walking in a semicircle. "I've never been much of a dreamer. I can read books and imagine what something looks like from the description on the page, but I'm not talented enough to make it up myself."

He's standing in the middle of the yard. And yes, there are broken pots and piles of god knows what. It's a mess...a mess with potential.

"Close your eyes."

"What?" He stares at me.

"Just go along with it."

He narrows his eyes. A frown line appears in between his eyes, and I want to touch it so bad that I scrunch my hands into fists so I don't give in to temptation and make this a lot more awkward.

“Okay. Fine,” he says, taking a breath and closing his eyes.

I flick a bug off his shoulder, which landed after he closed his eyes. I have a feeling Ellis would barricade himself in the house if he saw it.

“Why did you buy this house?” I ask.

He sighs. “Um...because it’s close to Alice’s place, and it was a good price because it needs some work. I’ve done some on the inside. Haven’t finished yet, which is why the outside, as you can see...”

“That’s the practical stuff. I want to know *why* this house. There are many other similar houses in the neighborhood.” I walk around him, wanting to touch his hair and see if it’s soft, feel his shoulders to see if they’re strong.

Stop it, Milo.

I have to remember this is about him. My financial future depends on this, however much I want to throw myself at him.

Christ, if only he knew the thoughts I have about him. He’d have a restraining order in place before the end of the day.

“This was the only house that felt like a home to me,” he says. “I’ve always wanted a family, and even though...um...it just felt right.”

He opens his eyes, and I wonder if I’ve accidentally touched on a sensitive subject.

“Nuh-uh. Close your eyes.”

He smiles but obeys.

“And in your dream home, what do you want to do in the backyard?” I ask.

“I want a space to relax. Somewhere I can sit and maybe do some work if the weather is nice. Have my family over.” He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“It’s a start.”

He opens his eyes again. We’re face to face, on the verge of something.

My mom used to call these *life-defining moments*. When nothing would be the same again because whatever happens will change you as a result, and you can't stop it from happening.

Ellis's gaze is warm but firm. He's someone who knows what he wants, and just like the time at the soup kitchen, my eyes are held captive.

A shiver runs up my spine, and I know this is one of those moments. Inconsequential but irreversible.

"When can you start?"

"What?"

"When can you start?"

I stare at him, dumbfounded. "But...you haven't asked me any questions. How do you know I can do the job?"

"You answered the advertisement. I'm assuming you have at least a better understanding of this mess than I do."

He walks inside, and it takes me a moment to catch up to him. "But—"

"Let's talk about the details inside. I have it on good account that my coffee is second best to Bittersweet's." Then he puts his hand on his chin. "Or maybe that's because it's free. I'll let you be the judge of that."

"I'll just check in on Sara." I head to the living room and crouch by the stroller. She's still happily awake and babbling to the music on the TV. "One of these days we'll get you one, I promise. Until then, I guess you'll have to live with my terrible voices when I read your books." I kiss her head and return to the kitchen, where Ellis has a cup of coffee and a delicious-looking cake thing on a plate.

"Is this for me?"

"It is indeed," he says. "I'm addicted to these cream-filled brioches, so it's probably a good thing I'm three down today. If you see me with a new pack at the checkout this week, you'll have to promise you'll take it out for me."

I take a bite, and it's so not what I was expecting. The bread is soft and sweet, and the filling Ellis mentioned isn't *cream* but more a custard. It's like nothing I've had before.

I shake my head. "Sorry, but this is too good. I can only encourage you to buy more. It's French, right? It sounds French. It has to be healthy."

Ellis laughs. "It's a French sweet bread, yes. I guess in a health war between a croissant and a brioche, the brioche would probably win."

"I rest my case," I say, eating the rest of the small brioche and then taking a sip of the coffee. "And this is good too."

Ellis rests his elbows on the kitchen island. "So, Mr....actually, I don't know your last name."

"Allen. Milo Allen."

"Mr. Allen. Tell me, how can you transform my backyard into the peaceful retreat of my dreams?"

I smile. "Do you have a piece of paper and a pen or pencil?"

He rolls his eyes. Of course, he's a teacher, so he opens a drawer and presents me with a notepad and a pencil.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing at his smug face.

"I'm not great at drawing, so this is just a rough sketch of my first thoughts. Feel free to tell me you don't like it."

I draw the outline of the fences first and the ideas I had when I first saw the backyard. Basically, I'm drawing what I'd do if this was my place. Not that I'll tell Ellis that. I just think it'll look nice.

He scrunches his face, trying to understand what I'm doing.

"Okay, so I'm thinking you can get rid of the shed and replace it with a deck for lounging. Some couches, beanbags, lamps, that kind of thing." I point to the opposite corner to the lounge area. "Your neighbors don't have trees, so in the summer, you might want to find a way to create some shade. There are a lot of different options for that. I suggest something solid and

permanent that can sustain through the winter or something lighter you can store and take out when you want.”

I point to the line of the fences. “If you want more texture and life, the easiest place to plant anything will be by the fences. You can keep them on the ground or build raised beds. There are some flowers and plants that don’t require much upkeep.”

I look up, and Ellis is staring at me.

“What?”

“Nothing. Please, continue.”

“Um, so the rest can be grass, which, you know, grows, so it’ll need to be cut. And then I was thinking that by having the lounge area where you have the shed, you won’t need to extend the porch. You can just repaint and add a grill. Maybe a chair or something.”

I stare at the drawing and try to think if there’s anything I can add. The backyard is big enough that if Ellis ever had kids, he could still separate an area for an outdoor playset.

“This is perfect, Milo. It’s...simple, minimalistic. I have very little free time outside of work during the school year, and now that I want to volunteer with Tyler, that’s some more of my time taken up. This looks perfect for me. I love it.”

I don’t know at what point Ellis put his hand on mine. I’m sure he’s not thinking too much of it. Hell, I’ve done it a million times without thinking.

But this is Ellis. The man I somehow feel so unexplainably attracted to, and his hand feels heavy and warm. The kind of heavy that makes you feel safe and grounded.

The warmth from his hand is spreading up my arm, and I feel my face heat.

The way he’s gazing into my eyes, it’s as if he knows my secret.

Oh my god, he knows I’m attracted to him.

Sara cries from the living room, breaking the spell between us, and his hand is gone.

I go over to the living room and know immediately what's happened. Ah, the lovely smell of baby poop.

"Ellis, I'm sorry. Could I use your bathroom to change her diaper?"

"Of course, it's through that door. The main bathroom has a surface big enough. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good."

As soon as I close the door behind us and take her clothes off, my heart resumes its normal tempo.

"Thank you, baby girl, for saving me from whatever that was," I say to her. "Embarrassment. That's what it was. If you were older, I'd give you ice cream or something. Even if Florrie disapproves. But since you're not, I'll just give you extra raspberries in your tummy and some cuddles later. Ew, girl, those raspberries will have to wait until you've had your bath."

She giggles like she's proud of the sheer amount of poop she's made.

With nine months of practice, I've changed her diaper so many times that we're done within a few minutes, but I need longer before I can face Ellis. I stand her on the bathroom counter and make her face the mirror.

"What do we do with ourselves, princess? Keep dreaming? Or come back down to reality and accept the hand that life has dealt us?"

She repeats the *dada* sounds she's been making recently, and I stare at both of us in the mirror. "I wish your dada was here too, baby."

When I can no longer hide in the bathroom, I come out with a chatty Sara, who refuses to get back in the stroller, so I hold her as Ellis and I discuss the work in the backyard.

"There's an access gate on the side of the house. This is the key," he says. "I know you work at the store, so you can work around that. I'm in no rush, and apart from unwanted visits from my siblings when they want free food or to annoy me, I

don't have any other visitors, so you can come on the weekend too."

Sara bounces in my arms. I need to ask the most important question, so I steel myself for the make-or-break answer.

"My main issue is childcare. My neighbor, Florrie, isn't always available. That's why I liked your advertisement. I was wondering if you'd be okay if I brought Sara with me. She'd just be in the stroller, and if I feed her, she usually sleeps for a couple of hours. Not even a hurricane will wake her up."

"Of course."

Ellis stands and starts opening and closing drawers.

"Found it. I knew I had it here somewhere."

I'm not sure what he means.

He places another key next to the gate key.

"This key opens the back door. Feel free to bring Sara any time, but please don't leave her outside. I'd feel awful knowing she's out in the heat. Bring her inside. You can use the bathroom to change her, the microwave if you need to heat up her bottle, or you can get water."

A lump is forming in my throat, and I need to not say anything right now because I will cry.

Ellis holds his arms out, and Sara stretches hers, so I pass her to him.

"Of course, that's if you come and I'm not here. With the summer break, I'm home most of the time, and I'm more than happy to keep an eye on her."

I look up at the sky, well, the ceiling, and curse my mother for passing her super-sensitive and emotional genes on to me because I simultaneously want to cry and also run.

If Ellis Bradford keeps being nice to me, I can't be held accountable for what my hopelessly romantic heart will want. And that is not a good thing.

Not a good thing at all.

ELLIS



A WEEK LATER, I find myself fidgeting as I wait for Milo to arrive for his first day.

I move the coffee table in the living room and lay a couple of blankets and extra pillows on the carpet. If Sara is crawling as much as Marnie was at her age, I don't want her to get hurt.

Everything else is tidy and clean. I'm on my third cup of coffee and resisting having any of the cream-filled brioches because that's a slippery slope when I'm already this nervous.

Why am I even this nervous?

Because you're about to have a hot young guy working in your backyard. That's why.

The last person I expected to answer my sister's ad in the paper was Milo, but after the walk through the backyard and hearing his ideas, I know I made the right decision.

Not only did he seem to get my hopelessness when it comes to gardening or looking after a backyard, but he also had some fantastic ideas to keep it simple and manageable.

As an added benefit, I know I'm helping him too. If I ever see Milo eat a meal like he did at the soup kitchen, I want to know it's because he's enjoying it, not because it's the only one he's had that day.

When we discussed pay rates, he asked for such a paltry amount I had to check with Alice if that's really how much a landscape gardener—or whatever they're called—gets paid.

After that call and some research, I decided on my own pay rate. Thankfully, Milo agreed when I asked if I could just transfer the money directly into his bank account.

I'm not stupid enough to think he won't notice or question the amount, but I'll deal with that when it comes.

There's a knock on the back door. I jump in place and let out a squeaky noise I hope goes unheard.

"Sorry," Milo says as I open the door. "Didn't mean to scare you. Just wanted you to know I'm here, and if it's okay, I'll leave my assistant inside."

I peek into the stroller. "I'm not sure she'll be assisting much."

Sara is asleep, and from her cute little snores, it sounds like she's down for the count.

"Yeah. She had a rough night. She's teething, so we were up quite a bit. After I gave her some formula, she settled a bit and then fell asleep during the walk here."

I help Milo get the stroller inside without disturbing Sara.

"Are you sure it's okay for her to stay here? I don't want to give you any work. I'm the one who's supposed to work here," he says.

"You kidding? Like staring at her adorable face is any work."

He snorts. "Just wait till she wakes up."

"That's when it'll mysteriously be your break time," I say, winking.

He chuckles. "Right, let me get started. I don't think you need to rent a dumpster because a few large bags might be enough for the trash you have here." He rubs his hands together and smiles before taking a pair of gloves from the back pocket of his jeans. "Let me see what treasures you have in that shed."

Milo has an old baseball cap in his pocket that he puts on backward as soon as he's outside.

Fuck my life.

Okay, I may be in my forties, but a guy in ripped jeans, an old T-shirt, and a broken-in baseball cap worn backward will never not be sexy.

“Sara, your dad is going to be the death of me.” And as I say it, she lets out this tiny sound like she’s dreaming and her lips form a tiny *O*. Her hands ball into fists, and I think she’s going to wake up, but she settles again.

Ignoring the paperwork I was working on at the kitchen island last night, I take the stroller farther into the kitchen. I stop by the table, pull up a chair, and sit down, staring at Sara.

“He’s the same age as you now. Nine months. I didn’t even get to see him.”

How can a person grieve the absence of someone they never met? Someone who was never theirs to start with?

The weight in my chest threatens to take me down. I stand and walk to the back door.

Milo has already created several piles of things, and he’s whistling a tune.

I focus on the way he moves. How his shirt rides up, showing a bit of skin every time he pulls something from the shed.

Milo is beautiful. Not just good-looking. There’s something special about him.

And yes, right now, he’s the sexiest thing I’ve seen in a long time.

I don’t understand why, but looking at him is the only time I ever find a glimpse of the peace I’ve been searching for since I came to Stillwater.

He looks my way and waves.

I go still, unsure of what to do. Will he think I’m spying on him? Or that I doubted he could do a good job?

He comes over.

“Hey, can you make a sign or something that says *free treasure to a good home* and then underneath *no takebacks?*”

“Sure, why?”

“Do you have any use for an extra sink or a set of red dining plates?”

I smile. “I’ll make up the sign.”

“There are some wonderful treasures for keeps too.” He runs the back of his hand over his forehead to wipe the sweat. “But I’ll show you those at the end. You might not think they’re treasures.” He laughs.

He goes back to work, and I check on Sara before following his instructions. I go to my office and print out a sign. I stick it to a piece of cardboard I cut out of a box from something I recently ordered.

Then, in a role reversal, I’m ordered to take the “treasures” to the front lawn and stick the sign next to them.

Can’t even say it’s not hot being bossed by backward-cap Milo. Nope.

With those jeans riding low on his hips, the fucking cap, and his easy smile to match the soft brown eyes, Milo can boss me around all day.

Get a grip, Ellis.

Milo comes in at lunchtime, removing his dusty boots and leaving them outside. He asks if he can use my bathroom, and a moment later, he comes back wearing a different T-shirt.

“I don’t want to pick Sara up in my dusty clothes,” he says as justification.

“Do you want to use the microwave for her food?”

I offered before, but if I know anything of Milo by now, it’s that he doesn’t take anything for granted, and I can see he appreciates me offering again so he doesn’t have to ask.

“Why is she wearing different clothes? Did she have an accident?” he asks, looking mortified.

I raise my hands. “No, no, no. It was all my fault. She warned me, but I didn’t take her seriously enough. My mistake. I

cleaned her and changed her diaper. Hope that's okay. I also put her clothes in the washing machine."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry. I've come here to work, and now you're having to...I'm really sorry. I'll check with Florrie to see if she's free tomorrow."

The microwave pings, indicating Sara's food is ready, so I take it out. As if she knows it's for her, she starts jumping excitedly in Milo's arms.

"Milo, please. Don't do that. I honestly enjoy looking after Sara. Dirty diapers and all. Let's face it, you couldn't have picked a boss with more experience. Alice made sure of it. She's even trained Darius, and *he's* a nurse."

I finally draw a smile out of a worried Milo.

With her full belly, Sara is as chatty as she can be, pulling on Milo's arms as he's eating.

"No way, you greedy girl. This is my sandwich. You didn't see me try to eat your yummy veggie sludge, did you?" Milo says to her.

I've prepared my sandwich, which I'm eating as I observe the interaction between the two people in front of me.

I'm caught staring when Milo suddenly looks up. "What? Do I have anything on my face? Please tell me none of her orange food is on my face because that stuff is worse than fake tan. Who'd have known carrots and tomatoes were so fierce?"

"You say that from experience?"

"Nope, I'm happy being pasty white. But I see my fair share of fake tan fails at the store. Anyway, time to get back to work. What do you say, princess?" He pokes Sara's tummy, and she holds on to his hand.

"No, don't go. I want to play," he says in a jokey voice.

"Okay, you be my sugar mama, huh?"

Sara stares at him like she understands.

"Yeah, didn't think so."

I laugh and hold out my arms. Without hesitation, Milo places Sara on my lap, then goes to the bathroom again and returns wearing the dirty T-shirt.

Sara and I watch as Milo works for a while.

“Your daddy is quite something, isn’t he?”

She makes a dada sound. “That’s right, he’s your dada.”

I’m not sure how long we stay there, but Sara seems happy to watch the activity outside, so we remain as we are.

Milo keeps ripping planks of wood out of the shed and putting them to one side. The collapsed roof of the shed comes apart, creating a cloud of dust.

I know Milo isn’t near it, so I’m not worried for him, but I realize I’m the one who may need medical attention when I see that he’s removed his shirt in order to protect his face from the dust.

“Christ, why didn’t you warn me, girl? You could have said *that* is what your dad looks like under his clothes.”

Great, and now I’m talking like a pervert to a baby.

But fuck. Milo is slim but strong. Not muscly, but with definition, although I’d love to see him fill out a little more. Even though his hair is brown, he has a lighter, almost blond trail of hair below his belly button that disappears under the waist of his jeans.

He’s determined, and as I’ve observed, he’s also capable of anything he sets his mind to.

What would it be like if he set his mind on me?

What would it be like being held by him?

Taken by him?

Why do I feel like the one man I can’t have is the one that could give me everything I’ve ever wanted, including the treasure in my arms?

I step away from the door.

My thoughts are too much to bear.

MILO



THE GREAT THING about working for Ellis, even these few hours over the weekend and some here and there in the week, is that now I will have enough money to cover my rent and bills when I get paid.

I don't want to think about when the job is over. I'm still trying to save as much as I can. I don't know what I'll do then. How long I'll be able to pay the increased rent if I don't get another job. But it's not something I want to think about right now.

The problem with taking the job working for Ellis is that I didn't consider how often he'd be home.

It's summer break, so it makes sense that he doesn't have to go to the school. I'm just the dumb person who forgot that tiny detail.

I shouldn't complain because he's so generous looking after Sara, which he says he really enjoys. In fact, I suspect he stays home on purpose when he knows I'm coming in to work.

The problem is that spending so much time around Ellis means I'm getting to know him better.

The devotion he has for his students when he talks about his plans for his classes. The way he moans about his brother and sister, but I can tell he'd do anything for them. How he's building relationships with people in the soup kitchen. Even from my side of the double doors, I hear it. He's popular with people in my neighborhood.

They all think he's funny for going all Mr. Teacher on a bunch of people that are much older than him, and the other day I heard Emy say he was bribing some of the guys with extra rolls to get them to convince Brian to come over and have a proper meal.

Once upon a time, I wondered what it'd be like to face my dad's best friend again. Especially after everything he did. But I doubt the cantankerous old man will ever come to the soup kitchen.

Regardless, I don't think Ellis will give up easily.

He's a solid person. The kind that would never let you down.

My silly little gay heart keeps beating a little faster every time he's around.

I can't stop it, and that's a bad, bad thing.

Because once all this is over, I'll go back to being the three-day-a-week cashier struggling to pay the bills, except I'll be doing it with a sad heart that wants Ellis more than ever before.

Why is life so unfair?

"Hey, Milo. Do you want a drink?" Ellis calls from the porch.

"Sure."

I don't even know what the time is. I've gotten so lost in my thoughts as I work on flattening the ground before I prepare the foundation for his deck.

As usual, I shake off as much dirt as possible before I go inside without my work boots. I grab my clean shirt and then go to his bathroom.

I wash my face and under my arms and use the dirty T-shirt to dry off. It's so hot outside that I know it'll be dry again by the time I put it back on.

After using water to make my hair somewhat straight-ish and with the clean T-shirt on, I go to see how my girl has been.

"Hey, baby-boo. What exciting and wonderful things have you been up to?"

She raises her arms from the high chair that recently appeared in Ellis's kitchen, so I pick her up.

"Well, let's see, she's started out by helping me with my banking, then she pointed out that I had my autumn lesson plans back to front and that Christmas isn't indeed in September, and then we agreed to disagree on whether whole peas are better than mushy peas."

I laugh. "Sounds like a very productive morning."

"Don't know about her, but I could use a nap," Ellis says, going to the fridge and taking out a bottle of lemonade.

"I'm sure there's enough formula in her bag to put you both to sleep if you want. I'll even throw in a bedtime story." As I say it, Ellis hands me the lemonade, and our fingers brush just a little, but it's enough to send sparks all the way through my body.

I don't miss how Ellis tenses too.

"I was joking," I say.

"Huh?"

"About...um, the bedtime story and...um, never mind." I open the bottle and gulp a fair amount.

Fuck, I've just made things weird. *Well done, Milo.*

"Are you hungry? I've made too much salad for my lunch, so if you like tuna, you're welcome to the rest," Ellis says.

"I brought my sandwich." I take it out of Sara's bag, and even I know it's a sad-looking lunch.

"Please, I insist. The lettuce will be all soggy by tomorrow, and I hate having it go to waste. Besides, after all the work you've done outside, I bet you can manage the salad and your sandwich."

He's not wrong, so I gratefully accept.

His tuna salad is delicious, and it's not a huge amount, so I supplement it with my sandwich, but I'm not convinced Ellis *accidentally* made too much.

When you're a single man who doesn't like waste, you don't *accidentally* make too much of anything. I would know.

Since it seems to make him happy, I don't say anything.

I'm too full to go back out in the sun and work, so it's a good opportunity to broach the subject I've been avoiding for a while.

"Ellis, you said I could ask you anything about the GED exam."

He straightens and smiles, almost like he's been expecting me to bring it up. "Yes, anything."

"I've, um...been going to the library to study in my free time. I did almost all of high school, so I didn't miss all that much, but I don't know what to do to actually take the test. Do I still need to attend the classes?" I sigh. "It's probably pointless anyway because I'm struggling with a few things, so I'm sure I'd fail."

"You've been studying on your own?"

I nod. It's hard to read him as he gazes at me with his lips slightly parted as though he wants to say something but doesn't know what.

Ellis's expression changes as he places his hands on the table.

This one I know. It's his teacher face.

"Okay, first, you need to register on the GED portal so you can access the resources and book your exam."

I stare at him. "How do I do that?"

"I'll take a guess you don't own a computer," he says, and I nod. "I'm happy to help you register using my laptop. We can do it now if you like. It doesn't take long."

"Okay."

Ellis leaves the table and returns a moment later with his laptop.

"What made you change your mind?" he asks.

I look at Sara, happily chewing on her toy. “I need a better job desperately. At work, all the supervisor jobs require a GED.” I let out a tired sigh. “Not that it matters. The store manager doesn’t like me, so he’ll probably never promote me, but maybe I could get another job somewhere else.”

Ellis turns on the laptop and searches for the website.

It doesn’t take long to register me on the portal. I write down my access details so I can go back and explore the area better from the computer in the library. After all, I do have to get to work.

“Thank you for your help with this. I should probably get out there. I want to finish what I started today so I can dig for the deck foundation next time.”

Ellis shuts down his laptop. “I’m glad to help.”

I’m almost by the door when he calls me.

“Milo, I just want you to know that GED or no GED, you’re an amazing person. You’re raising a child on your own and you’re a hard worker. You’re smart, and clearly, you have initiative. I know the job market out there won’t see all of that. They’ll just see three letters from an exam taken at a moment in time that show you have some education. So anyway, you know those things you said you were struggling with? I’m happy to tutor you after work if you like.”

My words are stuck in my throat. Between feeling like Ellis can see the person I am and his generous offer, I might actually cry.

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

Ellis comes closer. I see it in his eyes. The raw need to help someone. This is what he needs to do. I can’t let my pride get in the way and end up disappointing him.

“Okay.”

He smiles, and in the sun reflecting from the glass door, his eyes are a deep dark blue with a brown rim and golden flecks inside.

His gaze travels to my lips. My heart is beating so fast I'm sure he can hear it.

"Um..." I point to the yard behind me.

"Oh, yes...yes..." he says, taking a step back. "Are you at the soup kitchen this week?"

"I'm doing the first day only."

"Meet me in the playground beforehand. I'll collate a list of resources to help you."

"Okay," I say.

It's not until I step outside that I realize I haven't changed into my dirty T-shirt, but I can't go back now. I'm feeling too many things and my body is all over the place.

If I get close to Ellis and see him look at my lips like he did, I may actually do something stupid.

Something really, really good. But still stupid.

MILO



“Wow, so that’s what your happy smile looks like.”

I look up from the workbook I borrowed from the library. Pauline is sitting opposite me at the large table in the break room, but I must have been so focused on studying that I didn’t see her come in.

Correction. I was too distracted thinking about Ellis to see her come in.

“What do you mean? I smile plenty.”

She crosses her arms and gives me a pointed stare.

“You smile at customers. I’ll give you that. But not *that* smile. What gives?”

I shrug. “I guess I’m just less stressed. I picked up a second job that I’m really enjoying.”

“That’s great, hun. I’m so happy for you. Tell me about your new job.”

I look at the clock on the wall and bite my lip.

“I think my break is finishing soon. We can talk about it another time, maybe?”

She laughs. “Nice try. I know you still have at least ten minutes left.” She leans over the table and narrows her eyes. “Come on. Spill.”

“Fine. I’m working for Ell—Mr. Bradford, renovating his backyard a few hours a week. And since Gerald is still not giving me any extra shifts, this job is a lifesaver for now.”

She snorts but covers her mouth with her hands as Jimmy enters the break room.

It's clear he heard what I said because he pauses for a brief moment. Then he goes straight to his locker, puts his stuff away, and slams it shut before walking out.

"That was weird," Pauline says. "Anyway, you were telling me how you're working in Mr. Bradford's *backyard* a few hours a week."

I laugh at how she says backyard like it means something else.

"Take your mind out of the gutter. I really do mean his backyard. It's actually a fun project, and it'll help pay my bills. Ell-Mr. Bradford is even helping look after Sara, so I don't need to bother Florrie or hire a sitter."

She sucks her cheeks in, and I can tell she's trying to contain a smile. "How generous of Mr. Bradford."

"He's very kind, yes," I say, rolling my eyes.

She squeals and then drags her chair next to mine. "So tell Aunty Pauline. How long is it going to take you to work your way from his backyard to his in-yard?"

"Shut up. That's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"Pauline, why would he even take a second look at me when he can do so much better? He probably knows dozens of more sophisticated and educated men. I wouldn't stand a chance even if I wanted to."

She turns me around in my chair with strength I never knew she had and puts her hands on either side of my face.

"You listen to me, Milo, and listen to me good."

"Okay..." I say with my cheeks all squished.

"Mr. Bradford would be lucky to have you. It's never about how educated or sophisticated someone is. It's about what's in their heart. You know that. Don't come to me with that kind of bullshit because you're lying only to yourself."

I manage a nod, and she releases me.

“Good. I’m not saying to jump the man’s bones, for crying out loud. But have you noticed how he only ever goes to your register?”

“I’m sure that’s not—”

She stares, daring me to challenge her. Thinking about it, she might be right. I don’t remember seeing Ellis use another checkout whenever I’ve seen him in the store.

“It doesn’t mean anything. Besides, I’m working for him, and I don’t want to mess things up. I have responsibilities, Pauline.”

“I know you do, hun. But you’re also human. Now go out there before Gerald comes to get you with his slimy, greasy hands.”

“Ew.”

I put my book away and go back to work, but Gerald catches me before I make it to my register.

“Milo, have you finished your break?” he asks, looking at his wristwatch.

I’m sure I’m not late back. “Yes, I was just on my way back out. I’m not late.”

“I know everything that happens in this store, including when someone is half a minute late.” His smug smile makes me want to hurl.

“Then is there anything I can do for you?” I ask, already dreading the answer.

“It’s more what *I* can do for you.”

“I’m not following.”

“I wanted to catch you about the job opportunities you’ve been asking for.”

Color me speechless. “Really? That’s great, Gerald. I’m currently studying to take the GED exams at the end of the summer, so that should help, right?”

He stares at me blankly.

“I’m not sure how you’ll have time to study when you’ll be working nights.”

“I’m sorry, Gerald. Did you say nights? You know I can’t work nights. I have Sara.”

He places his pudgy hands on his hips and lets out a frustrated sigh. “I don’t know what else I can do for you, Milo. You tell me you want more hours. I’m helping you out, offering you an additional job that pays better, and now you say you can’t do it?”

I don’t know what to say to save the situation. I need the security of this job, but I can’t work nights. There’s no way I can ask Florrie to look after Sara during the night. And how would I take care of Sara during the day? When would I rest?

When I don’t answer, Gerald continues, “Word on the street is you have a second job working somewhere else.”

My blood goes cold. I know Pauline couldn’t have told him, especially since she’s still on her break.

Jimmy. It has to have been him.

“That’s right, Gerald. I am doing a few hours here and there, but I promise it’s not affecting my work here. I just needed the money, and you said you didn’t have hours to give me.”

“Well, I do now. Starting today. Jimmy was feeling unwell, so he went home. You’re doing his shift.”

“But—”

Gerald raises his hand. “Think carefully about what you’re going to say next, young man. Remember the chain of command in this place. If you still want a job to return to tomorrow, you’re staying to cover Jimmy’s shift. As for the night job. Take it or don’t take it, but don’t come crying to me asking for more hours because there won’t be any.”

I nod. “I’ll stay tonight, and I’ll let you know about the other job.”

He turns around and heads toward his office, where he'll no doubt sit doing nothing for the rest of the afternoon, as usual, or thinking about how he can make someone else's life miserable.

No matter how much I try, I can't muster my usual cheerfulness. Even Ethel notices, and I have to convince her I have a headache and will be fine as soon as I have my break.

When I have a break, I grab my phone to call Tyler to tell him I can't make the soup kitchen shift and ask him to apologize to Ellis for me for standing him up, but the battery is dead.

Next to my phone, there's a chocolate bar with a note. I recognize Pauline's handwriting.

Sorry the dick made you stay late. Hope this cheers you up. See you tomorrow.

Her message makes me feel better, and I praise the day I gave her my locker combination when she forgot hers because this chocolate bar is the only thing I'll have to eat until I get home tonight.

The chocolate gives me some energy, but it also settles in my stomach like a heavy rock. Or maybe it's just the weight of the decisions I have to make.

I can't afford to lose my job at the store and could use the security of another permanent job.

The work I'm doing for Ellis is only temporary, even if it's the most fulfilling thing I've done in years, apart from raising Sara.

I feel like I'm stuck at a crossroads, and no matter which way I go, I still lose.

ELLIS



THE MEETING with Principal Lewis drags a little longer than I expected, but I'm glad she agrees on the updated after-school program I've been working on at home in my spare time.

She then surprises me by encouraging me to apply for the assistant principal job that will come up in the middle of the next school year when the current assistant principal announces his retirement.

When I moved to Stillwater, I expected a lot of challenges. After all, I transferred in the middle of the last school year and hadn't been here a month before she discussed the after-school program with me. Something I expected to be handed over to a more established teacher.

I didn't need to be afraid because I felt part of the team from the first day. To be encouraged to apply for the new vacancy is something I need to process.

Being a principal is one of my professional goals, and god knows I've been knocked down enough to want to hold on to this opportunity with everything I have. But I also don't want to jeopardize the great relationship I have with the other teachers in the school.

I feel bad for clock-watching, but I want to make sure I have time to stop by my place to pick up the stuff I've gathered for Milo.

Principal Lewis closes her notebook. "I think we've covered everything. I'm sorry for keeping you so long. I'm meeting the gang at The Academy for a few drinks. Want to join us, Ellis?"

“I would, honestly, but I’m volunteering at the soup kitchen this evening and have an errand to run before. I really should be going.”

She nods. “If there’s an opportunity for the school to be involved, please let me know. The success of the Spring Fair taught me how the community can really pull together in times of need.” She stands. “I’m sure I’ll run into you in town at some point, but whatever you’re doing, enjoy the rest of your time off. And think about what we discussed today. We make a good team, and most of the teachers have expressed their desire to get involved in other projects or prefer focusing on teaching.”

“Thank you, Principal Lewis. I will consider it and let you know at the start of the new school year.”

I have little time to stop at home, especially since I still want to look up a few things, but I can do that another day. I’m sure Milo will already have plenty of resources with what I have for him.

When I arrive at the playground, it’s as deserted as the last time I saw it. There are a few wooden picnic tables that seem relatively clean, so I step on a bench and sit on one.

From here, I have a definite vantage point of the surrounding area. It looks as if all the streets were built to lead to or from the playground and the church, which is an interesting layout I haven’t noticed before. I wonder if it was intentional planning.

The few houses that front the square have their shutters closed even though it’s not dark yet. There’s a feeling of sadness around here. This part of town never recovered from the closure of the mill, and it’s affected not just that generation but their children too.

I look at my phone. It’s almost time for Tyler and the soup kitchen crew to arrive, but there’s no sign of Milo.

He said he’s working but finishing early today. I regret not taking his phone number now.

“Hey, Ellis.”

I turn and see Tyler approaching.

“Hey, man. You heard from Milo by any chance?”

He shakes his head but takes his phone out. “Should I have?”

“Nah. We were supposed to meet here early but he didn’t show. Stupid me, I forgot to ask for his number.”

Tyler puts his phone to his ear and waits. “Going to voicemail. He’s probably stuck at work. His boss is kind of a douche.”

I’ve seen the man walk around the store once or twice but never paid much attention to him. Milo must be sad to miss his time in the kitchen today, especially since he said this was the only one he could do this week.

I get down from the table. “I guess I’m on pan duty then.”

Tyler laughs. “Thankfully for you, this is a soup kitchen and not a retirement home.”

“Oh man.” I shudder.

I follow Tyler inside, and we get busy with the preparation. Now that I’ve been a few times and know my way around, I feel like I’m no longer a hindrance, having to ask where things are or what to do next.

Bob and Dave take the food outside while I help Anne and Emy with the rest.

Without Milo helping, I’ve been trying to keep up with the dishes as we go, so I haven’t seen people as they arrive like I usually do.

The chatter today is different. It sounds more animated at some tables, while at others, it’s more subdued.

Anne sighs. “This thing about the parking lot is affecting everyone. Even those who don’t live anywhere near the square or the church.”

“Does anyone know for sure it’s happening?” I ask.

“I heard there was a planning notice on a board in the town hall. If it’s not disputed, it can go ahead.”

“What’s the deadline?”

She shrugs. “That I don’t know.”

We ring the bell to start serving. The line forms quickly, but the chatter doesn't stop. As people come closer, I overhear some comments.

“What's the point? They'll fit in what, twenty cars?”

“Not if they build one of those, whatchacallit, multilevel parking garages.”

Some people within earshot gasped.

A parking garage right by the church, crowding all the surrounding houses, would be horrendous. Who'd want to live here?

“Why in hell would this town need one of them big parking garages?” someone else asks.

“The craft fair brings a lot of folks from all over. They gotta park somewhere, and I bet those rich people don't want them on their streets.”

I try to tune out the chatter and focus on serving the food before I go into the kitchen to start washing the pots.

Before I moved to Stillwater, Alice used to say there was never a dull moment here, and now I can see it.

Between worrying about the possibility of a parking lot being built right by the church next door and Milo doing a double shift, I don't notice the time passing.

I hear the squeak of the double doors and look behind me. Tyler comes in holding a takeaway box.

“Hey, Cathy saved some jambalaya for Milo. He'll be finishing his shift soon, so if you still want to catch him, you can head off now. We'll take over from here.”

I turn the water off and dry my hands. There's no doubt I'm not the only one worried about Milo, so I'm taking the offer and making sure he gets a proper dinner and gets home safe.

“Thanks, Tyler.”

His nod says everything. The man has a heart of gold.

Tyler is everything I've ever wanted in a partner. Head screwed on, caring, funny, and okay, he's a little older, but four of five years is an appropriate age gap.

Why can't I be attracted to him?

I arrive at the grocery store just after closing, but all the lights are still on inside. I get out of the car and lean against the hood.

A few people come from the side of the building, so I keep my eyes peeled for Milo. The last thing I want is to miss him.

Ten minutes later, I see him come from the side of the building with another group of people. Among everyone, he's the first one I see.

It's like my eyes have a Milo detector that even if he was wearing the darkest of clothes in the dead of night, I'd still see him.

He gives a girl a quick hug and they go their separate ways. The girl goes toward a parked car, and I see Milo walk to the edge of the store corner and then stop.

I'm parked so he'd see me on the way to the bus stop, but the way he's wavering and looking at the alleyway on the side of the store, I'm wondering if he's considering walking home. He mentioned before he does that sometimes, but not when he finishes late.

Except he wasn't expecting to finish late today.

I breathe a sigh of relief when he makes the right choice and walks toward the bus stop. His shoulders are low like they hold the weight of the world, and he must be lost in thought because he doesn't see me until he walks past my car.

He looks up and stops when he spots me.

"Ellis."

An advantage of my parents' work and travels around the world is that I've learned to read people well. They always told us to trust people's first reactions to anything.

Whether it's trying caviar or meeting someone for the first time, they always told us to look at people and not the surrounding things.

I always find Milo to be a little guarded, even if he's been opening up a little more when working at my place.

But he wasn't expecting me, so with his guard down, in that split second before he called my name, I saw it in his eyes. The kind of happiness you get when the person in front of you is exactly the person you want to see in that moment or forever.

I've seen that look before, and then I lost it. I was so blind that I didn't even see when it stopped.

"What...um...what are you doing here?" he asks, and I see his guard go up again.

I swallow, trying to push my thoughts away, and then smile. "I have it on good account that Cathy's jambalaya is the best outside of Louisiana, and since it's best eaten warm, I figured you might want it now."

He gasps. "You came all this way to bring me jambalaya?"

"And a ride home, which, by the way, is nonnegotiable," I say when I see he's about to argue.

I grab the box from the passenger seat of the car and point to a bench on the side of the parking lot.

Milo follows me to the bench but stops for a moment before opening the box. "Did Tyler send you?"

"He couldn't get ahold of you, so he figured you'd be on a last-minute double shift."

He takes the plastic fork and starts eating. "Oh my god. I love Cathy. This is so good," he says between mouthfuls.

It's a pleasure to watch him eat and enjoy the meal.

"Tyler says your boss isn't the nicest."

Milo snorts. "That's an understatement."

His hair falls onto his face as he tries to keep his food from falling out of the box while he eats. I feel a compulsion to push it behind his ears and wonder if his hair is always like this or if he's due for a haircut.

I like it like this. It's a little wavy and perfect to run my hands through.

Once again, I curse myself. Why am I not attracted to Tyler?

Why does it have to be this much younger man?

"Do I have food on my face?"

"What?"

"You're staring."

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I was just lost in thought," I say. "Did you enjoy your dinner?"

"It was perfect. Thank you so much for bringing it to me. I wasn't expecting to stay at work. All I had today was my lunch sandwich, so I was a little hungry," he says apologetically.

I put my hand on his arm. "Never apologize for something out of your control. Come on, let me get you home."

MILO



MY MOM WAS RIGHT ABOUT many things all the time. Or so she made us believe.

But this time, she was wrong. Working hard in the backyard, digging up soil, and breaking into a sweat isn't helping me figure out any of my problems.

I can't figure out how to approach the topic of my pay with Ellis. Money keeps appearing in my bank account, and it's far too much. Definitely more than the hourly rate we agreed on.

And I can't figure out how to stop wanting Ellis so much.

If the money is a problem, then wanting Ellis is a catastrophe.

He's been more than generous with his time, tutoring me after work and answering all the questions I've had. Especially with science, which is my weakest topic.

Two weeks ago, he suggested I bring a spare change of clothes, so I could use his shower and change after work to feel comfortable and clean while we study together.

I should have said no.

That had bad idea written all over it.

But did I say no?

Has hell frozen over?

So every time I come over to work in the backyard, I shower in Ellis's spare bathroom, then eat the dinner he insists on cooking for me before we do an hour or two of studying. I go

home feeling sated, happy, and smelling like Ellis's shower soap.

Even my sheets smell like Ellis.

Trying to sleep with an erection is not fun. I draw the line at rubbing one out in his shower, but when I get home, it's like my dick knows that once Sara is asleep, it's adult time.

It's the lonely nights when I wish for nothing else but to be held by another human that I give in.

I close my eyes and see Ellis staring at me like he always does. Full of wonder, like I'm something special.

His touch is always timid, like he wants to ask for something but is too afraid to do it. And when I feel as if I'm the only one who can give him what he needs, that's when my desire and my mind take over.

I wrap my hand around my hard cock and show him exactly how I like it as I whisper in his ear how much I want him, how amazing it'll be to feel him stretch around me.

My breath catches with every stroke as the intensity builds and the world around me narrows to only Ellis. I moan his name as I grip my cock tighter, pulling my foreskin back and teasing the head with my other hand.

His scent is everywhere. Every time I inhale, I smell his essence and my mouth waters. I want to taste him, feel his hard cock heavy on my tongue as I suck him deep and hear him moan my name.

The thought that I may have the same effect on Ellis that he has on me is as powerful as the electric current that runs through my body.

It never takes long for my orgasm to hit, and I fall asleep surrounded by remnants of his soap smell and my silly dreams.

Ellis is now such a familiar figure to Sara that as soon as we get to his place, all she wants is to get onto his lap.

I'd argue against it, but Ellis seems to relish it. I don't know why, but it's like he looks forward to seeing Sara almost as much as I look forward to seeing him.

Between my lust for him and his behavior with Sara, how am I supposed to keep my poor heart in check?

How am I supposed to stop myself from falling for this man I'm already stupidly attracted to if even my kid can't resist him?

Ugh.

The sun is high and there isn't a cloud in the sky. I clean the sweat off my forehead with my shirt.

Fortunately, I'm not digging holes today.

The soil beneath the shed had a little surprise waiting for me, so when I started digging the foundation for the deck, I came across a lot of rocks. That led to more digging.

I used the rocks with the concrete to strengthen the structure of the deck's base, but by the end of that day, my back was totally fucked.

Now, while the concrete is drying, I'm working on the raised beds.

Ellis wants a natural look like the deck, so I'm building the raised beds with reclaimed wood from a local supplier.

He hasn't decided what he'll plant in them, but I have some ideas. If he asks for my opinion, of course.

I hear the double doors open and look toward the house. Ellis comes out with Sara in his arms, as usual.

"If she gets used to being carried everywhere, I'm giving her to you. No take-backsies," I joke.

He mock gasps. "Did you hear that, princess? Your daddy says you can stay with me forever and ever. How about that?"

Sara giggles because Ellis tickles her tummy.

"I think we have a deal," he says.

"Well, in that case, how may I help you further, Mr. Bradford?" I stand and stretch my back, which feels good after bending down for so long.

He gives me a regretful look. "I'm afraid we've been summoned."

"We've...what?"

"My sister just called. *Apparently*," he says, using quote marks, "my brother-in-law got the grocery order wrong, and they have far too much food at home, so they're having a barbeque and invited us over."

I laugh. "Your sister has heard of freezers, right?"

He rolls his eyes. "I also asked that question, and *apparently*," he says, using quote marks again, "both her freezers are full."

"Then why did she need more food?"

He sighs. "She doesn't. It's totally an excuse to be nosy and ask you questions about what you've been up to in my backyard."

"Hasn't she seen the progress?"

"No. I've red-taped Alice and Darius from coming over until the backyard is ready. I'd like to get everyone together when it's finished so they can see your amazing work, but I don't want them in your way."

"Oh." I feel my cheeks heat. "It's not that great."

"You can't be serious. This already looks a hundred times better." He turns to look around the backyard, where there's no more trash or broken things. Everything here now will be used for the deck or raised beds.

When he turns back to me, my heart skips a beat. God, his smile is disarming. Maybe the sun is going to my head, but us standing in his backyard with him holding a happy Sara in his arms feels too good.

"So what do you say?" he asks.

"Huh?"

"Shall we go eat all of my sister's food?"

"I don't want to impose, and I still have a lot of work to do here."

Ellis laughs. “Are you kidding me? The invite was for you and Sara. I’m being invited only by extension.”

I don’t know what to say. Why is Ellis’s sister inviting us to her house?

“Um...okay? I’ll need to take a shower, though, if that’s okay.”

“Sure. Do you want me to give Sara her lunch before we go?” he asks.

“I can do it after my shower, unless we’re late for your sister’s thing.”

Ellis smiles again. “Not at all. I’m just trying to help, and I think she’s getting hungry. She had a bottle a little while ago.”

“Okay, then. If you’re sure.”

I try to be quick in the shower but can’t help taking a moment to enjoy how refreshing it feels after working up a sweat in the backyard.

My thoughts rapidly veer toward Ellis. Does he use this shower at all? I assume he has one in his bedroom upstairs, or there’s at least a separate bathroom with a shower.

My dick hardens as I’m cleaning myself. It’s not unusual since I can’t remember the last time I had sex with anything that wasn’t my hand. But the scent of Ellis’s soap and knowing he’s on the other side of the door at the end of the short hallway is enough to drive me crazy with lust for the man.

One of these days, I’m going to lose it, throw myself at him, get fired, and get a bad reputation all in one go. All because I can’t stop thinking about Ellis.

Maybe I should take Jimmy up on his offer. I’ve still not forgiven him for telling Gerald about my work for Ellis and leaving me to cover his shift, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Could I fuck my frustrations out on Jimmy? The thought alone is enough to kill my boner, so I turn off the water and dry myself with the towel Ellis left for me.

I go to grab my clothes when I realize I didn't bring them to the bathroom with me.

"Fuck."

I pace the bathroom, but there's only one solution. I need to go out and grab my clean clothes.

Wrapping the towel around my waist as tight as possible, I open the bathroom door and almost bump into Ellis.

A shirtless Ellis.

"I'm...um..."

I'm not sure which of us is mumbling, but we both stare at each other for what seems like forever until he breaks the silence.

"Sara decided she didn't like her lunch today. It's totally my fault. She was waving her arms, and I wasn't paying attention, so when she knocked my hand, it all went flying," he mumbles as he lifts his hand, holding the shirt dirty with Sara's food.

"Oh, Ellis, I'm so sorry. I'll buy you a new one if that one's ruined."

"I'm sure it's not. I was just going to change. You should too," he says, going to the end of the hallway and disappearing into a room I've never been in.

I look down and remember I'm almost naked. My dick is noticeably half-hard, and I think I'm going to die of embarrassment. It's clear I made Ellis uncomfortable.

Well, at least that clears any chance of my dreams coming true.

I grab my clothes and get dressed, not bothering to go back to the bathroom since there's no sign of Ellis.

Sara's plastic bib is surprisingly clean, as are her clothes, so it seems Ellis's shirt took the brunt of Sara's mood.

"What's up with your lunch today?" I ask her.

She cries, so I pick her up to calm her down a little.

“It’s okay, baby. Sometimes, I don’t like my lunch either. And I always feel like throwing it at Gerald. But we don’t do it to Ellis, okay? Because he’s nice to us.”

I always carry formula and extra food for Sara, so I take a fruit jar from her bag and feed it to her. She eats it all without fuss, which is a relief, and I give her one of her favorite cookies to chew on.

When Ellis comes back, he’s wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The shirt is untucked, just like the first time I saw him at the soup kitchen.

It looks great on him.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yeah.” I strap Sara into the stroller and quickly wash her jar and cutlery before placing them back in her bag.

Ellis says Alice’s house isn’t far, so we can walk.

This isn’t a part of town I’ve walked in before because it’s not on my way to work.

The houses are all really nice and have beautiful front yards. It’s like everyone is proud of their neighborhood.

“This is a really nice area,” I say.

“Alice lives in our grandparents’ old house, so everyone kind of knows everyone around here. But yes, it is. It’s why I tried to get a place as close to her as possible.”

We arrive at a white colonial-style house with a double garage on the side and a beautiful front yard with peonies planted all around it instead of a fence. There’s a large rose bush in the middle that looks like it’s been there for generations.

“This is it. Are you ready?” Ellis says.

“If this is your sister’s place, and she likes peonies, then yes, I’m more than ready.”

Ellis laughs.

“Well, I’m only here for the food, so let’s go in.”

ELLIS



AS SOON AS we're through the door, it's clear Alice's impromptu barbeque is anything but a last-minute, unplanned event.

She ushers us to the backyard, where she's set up her pop-up shelter to provide shade to the seating area. The kids' playset is pulled closer to the tree so it's in the shade.

"Take a seat over there. Max has started on the food. I'll bring the drinks out in a minute," she says before leaving us in the middle of the backyard.

I gesture to the shade tent so we can get out of the sun.

Milo keeps Sara in the stroller, and since she's in a sitting position, she can see everything around her.

"Where's my girl? She here yet?" Darius steps out of the kitchen into the backyard and comes straight to us. He looks at Milo for permission, which he gives with a nod, and Sara is happily giggling in Darius's arms in no time.

"Should I be worried about the age gap in this relationship?" Milo asks. "What are your intentions toward my girl?"

Darius laughs. "Don't worry, Pops. My intentions are pure. She's my new best friend. Isn't that right, sweetie?" he says to Sara. "Want to play with Uncle Darius on the grass?"

Darius takes Sara's socks off and goes to the play area, where there's a bunch of the kids' toys. He sits on the grass cross-legged, and we watch as he places Sara barefoot on the cool grass.

She doesn't like it initially. Pulling her legs up as soon as they touch the grass. But after a little while, she seems to get used to the feeling and stands, holding on to Darius's hands.

From the corner of my eye, I see Milo smiling. "He seems great around kids."

"My brother is the type of person who does nothing by half-measure. He plays in a hard rock band. When he's with his friends, it's all about partying, drinking, being tough, getting new tattoos, and getting laid. His words, not mine," I explain. "But then there's his other side that only our family and very close friends get to see. The gentle guy who's happy sitting in the grass playing with a baby."

We sit back and watch Sara as Darius helps her walk a few steps.

Alice brings us drinks and some snacks. While Milo is distracted looking at Sara, I catch Alice giving me a look but don't understand what she's trying to say.

She keeps looking from Milo to me and back.

I shake my head and shrug. She rolls her eyes and purses her lips in a silent kiss.

"What? No."

By the time I realize I voiced my reply, it's too late.

Milo looks at us, and Alice smiles. "I was pointing at the chips. Ellis usually can't decide if he wants the ones I bought specially for him or the ones he brings himself."

I know it's illegal to kill your own sibling, but would it be frowned upon if I tripped her the next time she walks by with a bowl of something that stains, say, barbecue sauce?

"Your sister is funny."

"Or extremely irritating. It's such a fine line."

He laughs, and I'm so glad we got past the awkwardness of earlier.

If he knew the effect that seeing him in just a towel around his waist had on me, he'd run out of my place and never look

back.

My only regret was not having more time to take my fill of him, but I didn't miss the bulge under the towel. Not when he came out of the bathroom, or as it thickened the longer we stood there.

A part of me still wants to feel desired by a man. To think his body reacted to me. The reality is he's a young guy who probably doesn't need much to get an erection, and any shirtless man will do.

"Uncle Ellis!" Marnie comes running toward me with Benji on her tail.

"Hey, kiddos. How's it going?"

"Benji said a bad word yesterday," Marnie whispers. "But I didn't tell Mommy because I don't want him to get in trouble."

At only two years old, Benji rarely says much that makes sense, so I seriously doubt he said any kind of swear word.

"Did you tell him he shouldn't repeat the word?" I ask her.

She nods, taking her big-sister duties far too seriously for her age.

"Come on, Benji. Let's go play with Uncle Darius and the baby."

A moment later, Darius is attacked by the two, and I watch closely to see if he needs rescuing, but in typical chill-Darius mode, he manages the situation perfectly.

The kids sit next to him as he tells him some kind of story, and even Sara stares at him as if she understands what he's saying.

"Wow. Those are some superpowers right there," Milo says.

"Speaking of superpowers," I say, leaning back on the chair to face Milo slightly. "How come you know so much about landscaping? Not just the building part, but what you've suggested about flowers and plants for my yard?"

A wide smile spreads across his face as he tucks his right leg under his left to face me.

“My mom. She loved flowers. Pink roses were her favorite. I used to listen to her talk about flowers for hours when I was a kid. We didn’t have a TV, and my brother was more the type to play outside. After she got sick, I used to go to the library and borrow books for her. We’d spend entire afternoons reading about how to look after different flowers. Annuals, perennials, what to plant for what weather.”

“How long has she been gone?”

Milo looks down to where his fingers play with the hem of his shirt. “She died when I was eighteen, just before I finished high school.”

“Is that why you didn’t graduate?”

He nods. “My brother was fifteen, so social services wanted to take him away, especially because...well, anyway, I got a job at the grocery store, and they let us stay together as long as Mikey went to school.”

The brightness in Milo’s eyes dissipates and is replaced with pain. He glances at Sara. Some of his smile returns but not completely.

“My mom used to talk about this place. A little village tucked away in a corner of the White Mountains. Every year in June, the lupines bloom for a short time, and the entire village and the surrounding fields look magical.”

“Lupines?”

“They’re these kind of tall cone-shaped flowers. They’re hard to describe, but you can look them up on your computer. I don’t even know where this village is, but I’ve always wanted to find it so I can take Sara one day.”

The vulnerability in Milo’s voice makes me reach out to him. I touch his shoulder, and he looks at me.

“I hope you can make your dream come true for Sara.”

“It’s just a silly dream. The place probably doesn’t even exist. My mom made up a lot of things to pass the time, especially after my dad died. She used to tell all these stories about things

they'd done when they were young. It never occurred to me at the time that some of them might not be true."

I squeeze his arm. "It's okay to have dreams. Without them, what's the point of living? How do we continue getting up each day if we don't have something to look forward to?"

"What's your dream?"

I look at the surrounding setup.

Max is at the grill, wearing his *Kiss the Chef* apron my sister gave him for Christmas last year. Alice keeps bringing bowls of food covered with foil, assisting Max, and never for a second taking her eyes off her kids, even though they're in the safest hands.

And then there's my tough-as-nails on the outside and marshmallow on the inside little brother. We're all so different, but in a way, we're all the same.

"You're looking at it," I say, answering Milo's question.

"You want a free barbeque?"

I turn to him, and his teasing smile makes me happy.

Only a month ago, Milo was really shy around me. Rarely made eye contact and his words always seemed to get stuck before coming out together all at once. It was adorable, but I never understood why he reacted to me that way.

I guess now that I know him a little better, I can see he was shy with someone he didn't know very well.

"A family. Our parents always traveled a lot for work. Sometimes out of need, but I think it's just how they are. Free and adventurous spirits who are curious about the world. Naturally, they'd produce three children who'd be the polar opposite."

Milo smiles.

"Darius was the least exposed to all the moving around, and Alice put her foot down when she was in high school and demanded to stay here with our grandparents. I was the only one who followed them, maybe out of obligation. I didn't want

them to think they were being abandoned by their children. But when I finished college, I settled in Boston, and things changed for me.”

“You wanted to settle down and start a family?”

MILO



SOME KIND of emotion goes through Ellis before he smiles and picks up a chip.

“Yeah, I mean, isn’t that what most people want? Come home to the person you love, a couple of kids, that kind of thing?” He plays with the chip before putting it in his mouth.

I tilt my head and rest my chin on the arm I have over the back of the chair.

“Generally, yeah. A lot of people want that. But you’re dedicating your life to educating our next generation. You light up when you see Sara, but you also look at her like you’re afraid to get too attached.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That it’s okay to want more. That it’s okay to say you want it.”

Ellis licks his lips and takes a sip from his drink. “Still won’t make it come true.”

“No, but sometimes the best things that happen to us are the most unexpected, so you never know.” I shrug and smile encouragingly.

I don’t even know why I’m trying to get Ellis to open up about this. It’s not my business anyway.

He sighs. “You’re right. I’ve only ever wanted two things in my life. To teach and to have a family. Not just to have children, but to have the kind of relationship Alice does.” He

looks over at his sister, who's by the grill, kissing Max like they're a couple of teenagers.

"No matter how crazy my sister is, Max loves every single part of her and she loves him, and together they have these two amazing little humans who will grow up to be happy people with great role models."

Ellis stares at his drink. "It's a silly dream, quite boring when you think of it. Just wanting to come home, kiss your husband silly, and tuck your kids into bed. But that's all I ever wanted."

"You don't want that anymore?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe. It may be too late now. I'm too old."

I don't understand why. Ellis isn't old by any means, so why wouldn't he still be able to have what he wants?

"Every time I was sad, my mom always tried to find the positive. If it was raining, she told me to stand by the window and wait until I saw the break in the clouds. When I saw it, it would stop raining, and I could go out and play," I say. "A lot of the things she said when I was young didn't make sense. At least not until Sara was born. Before her, there was nothing... No, that's not fair. Before her, life was different. But she was my break in the clouds. My rainbow gift from the world to let me know I'm not alone."

Ellis's gaze burns into mine. "She's an amazing baby. I see so much of you in her."

My throat closes up, and I have to look away.

"She's not mine," I confess, but it's more like a whisper I'm not sure Ellis even hears. This isn't something I tell many people. There aren't many people to tell. Those who know, also know why she's with me. "I mean, she's my daughter on paper." I finally look at Ellis and see nothing but compassion. "I'm her uncle."

"Boys, my man's meat is almost ready," Alice says, laughing at her own joke. "Ellis, do you mind if I borrow Milo for a moment?"

“Sure.”

I follow Alice, grateful for the interruption.

Was I about to tell Ellis my story? It’s not a secret, but the only people who really know it are my neighbors who knew my brother. Most just assume I had a drunken experimental night with some girl and Sara magically happened.

We go through the kitchen to the garage.

“Milo, please feel free to refuse or tell me to fuck off, but the thing is, you’d be doing me a favor,” Alice says, stopping beside their car.

“I don’t understand. Why would I do that?”

She grabs a box from a small stack and opens it. Inside is a bunch of baby clothes.

“These were Marnie’s clothes. I held on to all of them in case we had another girl. I kept anything that I could for Benji, except things like dresses or clothes that didn’t fit. He was always a little bigger than Marnie was when she was born.”

I stare at her as she pulls out some beautiful, colorful dresses and pretty shoes that look expensive and of good quality.

“They’re adorable, right? I went a little over the top. First child and all.” She laughs. “I’d like you to have them for Sara.”

For the second time in a short time span, I’m speechless and on the verge of tears.

“I don’t know what to say. You should give these to your friends, or you can probably sell them online,” I say.

She takes my hand. “From one mother to another”—she winks—“I’d rather know the clothes I picked so carefully for my first baby are with someone who deserves them. I know you’re only working in my brother’s backyard, but I haven’t seen him smile or relax in months. Maybe years. I think you’re a good person to have around. There’s no one else I’d rather see wearing these clothes than your daughter.”

I take a step forward and give her a tight hug. “Thank you so much. I am grateful and honored that you’ve picked Sara to wear Marnie’s clothes. We’ll look after them.”

When we part, she reaches for my face and wipes the tears I didn’t realize were falling.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cry on you.”

“It’s okay, honey. I was hoping you wouldn’t take offense at me being so forward or think of it as charity.”

I smile. “Thank you for taking my feelings into consideration. I’m not offended. I’m grateful I can use my paycheck for other important things for Sara and not worry about the clothes she grows out of so quickly. And I’m so grateful you invited us today. Sara is having a great time.”

I take some clothes from the box to admire how cute they are.

“You’ll have a hard time prying her from Darius’s hands. He acts all tough, but he’s dying to have a family. He just doesn’t have the time between work and his band.”

“Sounds like he’s not the only Bradford brother to want a family.” I gasp. “Crap, I’m sorry, that was out of line. I was distracted looking at the clothes and wasn’t thinking. Please —”

“Hey, don’t worry. I know my brothers. Both of them,” Alice says. “And you’re right.” Her face falls. “Ellis was seriously hurt before, so he says he’s written off love and having a family. I hope the right person comes along to show him it’s never too late.”

“He’s not even old at all,” I say.

“He’s forty-two. You’re right. Not old at all.” She smiles, and a glint in her eyes tells me this little conversation between us means more than the words we’ve just exchanged. “Come on. Let’s get some food.”

By the time we get back out, Sara is on Ellis’s lap, sucking on a piece of fruit.

“She keeps yawning,” he says. “I think Darius wore her out.”

I hold my arms out, and she stretches to come to me. I get a lovely piece of sticky, partly chewed apple on my neck as she holds on to my shirt.

“She might need a drink. It’s quite hot.”

“I’ve already given her some from your bag.”

I pause before reaching for the bag. “Thank you.” I take the cleaning wipes and get most of the stickiness off her mouth and hands, as well as my neck. Then I place her in the stroller and lean it back a little.

“Well, she’s not complaining, so she must be really ready for a nap,” I say. “Look at that. I get to eat my food warm today.”

Ellis laughs. “I bet it doesn’t happen often when you’re on your own with her.”

“Try never.”

It’s cooler in the house, so Alice suggests placing Sara in Benji’s bed when she falls asleep and then brings out her baby monitor.

Max cuts up all the meat, so it’s easy to pick out different bits. From chicken to steak, Ellis wasn’t wrong. They really have a lot of meat. Alice made so many sides that it’s hard to choose what to have.

I wait for the family to serve themselves before I take some, but Ellis grabs my plate. “Do you want potato salad? Alice’s couscous is always superb. And the roasted peppers. Steak? Chicken? Oh, there’s some barbecue sauce here. Max, can you pass the ribs, please?”

He puts the plate in front of me, and I struggle not to laugh because at no point did he stop to let me answer his questions.

“I guess those were rhetorical questions,” I say, looking at the pile of food.

He grins. “Sorry. I guess I’m a little hungry and assumed you are too. Especially since you’ve been working since early today.”

“Then you better make sure you have as much food on your plate as you put on mine.”

He laughs. “Challenge accepted.”

The food is delicious. I want to stop eating to tell Max and Alice, but I can’t. My moans and nods will have to do.

“Did you hear about the next town meeting?” Max says.

“What about it?” Ellis asks between mouthfuls of potato salad.

“They’re discussing the planning permission of that parking lot on the south side by the church, but they’re closing the meeting to the public.”

Ellis coughs. “It’s a closed meeting? How is anyone supposed to challenge it?”

“I think that’s the point,” Alice says. “Do you think Tyler might know something? After all, he’s close to Father O’Reilly, and there’s no way they’d do anything without consulting the church.”

From the way Max snorts as he takes a bite of his steak, it sounds like he’s not so sure about that. I’m inclined to agree, but I don’t want to weigh in on this particular conversation.

“I can ask him this week,” Ellis says, and I’m glad the conversation ends there and moves on to other topics.

I particularly enjoy watching the siblings bicker over Christmas and whose turn it is to host their parents this year.

I’m not used to eating this much in one meal, though, so I’m full before I finish all the food Ellis put on my plate.

“This was amazing and by far the best food I’ve ever had. Sorry, I can’t finish it. I’m not used to such large portions.” I give Ellis a look.

“You mean my expertly reheated leftovers aren’t cutting it anymore? That hurts my feelings so deep,” he says, putting a hand to his heart.

“What can I say?” I shrug. “Good effort. Must try harder?”

“Damn, bro, you’re being roasted better than this chicken,” Darius says.

Max throws a bunched-up napkin at him.

“Mommy, is Uncle Ellis being roasted for real?” Marnie asks, scrunching her nose.

Alice laughs. “It’s just an expression, honey. It means someone is making a little bit of fun at his expense.”

“Ah okay.” She seems happy with the explanation.

“Hey, Darius, you know that favorite uncle title you’re going for?” Ellis asks. “Now is your chance.” He points at Benji, who’s falling asleep while trying to eat a chip.

“I fail to see how putting him to bed would give me cool uncle points,” Darius says, grabbing a chicken wing with his hands and eating without any care for the mess on his face.

Ellis rolls his eyes and stands.

“Is it okay if I go with you? I’d like to check on Sara,” I say.

“Sure.”

Alice smiles at me in the same way she did earlier, but now I get it. She’s hoping for something between Ellis and me.

Yeah, me too, my friend. Me too. But given the way he reacted to me earlier, it’s not happening, so...

Since Sara is occupying Benji’s bed, we take him to Marnie’s room. I help Ellis clean the remnants of Benji’s lunch from his hands, but he definitely needs new clothes, so Ellis points at the drawer where I can get some.

We work together to make sure Benji doesn’t wake up. At some point, we stop, look at each other, and smile.

He whispers, “I hope you understand Alice is currently looking at the baby cam and watching us work together, probably picking the colors of our bridesmaids’ dresses as we speak.”

“Personally, I’ve always been a sucker for teal,” I joke, but then I see the look on his face, and I can’t tell if he’s terrified

because I'm joking, or worse, that I might be serious. Either way, it's not a positive look. "I'm only joking. Don't worry. No misunderstandings here, whatever Alice may or not be hoping for. I think you can do the rest on your own. I'll go check on Sara." I walk all the way to the door before I turn back. "By the way, you were wrong earlier. You're not too old."

I keep my expression as neutral as I can until I open the door to Benji's room and I'm safely inside.

Sara is awake, holding on to her blankie with one hand while the other reaches for one of Benji's stuffed animals.

"Hey, baby girl, ready to go home?"

When she sees me, her smile is so big that it fills up all the empty spaces in my heart.

I pick her up, and she calls out Dada. "That's right. I'm your dada. And one day, when you're a little older, I'll tell you all about your real dada and momma, and your grandma too. She was the best, you know?"

When I return to join Ellis's family, the table has been cleared of all the food. Marnie is asleep on an inflatable toy under the tree and the adults are all in the lounge area.

I approach them. "This little lady was awake. I guess it's time to take her home."

"Already?" Alice asks, sounding disappointed.

"It's been a long day for her. I really appreciate the lunch and the clothes. I'll borrow my neighbor's car this week to get the box if that's okay. I'm walking home, so I can't take it."

She gives Ellis a stare.

"I can borrow their car and drop you off," he says.

"That's okay. After all the food, it will be nice to walk."

"Please, I insist," he says.

There's nothing worse than feeling like someone is doing something nice out of obligation, but I know there's no point arguing, so I agree.

Alice fills the trunk of her car with three boxes of clothes for Sara, and I thank her again for her generosity.

The drive to my place is silent.

“Did I say something wrong? You seem awfully quiet,” Ellis says.

“What? No. I’m just a little tired. After work and the big lunch, I just want to see how my neighbor is doing, and then I’ll do a couple of hours of studying.”

He narrows his eyes as if he’s assessing me.

“Okay. I guess I’ll see you at the store, the soup kitchen, or next weekend.”

“Yeah.”

I take Sara inside before coming back out for the boxes.

Ellis helps me bring them to the door and then goes back to the car.

He turns around like he wants to say something but instead just leaves.

“The first time that nice man dropped you off, you were smiling. This time, not so much.” Florrie stands from behind a bush.

“Jesus, Florrie. You want to give me a heart attack?”

She laughs. “Sorry, my dear, I thought you saw me here deadheading the roses. Anyway, what happened between last time and today?”

I give her a smile I don’t feel. “Nothing, Florrie. We’re just friends.”

“Hmm...I was just friends with my late Freddie until we weren’t just friends anymore.”

“We’re just friends,” I repeat, and I’m sure it’s more to remind myself of that than for Florrie’s benefit.

If I’m honest, I don’t even know if we’re friends, but I’d like to think we are. Especially after all the time we’ve spent

together having lunch and Ellis tutoring me. And today, we shared more personal stuff.

Maybe that's just another one of those things that only exists in Milo's world, like love and happy endings.

"I'll let you get inside because I have to get ready for the bowling club, but this conversation isn't over."

"How many clubs do you belong to?"

"A girl's gotta try everything once. Even other girls."

"Florrie!"

She goes off giggling to herself, leaving me slightly shocked on my doorstep.

ELLIS



THE ACADEMY IS NOISIER than usual. Probably because it's Friday night.

Tonight is the town meeting about the parking lot. Arlo got an invitation to sit in because of his association with the craft fair.

Levi is working the bar tonight, and Fletcher is babysitting all the kids, so Arlo agreed to join us later to give us an update on the meeting before picking up Ava from Fletcher and Harrison's place.

"You're very quiet tonight," Harrison says, leaning closer so I can hear him. "That's usually my job."

"It's noisy here. I can't even hear myself think."

"It'll die down in a bit. Usually, people either stay for dinner or go home after happy hour. Wanna step outside?"

"Sure."

We pick up a couple of beers from the bar and go outside, where there's a cordoned-off area with some tables and benches. Despite the warm summer night, the outside space is practically empty.

"What makes people want to pack like sardines into a hot bar instead of sitting outside where they can breathe fresh air instead of body odor?" I ask.

Harrison chuckles. "Bars and clubs were never my thing unless my best friend dragged me out, but if I remember correctly, it was the whole smelling someone else's scent and rubbing against each other. In the right place, at the right time,

it can be a really...enjoyable experience.” He elbows me playfully.

“Yes, yes, I remember. I just don’t want to relive it.”

“Fair enough.”

He takes a swig of his beer.

The night is warm, and there’s no breeze. It’s like the world is still. Not even the leaves on Main Street move an inch.

“Hey, sorry about Fletcher teasing you last time about Milo. He can be like a dog with a bone sometimes and doesn’t know when to quit.”

I cross my legs and balance the bottle on my knee. “Yeah, I know. It’s fine. He’s not entirely wrong.”

“Wait...he’s not?”

“No, of course not. I mean, he’s such an amazing guy, but he’s still so—”

Harrison puts his hand on my shaking leg and stares at me.

“If you’re going to end that with young, then stop right there. What does it matter if there’s an age gap between a couple? If you agree on the things that matter, what else is there to worry about?”

I sigh. “Yeah, I know you’re right, but it’s just that...I don’t know. I feel too much like a fool.”

Harrison looks at his watch. “Look, this stays between us. If you just want to talk about it, I can listen.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you actually have feelings for Milo?”

Do I? *Feelings* is such a loaded word. So heavy.

“I...ugh...I am definitely one hundred percent attracted to him. How can I not be? He’s so strong, sweet, kind, smart. He’s just...I don’t know. There’s just something about him that pulls me. But I have nothing to offer him. He’s raising a child on his own.” I run my hands through my hair. “Even if we

ignore the age gap, he deserves more than what I can give him.”

“Is it the kid thing?” he asks.

“What? No. I love Sara. I just...I have some baggage I don’t think is fair to unload on Milo.”

“Sometimes that’s not our choice to make, Ellis. If Milo has feelings for you, you can’t stop that from happening any more than you can stop your feelings from happening.”

“He doesn’t have feelings for me. Come on, let’s be real here.”

Harrison laughs. “Okay, let’s be real. Ellis, you’re a good-looking man. You’re the type that’ll only get better with age when the rest of us look like overgrown, old teenagers. But yeah, you’re hot.”

I stare at him.

“What? Just because I’m in love with Fletcher doesn’t mean I can’t find other people attractive. We compare notes.” He shrugs.

“God, please, save me from this,” I beg.

“Now, let’s look at what matters. What’s here”—he points to my head—“and what’s here.” He lays his hand on my chest. “You care about the kids you teach. When there was a challenge with the Spring Fair last year, you picked the most unlikely pair to run it. Thanks for that, by the way. I still owe you for pushing me toward Fletcher.”

“It wasn’t intentional. You just had less knowledge of the parent politics, so I knew you’d do a good job. Also, having more LGBTQ+ representation in the school mattered to me too.”

“See?” he says, opening his arms as if to prove a point. “You’re a good man. I can’t think of anything you couldn’t offer Milo.”

I take a deep breath. “It’s complicated. I don’t want to hurt Milo in the long run, even though I think I may already have.”

Harrison stares at me with disbelief, so I tell him what happened over the weekend, from our tense encounter outside the bathroom to the moment in Marnie's room.

I skip the part where Milo and I talked about our dreams and the things that mattered to us because that's too personal.

Listening to Milo talk about his mom was both sad and riveting. All I wanted at that moment was to take him to that village in the White Mountains so he could see his lupines and connect with his mom.

"Ellis, let me ask you this. What do you want from Milo?"

I finish my beer and set the bottle on the table.

What do I want from Milo? That's a good question.

I know what I want for him. I want to protect him, to make sure he doesn't hurt. I don't want to see him go hungry again. I want him to follow his dreams, and I want to encourage him to look for something in landscaping since he seems to have such a passion for it.

But what do I want from him?

I stare at Harrison, lost for words, and since I don't answer his question, he continues. "Milo reminds me a lot of my younger self," he says. "Almost too mature. Especially after my first relationship ended. I was nursing a broken heart because I had so much love to give and no one to give it to. All I wanted was to love."

"How did you get past the hurt and move on? I mean, you eventually did because you married Megan's mom," I say.

"Let me ask you this. If all Milo wanted was to love you, would you let him?"

"I don't understand."

Harrison stands. "I need more beer for this." He goes back inside, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

If Milo wanted to love me, would I let him? The answer should be yes. Right?

But what would happen when he tired of our life together?
What about when I became too boring for him?

Harrison comes back with two more beers and sits in front of me.

“When I met Stella, I didn’t think I was worthy of being loved. I thought I had to be the one to do all the love. Otherwise, she wouldn’t want me. I worked so hard at being the perfect husband that, along the way, I lost myself. I lost us. It’s different with Fletcher. I love him just as much, but I’m not afraid anymore. We are both important to each other.”

I see Arlo a few yards away, and Harrison sees him too.

“All I’m saying is that you probably want to take care of Milo. Just remember, he’s not a porcelain doll. He’s, as you said, a strong man. If he likes you, let him show you. If you like him, show him you do.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

He nods back, and that marks the end of the conversation.

“Hey, boys. What are you doing out here? Too crowded inside?” Arlo asks.

“Yeah, I like going home smelling like my own aftershave, thank you,” Harrison says.

Arlo laughs. “Let me say hi to my man and grab a beer. I’ll catch you up with the meeting. Tyler is on his way too.”

When Arlo is out of earshot, I turn to Harrison. “Thank you for the talk. I guess I have some stuff to figure out, but I’d appreciate if this stays between us.”

“From what I hear, Milo is working in your backyard, so you have plenty of opportunities to figure it out.” He raises his beer and winks at me before taking a swig. “And your secret is safe with me.”

Arlo comes back with a couple of beers a few minutes later, and then, as he said, Tyler arrives.

“Get straight to it, man. What happened at the meeting?” Tyler asks.

Arlo makes eye contact with each of us. “The vote was unanimous to give the go-ahead for the parking lot.”

“What?” I ask. “How can they do that?”

Arlo raises his hands. “Hold your horses. The vote was unanimous because the only ones allowed to vote were those who want the parking lot to happen. A load of people in the audience questioned the ethics of the voting system and the lack of representation from residents from the area.”

“Damn right. How can they do something without even asking the people it’s going to affect?” Tyler asks.

“The problem is that the playground has been largely abandoned for years. The opinion of the community doesn’t hold much weight when the other side is saying the investment in the area is a good thing,” Arlo explains.

“They have a point,” Harrison says.

“What if we clean it up?” I ask. “We get rid of the weeds. Restore the play structures.”

Tyler is playing with the label on his bottle.

“It’s not that easy. Do you know how many times that playground has been cleaned up? Too many to count. It doesn’t get used by children to play because the parents are too scared.”

What?

“Why?”

“A few years ago, there was a surge of drug dealing and drug-related crime. Most of it is gone now because those who caused it”—he looks at me—“are dead. But that won’t magically bring life back into the playground.”

“Then we make it. We have to start somewhere. Cleaning it up is the start. Then we’ll figure the rest out.” I turn to Arlo. “What was the outcome of the meeting?”

“They’ve postponed the meeting until a committee of residents can be formed to represent their opinion. We basically have a

few weeks until they demand a meeting or go ahead without one.”

“We’ll make it happen.” I stand.

“Where are you going?” Harrison asks.

“Home. There’s a bunch of stuff to plan and not a lot of time to do it. I’ll see you guys next week.”

I walk a few yards until Tyler catches up to me.

“Hey, walking this way?” I ask.

“I am now.”

I chuckle. “Don’t worry. I told my sister there’s nothing between us, so you don’t need to walk me home.”

Tyler doesn’t laugh at my joke, so I look at him and see his worried frown. “You seem to have a special interest in the playground.”

“Of course. I’ve grown attached to the community, and I think the parking lot would be the end of whatever small thread is holding that community together.”

He hums. “Is that it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not going to bullshit you, Ellis. Is this because of Milo?”

I roll the sleeves of my shirt again because, despite the time, the temperature hasn’t gone down. Or maybe I’m just feeling too hot all of a sudden.

“Well, it’s his community, so yeah. You know I respect Milo. We’re friends, and I adore Sara. I’d love to know that she can grow up playing there.”

He nods. “From one friend to another, I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again. Milo is a special person. If you care about him, show it. Don’t keep it to yourself.”

He pats me on the back and turns to go back in the direction we came from.

“Where are you going?”

“I forgot I drove here. I guess it’s that old age setting in and all.”

I shake my head. “You’re a bastard.”

“Yeah, but with good intentions, which makes me a fucking fairy godmother.”

I pick up a small rock and throw it in his direction. I miss, of course, which was the expected outcome and my intention.

Tyler laughs until I no longer see him.

I walk home thinking about how I can ask Milo out without sounding like I’ve been thinking about him every day for the past few months.

Harrison’s words come back to me too.

Maybe it’s time to give Milo some credit and respect him for the man he is.

And also prepare myself for rejection.

MILO



THWAT.

“Ugh. Stupid nail.” I pull the bent nail from the wooden slabs and try again.

Thwat.

Okay, this one’s going in.

Thwat. Thwat.

“Fucking ugh.” It bends just as it looks like it’s going through.

I stand and stretch my back. The small pile of bent nails is making me angry.

Well, angrier.

I’ve been in Ellis’s backyard since just after sunrise, measuring the slabs to outline the deck’s base and ensure I’m using the right ones. Ellis bought them cut to size, so I don’t need to do any cutting, but I want to ensure they all fit together correctly. Hence using smaller nails before I use the nail gun I rented.

None of this would be a problem if I wasn’t so worked up about talking to Ellis about what he did.

When I get worked up, I get nervous. I shouldn’t even be handling a hammer, let alone trying to nail anything in place.

I look toward the house. There’s still no movement from inside.

Okay, so that was my intention. To do some work, and by the time Ellis noticed I was here, I'd have gathered my courage to confront him.

“Okay. Deep breaths and focus, Milo.”

I kneel again. This time the nail goes in, and it's a small victory. If I can repeat this a few more times to get the basic frame in place, I'll have the confidence to use the nail gun, and it'll all be much easier and quicker.

Hopefully, by the time I leave—if I don't get fired first—I'll have the deck's base finished. My anxiety level spikes at the thought that Ellis may actually fire me. I had to decline Gerald's offer of the extra night shifts, so I need the landscaping job more than ever.

He knew I'd never be able to take the shifts, but now he'll hold my decision against me forever, which means I should really start looking for a new job.

I put those thoughts aside and let my mind focus on the job at hand. And as I see progress with the deck, I have a renewed energy to keep going.

Within an hour or so, the base is in place, and I can start nailing the actual floorboards.

I stop to take a sip of the coffee I brought with me in a to-go mug when I hear the kitchen door open.

Ellis comes out holding a cup of coffee in his hand. He's barefoot and wearing pajama pants and an old T-shirt.

I don't want to look but, fuck me, I look, and even his hair is a little out of place like he's just gotten up. No one should look so...like that in the morning.

It annoys me even more because I want to kill him as much as I want to just pull him down on the newly laid grass and kiss him stupid.

“You shouldn't be out here barefoot,” I say, collecting the nails I bent earlier and placing them in a box.

He looks at his feet and goes back inside, coming out wearing a pair of old sneakers.

“How long have you been here? It’s barely morning,” he says.

“It’s past ten, and I came earlier to make sure I can finish this part today.”

He narrows his eyes. “Where’s Sara?”

“With Florrie.”

I resume nailing the boards together.

“Oh, if you’d said you were coming earlier, I could have gotten up earlier to look after her.”

Stop being so fucking nice.

“Florrie misses spending time with Sara. Besides, you’re usually up early anyway, so it wouldn’t have made a difference.”

He sits on the grass and crosses his legs, resting his hands on his thighs as he holds the coffee.

“I was thinking about a lot of stuff last night and couldn’t sleep.”

“Thinking about what?”

“You...mainly.”

The nail gun slips from my hand, and I avoid an accident only because I’m holding it with both hands.

“What do you mean?” I ask, putting the nail gun down to face him.

He looks at me. “I...it’s hard to explain...because...I have so much respect for you, Milo, and I don’t want to—”

I interrupt him because of all the things he could have said, I don’t expect him to use words that trigger my anger.

“Respect. Really? Then explain this to me. How come there’s more money paid into my account than what we agreed for my hourly rate?”

He looks down and places his coffee on the grass.

“If you respected me, you would discuss what you were doing instead of going behind my back.”

“Milo—”

I get closer to him, and now that I’m getting started, I feel the blood pumping through my veins, and it’s all going to come out. “I went to study at the library yesterday. I signed into my GED account and saw the fee for my exams was paid. I looked for the payment receipt, and it had your name on it. Were you planning on telling me?”

“I…” He runs his hands through his hair and then looks at me.

We’re practically face to face. Him sitting on the grass and me kneeling next to him, standing a little taller.

“You offered me a ride home. You brought me dinner when I was stuck at work. You gave me a job when I needed one. At no point did I feel like I was a charity case to you. But you treated me like one by going behind my back and paying for stuff for me.”

I point a finger at his chest. “I may not have much, but I work damn hard for it. I’m not proud. I can accept help. But I deserve to be respect—”

Before I can finish, Ellis yanks me by the front of my shirt with one hand and with the other, grabs the back of my neck and slams his lips against mine.

The move is so unexpected that I lose balance and fall sideways.

Our lips part for a split second. My brain hasn’t even caught up before Ellis is there again.

Ellis Bradford is kissing me. I’m not dreaming. His lips are touching mine.

This is one of those moments that I know I will never remember exactly how it happened because it’s over so soon.

I can smell the coffee on his breath when he pulls away, resting his forehead against mine.

At some point, I must have closed my eyes because when I open them, I’m staring at Ellis’s dark-blue ones.

“Why did you do that?” I ask. My voice is trembling and my body is tense. Trying to hold in what I really want to do.

There’s a layer of vulnerability in the way he’s looking at me. Like he doesn’t quite believe he did what he just did.

That makes two of us.

“It seemed like a good way to shut you up.” He smiles. “Milo, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel the way you do. Honestly, I paid the fee because I realized the deadline was coming up soon, and I didn’t want you to miss it. I should have asked you first.”

“You should.”

He runs a finger over my cheek. “I don’t see you as a charity case at all. And once again, I know I should have consulted you, but I’ve done some research. You asked for too little, and at the time, I didn’t know better, so I agreed. I’m simply paying you what you deserve to be paid. Your exam fees can come out of your pay if you want.”

His gaze moves away from mine, but his hand is still on my face. We’re still lying beside each other.

“I...um...probably shouldn’t have kissed you either. I’m sorry for that.”

The heat spreading through my body, threatening to turn my veins into lava, suddenly becomes ice cold.

“Why?”

“Because I want us to be friends. Because we have a working relationship. Because I’m so much older than you.”

Wait...what?

My quick thinking gives me an advantage over Ellis, so I roll him onto his back and straddle him.

I keep my hands on either side of his head because if I don’t, I might start undressing him.

“What are...you doing?” His voice is thick with want, and now I can see it.

I slide down on him so our faces are closer together. There's no way what I feel against my thigh isn't his erection.

"Those are bullshit reasons, Ellis."

He swallows and looks at my lips.

"Tell me one thing. Did you want to kiss me?"

He nods.

"For how long?"

He closes his eyes like he's in pain. When he opens them, there's nothing but resolution. "Since the first time you said my name out loud."

"When we met at the store?" I ask.

"No. When you called me Ellis."

I run my nose over his. My open mouth catches his lip, and the sexiest, breathiest moan I've ever heard fills me with the confidence I need to know this is okay.

"Ellis," I whisper, rubbing my cheek on his.

I pull his earlobe with my teeth and whisper his name again.

His hands come up to hold my wrists.

"Milo."

"May I kiss you?"

"Please."

This time, when our lips touch, it's not a stolen moment. I will never forget this. It's the culmination of months of wanting, pining, desiring, and hoping. The soft and tender kisses become laced with more need. Our bodies line up until I'm practically fully on top of him.

Ellis's hands move up my arms until he's cradling my face. He opens his mouth, and as our tongues touch, I know I'll never want to kiss anyone ever again.

I push for more because I've wanted to taste Ellis since the moment I first saw him, and he lets me. He gives in like he's meant to be mine.

Each one of his moans is swallowed until I have to come up for air, but even then, I don't stop. I kiss his neck and suck his Adam's apple.

The thought that we have to stop and talk about what's happening terrifies me. But he wants it. He said he wanted to kiss me. So I do.

I kiss him until my dick is so painfully hard that unless we stop, we're at risk of doing something really inappropriate in his backyard.

"Ellis, dear?"

We both freeze when we hear the voice on the other side of the fence.

"Is everything okay over there? I keep hearing moaning and wheezing. I hope Milo hasn't hurt himself."

I rest my head on his chest, trying not to laugh. He brings his hand to rest on the back of my neck.

"It's okay, Mrs. Fisher. All under control."

"You make sure he doesn't put himself under too much stress. He works far too hard."

Ellis's chest rumbles with barely contained laughter.

"I will, Mrs. Fisher. Don't worry."

We stay still until we hear the sliding doors to her home close.

Ellis flips us so he's on top of me. "No undue stress. Mrs. Fisher's orders."

I cant my hips, knowing he'll feel my erection through his thin pajama pants.

"This is your fault," I say.

We smile at each other.

"I guess I'm forgiven for my transgressions?" Ellis asks.

"Hmm, I'm not sure. I haven't had breakfast yet."

He laughs, and I feel it all over. I love it.

“Why don’t you get back to work, and I’ll prepare something for us.”

“Yes, boss.” I give him a quick kiss and move him off me to stand.

I’m not made of steel, so I look at the nice tent in his pants.

My mouth waters at the thought of finishing later what we started now. It’s with a lot less frustration toward Ellis, but a lot more of the sexual kind, that I grab the nail gun and go back to work.

I pretend not to watch Ellis through the kitchen doors as he puts together something for breakfast—or brunch since it’s close to eleven.

The way his pajama pants cling to his ass. The way he moves around the kitchen. The way he felt under me, on top of me. How he tasted.

I look up at the blue sky.

Am I dreaming, or is this really happening?

ELLIS



I CRACK the eggs into the bowl and set the whisk next to it. Next, I chop some mushrooms, peppers, and ham.

It's a good thing my hands can work independently from my brain because it's having a meltdown.

I kissed Milo.

Milo kissed me.

I put the knife down before I cut a finger off while remembering every second of that absolutely perfect kiss.

The way we fit together. The way Milo took charge was such an unexpected relief. How did he know that, more than anything, him taking control is the fast lane to me giving it all up?

My control, my sanity, my...fuck.

If I was confused yesterday about how I felt about Milo and if I should tell him or not. If I was afraid of being rejected by him...now it's worse.

I look behind me toward the backyard and see he's working with his usual focus. The base for the deck is almost done, but from where I stand, it's like nothing happened. It's like any other Saturday.

But there's a stark difference now.

He hasn't had the coffee and brunch I usually make for him yet.

Sara isn't here today.

There are no more layers of protection between us.

We broke the seal on that grass, and now I don't know if the lid will ever close again.

I'm too wired to think straight. To remember Harrison's words or Tyler's warnings.

My dick is so painfully hard. Telling me it's been too long since I've used it properly and now it wants to feel more of Milo. Preferably without clothes.

"Fuck. I need clothes." I look down at the tent in my loose pajama pants. "I definitely need clothes."

Milo always lets me know when he arrives. Even if he doesn't want to bother me, he places Sara on the play mat that is now permanently in my living room. The coffee table hasn't gone back to its usual position in weeks.

So when I got up and came down to make myself a cup of coffee, I wasn't expecting to see Milo already here and working. I completely forgot about what I was wearing or that I was barefoot.

I add more coffee to the filter and turn the coffee maker on before going up to my bedroom to put on more appropriate clothing, but when I get there, I don't know what to do.

Do I go for the safe option? Jeans will keep my dick from starring in its own show.

I open the closet and take out a clean pair.

But we kissed. What if he wants more? Will the jeans be in the way?

I throw the jeans on the bed and go to the chest of drawers to grab a pair of joggers.

"Fuck. These are only mildly better than the pajama pants."

But they provide easier access.

Why the fuck am I having such a freak-out over what to wear? I'm not fifteen, for the love of everything sacred.

I'm an adult, and as such, I should behave like one.

Before I change my mind, I put on the jeans and a clean T-shirt.

Ignoring the desire to go outside and pull Milo in here with me, I start making the omelet. I'm almost done when he comes through the door into the kitchen.

"The base—" His gaze runs up my body until it meets my eyes. "You got dressed."

"Would you rather I hadn't?"

He comes forward, and I step aside so I don't accidentally burn myself on the stove.

Milo's usually soft gaze burns through my skin. "Yes, actually," he says, coming even closer. "Your other clothes provided better access."

He runs his nose over my neck, and I feel him suck a patch of skin.

I close my eyes and moan as my dick reacts. "I knew I should have picked the joggers."

"Can I take a shower?"

All I can do is nod.

He grabs his bag and disappears into the guest bathroom.

I take the time he's in the shower to get a modicum of self-control and finish the brunch.

Since I discovered that Milo likes the French brioches, I always have some whenever he comes over. I set the oven to a low temperature and add a couple in. They'll be warm and slightly toasty by the time we finish the omelet.

The coffee maker splutters out the last few drops, so I turn it off and bring the pot to the table.

I'm plating the omelets when Milo joins me. His hair is messy and wet. He must have rushed drying off because there are a couple of damp patches where his T-shirt clings to his body.

The scent of my soap follows him. It wasn't a conscious decision to get the same brand I use for the spare bathroom.

More like a desire to not have to think too much about it. But from the day Milo started showering here, I've thanked my past self.

The thought that Milo goes home smelling like my soap makes me strangely possessive of him. Like he belongs to me and no one else.

"Food smells nice," he says, taking his usual seat across from me.

"Thanks. Coffee?"

"Please."

We eat in silence, but if we were in a busy nightclub, it couldn't be noisier than it is right now because of this thing between us.

This thing that has been bubbling inside me for months? It's loud.

We keep stealing glances and smiling at each other.

He looks so relaxed. Why is he so relaxed? Was he prepared for this to happen?

I don't know how since even I didn't know I would make the first move.

"Freak-outs are my specialty," he says. "And it seems to me you're freaking the hell out."

"That obvious?"

He points to the brioche on my plate that I've turned into crumbs. I clean my hands.

"Sorry."

He drinks the last of his coffee. "Have you finished?"

"Yeah."

Usually, he goes back to work after brunch while I play with Sara, but if he's taken his shower, he must be done for the day. I don't want to feel disappointed that he might go soon, but I am.

He stands, grabs our plates, and takes them to the sink. Then he comes back for our empty coffee cups. A quick wipe of the table to ensure there are no crumbs, and then he washes the dishes.

I just stare as he looks so completely at home in my kitchen.

When he's finished, he wipes his hands on a dry cloth and comes over to me.

I take his hand when he holds it out for me and follow him to the couch. He pulls me down with him. We're sitting so close together that I'm practically on his lap.

His fingers trace the palms of my hands like we've got all the time in the world. I do the same to him, and I'm surprised that his hands are soft despite the hard manual labor he's been doing the last few weeks.

"I feel like I should say something. Do something," I say.

"As long as it's not an apology, what do you want to say?"

"I don't know."

"What do you want to do?"

I look at where our fingers are laced together.

"I want to get out of my head. I want to stop wondering if kissing you was wrong. It felt so good, and I don't know if I could survive not doing it again. And if I...we never kiss again, will I still remember how good it was ten years from now?"

Milo takes one hand back and brings it to my face.

"You can catalog all of our kisses, but if it depends on me, you will never have to wonder if it'll happen again."

He comes forward, and I welcome the touch of his lips on mine.

"I love how you don't know what to do with yourself when I touch you, Ellis."

I want to laugh because he's right, but he keeps sucking my lips into his mouth, and I feel when his tongue runs over them,

soft and warm. All I can do is let it happen. Let myself be consumed by Milo.

“Why,” I rasp. “Why do you like it?”

He stops kissing me and nuzzles me until I’m lying on the couch with him between my legs.

“Because it gives us an even playing field.” He kisses my jaw. “Can I?” He pulls on the hem of my T-shirt, and I help him take it off.

“When I’m around you, I can’t think. You’re always so composed, so in control,” he says. “I like knowing that I can do this to you.”

He sucks my nipple into a peak. I cant my hips to meet his, and we both hiss.

“I’m never in control, Milo. Especially when it comes to you.”

He treats the other nipple the same way before moving down my chest.

I instinctively put my hand on my chest. He looks up.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“What are you sorry for?”

“I’m not...my hair is...I’m...”

“You’re stunning, Ellis. I like your hair, all of it. The dark brown, the white ones on the sides of your head.” He kisses my hand and pushes it away. “And I particularly like that your chest hair has even more gray. Fuck, I never imagined you’d be this sexy.”

“I’m getting old.” Fuck, I hate that my insecurities are getting the best of me when it’s clear Milo likes what he sees.

“I’m aware of that and don’t give a shit. I bet you a blowjob that I’m growing old at the same rate.”

I laugh. “Deal.”

He unbuttons my jeans.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I won the bet. Or do you need to consult your science books?”

“But I...”

He laughs. “Oh no, no, no. You said you want to get out of your head, and I want to get your head. It’s a fair trade.”

I laugh, but it turns into a moan when Milo opens the remaining buttons on my jeans and my erection springs free.

“No underwear. I like it.” He sits on his heels and pulls my jeans until they’re completely off.

He stares at me in what looks like awe, but I have to close my eyes because I’m too naked and he’s too dressed. If he doesn’t do anything, I might just bolt.

“Milo,” I beg.

His hands run up my calves, massaging my muscles and relaxing me. Well, part of me because the other part is anything but relaxed.

With his hands on the back of my knees, Milo pulls my legs up until I’m totally exposed to him.

“What are you—” I open my eyes and gawk as Milo removes his T-shirt with one hand while the other keeps me in place. Then he does what I least expect.

He lowers his face and licks a path from the rim of my hole to my balls, where he sucks them into his mouth one at a time. When I think I’m about to die, he carries on his path until his mouth opens to take my crown.

“Fuck...oh fuck.”

I don’t know what he’s doing with his tongue, but it feels so good together with the suction.

“Ugh, Milo. Christ...fucking...”

“Mr. Bradford, I hope you don’t take that potty mouth into the classroom.”

I moan as he takes me deeper until my cock fills his mouth.

No, I don't take this language into the classroom, but right now, there are no other words to express what he's doing to me, so fuck will have to do.

His hands explore my legs, my stomach, and around my back, where he squeezes the globes of my ass, but his mouth never stops.

"Fuck, Milo, I'm so close."

He brings up one hand to jerk me. "I'm ready for you." And then he goes back to sucking and licking.

My body is a volcano, and I'm surprised I haven't melted the couch. The tell-tale tingle of an orgasm rises slowly up my spine. It's right there, under the surface.

As if he's been studying my body for an exam he's more than ready to excel at, Milo runs his thumb over my hole, not really pushing in, just applying a hint of pressure, while he increases the suction on my head.

"Milo...fuck...I'm coming..." It's the only warning I can give before my body convulses in an orgasm strong enough to destroy all memories of previous orgasms.

And he hasn't even fucked me yet.

Yet.

What?

Milo catches every single drop of my release until there's nothing left.

I'm still catching my breath, totally boneless and practically brain dead, but my dick still has the energy to stir when Milo drops his jeans and jerks off until he's coming all over me.

I've never felt so owned, and it's never felt so right.

Everything about my life so far has been either one great big lie or an opening act. A prologue to the real thing.

Milo falls on top of me. "That was the most amazing thing ever." He cradles my face and kisses me. "I've wanted you for such a long time, Ellis. I can't even believe this just happened."

“I guess my omelet was really that good, huh?”

His laughter is the best sound ever. I think it’s the first time I’ve heard it.

“It was the best omelet ever. I will definitely want seconds.”
He kisses me. “And thirds.”

He chuckles. “Maybe we should wash up before we...um...
cook again. I think the stove is out of service for now.”

He stands and pulls me with him, chucking his jeans off. He stops by the guest bathroom, but I squeeze his hand and pull him toward my room.

He blushes, and it’s the first time today that I see the Milo I thought I knew. It reminds me that we’re both still people with things to overcome and room to grow.

We take a slow shower, during which his cock becomes ready to go again.

My mouth waters at the sight.

He tells me we don’t need to do anything, but I’m on my knees with his cock in my mouth before he finishes talking, and since I have a few tricks of my own, I draw another orgasm out of him in record time.

We dry off and then lie naked on my bed, facing each other.

He’s the first to talk. “We probably have more questions now than ever before. But I liked this. I like you, Ellis. At the risk of sounding sad and desperate...can we just enjoy ourselves and see where it leads?”

I caress his face and gaze into his warm brown eyes. The heat has been pushed back and I see the soft Milo that’s captured my attention for months.

“I mean, we don’t have to tell anyone or anything.” He tries to push away, but I pull him closer and kiss him.

“I will never be embarrassed to be with you or to have people know I’m with you, Milo. I don’t know if further down the line I can give you what you need, and that worries me because I don’t want to hurt you. Our age gap worries me, but

I can't resist you. And I don't have the strength to push you away."

He nods. "Okay." And then he brings his hand up to my face, caressing my temple. "Ellis, whatever happens between us, I'll make you believe you're not too old for me or anyone. You're perfect."

I pull him closer, and he comes willingly, resting his face against my neck.

Every time he breathes out, it tickles, and it's fucking perfect.

"Are you doing anything tomorrow?" I ask.

"No."

"Do you want to bring Sara and spend the day at the lake with me?"

He looks up to meet my eyes and smiles.

"I'd love to. I might have to ask her personal assistant though. Her schedule is quite busy, you know?"

I slap his ass, and he groans.

"I probably should go," he says. "Florrie will wonder why I'm so late."

"Just tell her you were busy blowing your boss."

I like Milo's carefree smile and the fact I put it there. I like it a lot.

If I'm not careful, he's going to melt the ice around my heart and make me question the decision I made when I moved away from Boston.

MILO



WALKING ON AIR, floating on a cloud, being carried by hundreds of butterflies.

That's how I feel on the way home, yet somehow, none of those words are good enough to describe it.

Ellis drives me because we ended up falling asleep together after I finally got confirmation that the shower soap he's given me to use in the shower downstairs is the same brand he uses. A small inconsequential fact, but I like it even more now that I know the smell I've been using to fantasize about Ellis is the one he uses for himself.

We didn't wake up until his sister called to ask about his plans for tomorrow.

I had to put my finger over my lips and point to his phone to remind him she couldn't see us. Once his face returned to a healthier color, it was nice to watch him speak to his sister, who apparently also had a multitude of other things to talk about.

After convincing her that he genuinely had other plans for his Sunday, Alice let him go, so we got dressed and left his place.

"What are you smiling about?" he asks, giving me a quick look when we stop at a light.

"Just the way you and your siblings are with each other. It's..."

"Weird?"

I laugh. "No. It's endearing." And then it's his turn to laugh.

“That wouldn’t be my choice of word,” he says.

He parks in front of my gate. “Can I come say hi to Sara?” he asks.

“Of course.”

Be still my beating heart.

I take a deep breath and get out of the car. Florrie is outside in her front garden with Sara, so it takes approximately three seconds for Sara to see me and call Dada.

“Hello, baby girl. Did you have a good day?” I hold out my arms, and Florrie hands Sara over to me.

“She did indeed. Lots of walking practice, and we read a few books. Then she cleaned the house while I took a nap,” Florrie says. “Oh wait, that was the other way around, and then one of us pooped all over our clean clothes.”

“You didn’t have time to run to the bathroom?” I joke.

Ellis snorts, which is when Florrie seems to notice his presence.

“Well, hello, young man. I think it’s about time we were introduced, considering you’ve dropped my boy home twice now, and I want to know your intentions.”

“Florrie!” I admonish.

Sara fidgets in my arms, asking to go to Ellis. I oblige since he’s practically taking her off me.

His face goes a cute shade of pink, a slightly lighter color than the red when his sister called. Then again, we were naked, so I guess the embarrassment level goes down a little.

“Florrie, you haven’t been formally introduced, but Ellis is the person you spoke to about the backyard job. He’s my boss,” I say.

“Oh really?” she asks. “Well, I’m sure you’re happy with the work Milo is doing in your backyard, or you wouldn’t be giving him so many rides home.”

Ellis coughs, but as I try to save the situation, he stretches his hand out to Florrie. “Really nice to finally meet you. Milo talks a lot about you. Thank you for connecting us. Milo’s work is absolutely the best I’ve ever had.”

It’s my turn to choke.

“I’m sure it is,” Florrie says, meeting Ellis’s unwavering gaze.

“Well, this is...um...not awkward,” I say. “But I’m sure Ellis has to get back home.”

Ellis looks at me with a warm smile. “Pick you up at ten tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I reply, taking Sara back from him.

“Tomorrow? I thought you had the day off,” Florrie says.

Ellis places a hand on Florrie’s arm, and it’s amazing to watch how she reacts to him. Like she wants to trust him, but she’s not too sure. “He does. We’re taking Sara to the lake tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Florrie looks from Ellis to me and back to Ellis. The challenge in her eyes is clear as day. “I’ve never been to the lake. I’m new to the area, you see?”

“Would you like to join us?” Ellis asks.

“I would love to. How very nice of you to ask.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay then, now that’s sorted, we should all probably...” I gesture vaguely with my hands.

Florrie gives me a surreptitious wink before disappearing into her house.

I give Ellis a nod to follow me into my place. “Do you guys learn poker face or how to be politely awkward at teacher school or something?” I ask as we go inside. I place Sara in her bouncing chair.

“What do you mean?”

“Florrie is a retired teacher.”

Ellis laughs. “It all makes sense now.”

When I turn back to him, he's looking at the photos I have on the wall, and I realize it's the first time he's been inside my place.

"Is this your family?" he asks.

"Yeah. I think I was five and Mikey was two. That was the year before...anyway...that's my mom and dad."

Ellis pulls me closer and wraps his arm around me, kissing my forehead.

"You all look so happy."

"Dad had just gotten a new job, so he took us all to the pier in Bridgeport. We got to go on the rides and have Slush Puppies."

He points to another photo.

"Is that your brother?"

"Yeah."

"You look very alike."

"People used to say that if it wasn't for the age difference, we'd be twins. There are photos of us as kids that even my mom struggled to tell which of us was in it because she kept all my clothes for him."

Ellis turns me to face him. I wrap my arms instinctively around his waist.

He runs his hands through my hair, resting them on my nape. I close my eyes and let myself relax under his touch.

Talking about my family is always hard for me, no matter how much I remember them daily. Somehow Ellis seems to know it.

He pulls me closer until we're hugging and kisses the side of my neck.

"I'm really looking forward to tomorrow," he says.

"Florrie and all?" I tease.

"Florrie and all."

I pull back to give him a kiss. The knowledge that he'll let me kiss him just how I want is the permission I need to believe that there may be something real between us. Small, but real.

ELLIS



FLORRIE IS A HOOT. I can only imagine what it would have been like to have her as a teacher.

As soon as we start the drive to the lake, she peppers me with all kinds of questions. She does it in such a sneaky way that I don't even feel like I'm being interrogated or assessed until Milo intervenes and asks her to stop pestering me.

Fortunately, she's still on the right side of appropriate, but there's no tricking her. She knows something's going on between Milo and me.

I stop pretending halfway through the journey and hold Milo's hand while I drive us through the country roads. That seems to put a stop to Florrie's questions.

The lake isn't far from Stillwater at all, but the place I want to take them is.

When we get there, I find a parking spot in a shaded area. There are a few family cars around, but not as many as I expected, considering it's a warm summer day and kids are on vacation.

"Florrie, do you want to take Sara while Milo helps me with the rest of the stuff?" I ask.

She takes Sara from the car seat as Milo stares at me. "Rest of the stuff?"

He follows me to the trunk and laughs when he sees everything inside.

“Are we spending the day or moving here?” he asks. “Just so you know, I’m good with bugs but not...general wildlife. You know, the kind that bites.”

I pull him close and give him a kiss on the lips. “I’ll protect you.” When we pull back, he’s blushing adorably. “Come on, you’ll thank me later when it’s hot.”

We’re on a fairly wide stretch of beach with a mix of sand and wild grass. We pick a spot, and Milo helps me build the small beach cabana that will provide us with shade as the sun moves across the sky.

After dropping Milo off yesterday, I went to my sister’s and borrowed a few things from her, like the small inflatable boat that makes a perfect bed to keep Sara comfortable and safe when she falls asleep.

I had to confess to my plans and beg her not to crash our day out. Having Florrie with us is already putting a big spotlight on whatever this is between Milo and me. My sister would totally blow it out of proportion before we even figure it out ourselves.

Florrie stays in the shade with Sara while we do the last trip to grab a chair for Florrie and the cooler with the drinks and food.

I close the trunk and lock the car. “I think—” When I turn around, Milo is in my personal space, looking at me like he wants to eat me for brunch.

“You think...” he says, placing his hands on the car on either side of me.

I swallow. “That we have everything we need.”

“Not quite.” He presses me against the car and kisses me. My body instantly lights up, and I want more of him. I put my hands on his ass to keep him close and feel his body’s reaction to our closeness, the meeting of our lips, the dueling of our tongues.

There seems to be no rush on his part to end the kiss, which is something I am easily on board with. As the intensity of our kissing subsides, so do our erections, thankfully.

“Now we have everything we need,” he says.

“Maybe another pair of beach shorts on top of these would come in handy. I wasn’t prepared.”

He looks down at the bulge in my shorts.

“Maybe we can take care of that later.”

“You can count on it.”

We finally grab all the stuff and walk to our spot, where Florrie gives us a look before telling Sara, “I think your daddy’s boss might have been looking for the ice chest at the back of your daddy’s throat.”

Milo groans, but I laugh because Florrie isn’t wrong.

“How about we go check out the lake water, sweetpea?” Milo says to Sara.

He removes her clothes and dresses her in the cute navy swimsuit with white bows that I remember Marnie wearing when she was the same age.

I remove my shirt and put on sunscreen. Milo does the same, and we do each other’s backs before putting a hat on Sara and lathering her with a protective layer of children’s high-SPF sunscreen.

“Are you joining us, Florrie?” I ask.

“Nah, I’m happy sitting here watching people and reading my book. You go on ahead.”

The water is cool but not as cold as I expected. It still takes my breath away as we go in slowly.

Sara’s holding on to Milo. Her little hand closed in a fist around a clump of his hair.

We stop when we’re short of waist deep.

“What do you say, sweetpea? Want to try out the water for size?” Milo asks.

He holds her out, and as soon as her toes touch the water, she pulls her legs up as far as she can.

“It’s a bit cold, isn’t it?” I ask.

Milo wets his hand and then touches Sara's feet. The more her feet get acclimatized to the temperature, the more she kicks, and before long, we're waist deep and she's kicking her legs in the water.

"Thank you for bringing us here, Ellis. I can't even remember the last time I came to the lake, and I certainly didn't know about this beach."

I straighten Sara's hat. "It's my pleasure. I admit I don't take days off like this often enough. It's nice."

"Why not?"

I shrug. "During the weekends, if I'm not seeing my family, I end up working and preparing my lessons for the week. And this summer, I've been busy with a few school projects I want to complete before the start of the year."

"It must be hard being a teacher. So much responsibility," he says.

"No more than being a parent, but I get to give them back," I joke. "I like it. Despite my parents' lifestyle, working and traveling all over the world, they never pressured us to do anything we didn't want. When I said I wanted to be a teacher, they were supportive. Just like when Darius said he wanted to be a nurse. For me, being a teacher gives me the opportunity to help all those young minds open themselves up for the future. I don't want to shape them. I want them to question the world, to be brave, and not be afraid to find out who they are."

Milo smiles. "I think I understand it. It's important for kids to have good role models, and I know it sometimes doesn't happen at home. My mom always encouraged us to follow our dreams."

"She sounds like she was an amazing woman."

Milo looks at Sara. "She was. I miss her a lot. She never batted an eyelid when I told her I was gay. She never once told me I couldn't be what I wanted to be."

"What did you want to be?"

“At the time? A cowboy. I was obsessed with old western movies.”

I tilt my head and narrow my eyes. “I can see that. You’d make a great cowboy. Riding your horse, wearing your cowboy hat.”

I reach for his hand under the water, and he laces his fingers with mine.

“Don’t forget the boots. It’s all about the boots,” he says.

Sara reaches for me, so I take her from Milo’s arms. “Hello, gorgeous.” She’s so beautiful. Her nose is just like Milo’s, her eyes too. Probably because of the similarity between the brothers.

She looks at me and babbles like she’s trying to make conversation.

“Well, I don’t know about that. It’s a little early for boys or girls, but you’ll need to ask your daddy,” I say, booping her nose. She giggles.

“Hell no. No boys, no girls, no nothing until you’re at least... forty,” Milo says.

“How did that turn out for you?”

He blushes and bites his lip.

I laugh. “You can’t have a rule for her that you didn’t follow yourself.”

“Fine. Thirty then.”

“Twenty.”

“Twenty-five.”

“Deal!” I hold out my hand to Sara for a high five, and she pulls it to her, holding two of my fingers in her little hands. “See? That’s called negotiating.”

“We should probably get in the shade for a while,” he says.

“I have a better idea. Stay here.”

I take Sara to the cabana and strap her into the inflatable chair I borrowed from my sister so Sara can see us.

“You two seemed deep in conversation out there,” Florrie says, putting her book to one side.

“Milo is easy to talk to. It’s easy to forget there’s such an age gap between us.”

“Does it bother you?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think we should be into different things. We should find it harder to talk because we grew up in different times.”

Florrie nods. “Should is such a powerful word, isn’t it? My late husband should have married the girl he was engaged to. He should have followed in his father’s footsteps. Instead, he ran away. One night, in the middle of a storm, he knocked on the door of an old farmhouse. He told me that as soon as I opened the door that night, he knew I was the girl he was going to marry.” She looks out into the distance. “Sometimes we can be so stuck on what life should be that we forget what it could be.”

A tear falls down her cheek and she swiftly wipes it clean. “Don’t listen to the rambles of an old woman. What do I know, hey?”

“You care about Milo a lot, don’t you?”

She looks at me. “We couldn’t have children. In those days, it was different, especially where we lived. Medicine may have advanced in the city, but our doctor was still the one that helped my mom give birth to me. In any case, we were happy. Very happy. Milo is a gentle soul, a good man with a big heart. If I could ever ask for a son, I wouldn’t mind if it was him. And he lets me indulge in pretending to be a granny to this precious little girl.”

“Florrie...”

“Oh shush, enough of the emotional. Go out there and play with my boy in the water. I’ll look after the little one.”

I stand and lean over to give Florrie a kiss on her cheek, then I run to the water, diving in and bringing Milo down with me.

“Freaking fudgesickles, warn a man. I was not ready for that,” he says, splashing water in my direction.

I grab his arm and pull him to me. “Are you ready for this?” I kiss him on the lips and then down his neck to his shoulder.

“Thank fuck the water is cold,” he says, and I laugh.

We mess around in the water until our fingers look like prunes before joining the girls.

We share a towel to dry ourselves and then sit next to each other on another one.

Florrie takes her phone out from her pocket when it dings.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

“What’s that?” Milo asks, grabbing the cool bag to get Sara’s lunch.

“The girls from the knitting club have recruited some helpers, and we’re going to protest against that damned parking lot they want to build. Vera is getting supplies from Birchcraft to make signs and everything.”

“Not that again,” Milo says.

“Just because you don’t want to get involved doesn’t mean the rest of us want to watch as they destroy our community,” Florrie says.

Milo looks at her like he wants to say something but then stops himself. He peels off the lid from Sara’s yogurt and grabs her spoon from the bag.

Florrie makes eye contact with me.

There’s definitely tension between them about the parking lot issue, but it’s not something Milo and I have ever discussed.

“I heard Tyler is talking about a cleanup operation at the playground to convince the council to drop the application,” Florrie says. “You know about that, don’t you, Ellis?”

Milo looks at me.

“I…yeah, I met up with him and a couple of friends after the town council meeting.”

Milo frowns and goes back to feeding Sara.

“Anyway, what’s this knitting club about, Florrie? Can anyone join?” I change the subject to avoid any more tension.

It takes Milo a while to come out of his head and be more himself while Florrie tells us how the knitting club is the best place to be for all the gossip because everyone there is either related or knows someone who works in the various businesses in town, including the mayor’s office.

The rest of the day goes by peacefully, and we even manage to get Florrie to the water’s edge to get her feet wet.

By the time we’re pulling up at Milo’s and Florrie’s homes, Sara is fast asleep in the car seat. She had a great day and exhausted herself by trying to stand on her own while holding on to Milo.

She even loved when we sat on the water’s edge and the small waves kept coming in and getting her wet while she grabbed clumps of sand that we tried very hard to make sure didn’t go in her mouth.

Florrie retreats into her place, and I follow Milo into his.

Sara wakes up while he’s giving her a bath, but after a bottle of formula, she’s out again, so he takes her to her bedroom.

“Where’s your bedroom?” I ask. When I was here yesterday, it didn’t occur to me that I’d only seen two additional doors in the small house. One of them I now know is the bathroom and the other is Sara’s nursery.

“Why? Want to take advantage of me, Mr. Bradford?” Milo asks, taking my hand and pulling me closer. He nuzzles my neck and inhales, causing all my hairs to stand to attention and my dick to react.

“I might.”

“Then you’re standing in it.” He runs his hands up until they’re behind my neck, keeping me in place while he kisses me with as much heat as he did this morning against the car.

“Where do you want me?” I gasp when he releases my lips.

MILO



WHERE DO YOU WANT ME?

Is Ellis really asking what I think he's asking?

"Maybe here." I push him to face the nearest wall. "Arms up."

He does as I command, and I remove his shirt. I kiss the middle of his back between the shoulder blades. He moans, pushing his ass back.

"Or maybe...here..." I take his hand and turn him so his back is to the kitchen sink. I fall to my knees, pulling his shorts down with me.

He's hard and needy. I never thought I'd love having this kind of power over someone, but hearing Ellis moan as I stroke his dick and nuzzle against his balls is an addicting sound.

I take his shoes off and then stand to meet him face to face.

"You're a little overdressed," he says.

"It seems we have a habit of ending up in this predicament, Mr. Bradford."

He laughs.

"Tell me. Do you usually lose your clothes this quickly?"

He looks straight into my eyes. "I never lose anything, Milo. My clothes, my mind, or my willpower. Except when I'm with you."

I have to take a deep, steady breath to keep from turning him around and fucking him until we've both forgotten our names.

No, I have a bed, and I intend to use it.

“If this is your room, do you sleep standing up?”

I shrug. “I’ve been known to do it, especially just after Sara was born and I was practically a zombie.”

“Hmm...” He puts a finger to his lips. “If there’s no bed... where are you going to fuck me?”

I growl. Fuck me. I growl.

“Just remember, my old bones might not enjoy the floor as much as a comfortable bed or couch,” he says.

I look down at his erection. “You don’t have a problem with your boners, from what I see.”

“And you still have too many clothes on. Like, all of them,” he moans.

I pull down the Murphy bed from the cabinet in the wall.

“Space saver,” I say before I throw him on the bed. He pulls me with him, and his hands get busy trying to undress me while we kiss again.

“God, I love your body,” he says.

“Ditto.”

We wrestle to get me out of my clothes because we can’t stop touching and kissing. It’s as if a switch has flipped in both of us and it’s a race to heaven.

“Fuck.” I knee him in his thigh, trying to get out of my shorts. “Sorry. At least it wasn’t your balls.”

“No, but you can apologize to them too.”

“My pleasure.”

I travel down his body but don’t spend much time in any particular area. My goal is to suck his dick and eat his ass before I prep him.

“God, your cock is beautiful.” I take his head into my mouth and suck.

He cants his hips, asking for more, and I oblige.

“Turn around,” he says.

“What?”

“Turn around and let me suck you.”

I let go of his dick with a pop.

“Can’t. If you do, I’ll come in three seconds flat,” I say.

“Milo,” he says with the calmest of voices. “Let me make you come to take the edge off. I promise to help you recover so you can fuck me.”

I fall on the mattress, partly across from him. “Fuck, you drive a hard bargain.”

He covers my body with his and kisses me. I open my legs to give him space, and he lines up our cocks.

I don’t even know if we’re the right way up on the bed or across it. All I know is that Ellis’s cock rubbing against mine will be enough to make me come if he doesn’t stop it.

“Ellis...” I moan.

He wraps his hand around my cock and strokes it slowly, twisting his wrist and tightening his grip. The more I beg, the less he gives me.

I grab a pillow and put it over my face because I can’t risk waking Sara. This is going to be one motherfucker of an orgasm. I can already feel it building.

He releases my cock and replaces his hand with his mouth. My ears ring and my breathing is labored. Who knew Ellis Bradford, the teacher with the gentle manner, could be such a surprise in bed?

I open my legs wider to give him a hint, and he takes it because the pad of his finger massages my rim. It’s too much sensation with his mouth bobbing up and down on my cock, the sucking, the wet warmth, the fact that it’s Ellis.

Before I can warn him, my balls draw up tight and my orgasm takes over. My body makes so many involuntary jerks that, for a brief second, his finger breaches the ring of muscle in my ass. That just draws out the pleasure even more.

I feel like I've just run a marathon. My heart is racing, my dick is extra sensitive, and I'm still hard.

There's movement on the bed, but I'm too dead to check what he's doing.

A second later, something wet cleans my dick, and then I feel him line his body next to mine. He lifts a corner of the pillow.

"Are you alive?"

"Barely, you motherfucker," I say. "What kind of fucking special ninja blowjob skills are those?"

He chuckles and removes the pillow from my face, placing it under my head.

"I didn't do anything you wouldn't in my place."

"Yeah, fair enough. I can't move now though. I want to. But you deceased me."

He rests his head on his forearm and faces me. I put my arm around him, and he cuddles against me, placing one leg over mine.

"You didn't come," I say.

"I wasn't supposed to. I'm saving it for later. Us old guys can't get it up as often as you."

"Don't say that."

"What?"

"Don't refer to yourself like you're some kind of old grandpa. Especially because I'm not into grandpas, but I'm very much into you." I turn my face to him. "I really don't care about our age difference, Ellis."

He goes silent, and I think I've lost him to his thoughts. "You say that now, but you can't deny that there's a significant age gap, Milo. You're in the prime of your life. This is all great fun, but you'll want to find someone you can grow old with."

I tilt his head so he has to not only hear what I'm saying but see it in my eyes too.

“My parents never grew old together. My brother will forever be young. We only have now, and now? All I want is you.”

I kiss him before he can argue and don't stop until he's mush in my arms and his dick is hard again. Mine shows signs of recovery but not enough for a full hard-on.

“Tell me more about your family. Where's Sara's mom?”

I close my eyes and try to remember Sienna's beautiful face as I saw her for the last time.

“Is this a painful thing to talk about? I'm sorry. I didn't mean —”

“It's okay. I don't talk about her enough, and I should so I don't forget her.” One day, I'll want to tell Sara about her mom. The good parts, at least. I want her to know she was wanted and loved.

“There was a period of about two, almost three years where my brother disappeared. We had this massive argument where I tried to convince him to straighten up, get a job, and we'd support each other. He left that night and didn't come back for two years.”

“I'm so sorry, Milo.”

I caress his cheek. I know he's telling the truth and not just doing what everyone else does. There's no pity. No poor Milo. Just understanding.

“Shh, this is my story. Anyway, one night, there's a knock on the door, and he's there. He looks good, healthy, happy. With him was this girl he met at some point during the time he was away. Her name was Sienna. She was beautiful, funny, caring. I knew it was because of her that my brother got his act together. We hit it off straight away, and she became like a little sister to me.”

My throat chokes, so I reach for Ellis's hand and lace our fingers together.

“They moved in with me because they didn't have anywhere to go. I gave them my room and started using this bed. Shortly after, they found out Sienna was pregnant. I've never seen my

brother so happy. I thought I was finally going to have another chance at being a real family.”

“What happened then?”

“It was hard for him to get a job in a town where he was the catalyst for most of the stuff that turned this neighborhood into what it is now. He was getting more stressed the closer it came to Sienna giving birth. I should have seen it coming, but I was so happy that I became blind to him defaulting to his old behaviors. Coming home late. Mentioning some of his old friends.”

I take a breath. Ellis holds me tighter as if trying to remind me where I am.

“The night Sienna’s water broke, I couldn’t reach Mikey. I left loads of messages on his phone, but he never called back. I was there when Sara was born. I held Sienna’s hand as she brought the most precious gift into the world and, at that moment, I forgot about my brother. In the morning, two police officers came in asking for me. They told me my brother had been shot during a drug deal gone wrong. He died trying to protect a police officer his friend shot at.”

“Oh, Milo.”

“The change in Sienna was immediate. When she had to register the baby, she put my name on the birth certificate. I tried to argue that Mikey should be the named father. He was Sara’s father. But she just looked at me and said he’d made a decision that night and didn’t get to be anyone’s father. Once again, I was blind to what was happening around me. We were both grieving, so I didn’t notice when Sienna started changing her language. She spoke like there was no future. She said I was going to look after Sara so well. That she was so lucky to have me as her dad.

“Sara was five weeks old when Sienna took her life. She left a letter for me and a for Sara to read when she’s older. My letter just contained an apology and said she knew I’d look after Sara like she never could.”

“Once again, it was only you, but now you had this tiny baby to look after,” Ellis says.

“Believe it or not, it helped. The steep learning curve into parenthood made me put aside my pain to focus on Sara. Then Florrie moved in next door. We’ve been a family of sorts ever since. It’s been almost ten months since Mikey died and eight since Sienna. Some days it all feels so far away, like it never happened. Other days, the pain is so alive like it’s happening right now.”

“I’m really sorry that happened to you. I can’t even comprehend the pain you must have felt and the strength you needed to move on. Now that I know your story, all the gentle, shy smiles you always had for me whenever I went shopping mean so much more. I wish I had an ounce of your strength.”

The way Ellis says it makes me wonder if there’s something behind the statement, but I’m tired of the heavy stuff. I want to go back to feeling light and happy because I have my absolute crush and all-time-sexiest man in my arms.

I flip us so I’m on top of him.

“I believe I owe you an orgasm, and you promised me I could have this.” I run my hand down his side until I reach his ass and squeeze his butt cheek. “I wouldn’t want to break a promise, would I?”

“I hope not.”

I reach over to the bedside table to get supplies, and then I remember I’m out of condoms.

“Fuck.”

“What’s up?”

“I don’t have any condoms. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time. I’ve been tested since, and I’m negative, but I can’t afford PrEP, even with my insurance,” I say.

“My last relationship was exclusive, but I got tested when it ended. Haven’t been with anyone since.”

I look into his eyes.

“Are we good?”

He smiles. “We’re good. But I’ll be even better once you get your dick inside me.”

ELLIS



“I NEVER PEGGED you as a demanding bottom,” Milo says, grabbing the small bottle of lube. “Always so calm and collected every time I saw you.”

He places the bottle on my stomach. “If this bottle moves an inch...”

I laugh, and he gives me a serious look, placing the bottle back after it slides onto the bedsheets.

“And I never pegged you for a teasing top,” I bite back. “Always so shy and couldn’t put one word in front of the other.”

“I was only shy because I had a massive crush on you and didn’t want to make a fool of myself. Now...like I was saying, if the bottle moves, I get to pick where I come.”

“And if the bottle doesn’t move?”

“I still get to pick where I come, but you will also come.”

I drop my head on the pillow. “Fuck.”

“We’ll get to that. Now open up.”

I raise my legs, careful to mind the bottle. This would be so much easier if I had abs, but I’ve never in my life had any definition in my stomach other than flat, which it no longer is. I put that wish aside and focus on breathing through my chest.

Milo runs his blunt nails over the back of my legs. I feel goosebumps rise on my skin. My cock is impossibly hard, but he’s not getting anywhere near it.

“You look so good like this,” he says. “Your ass fills out a pair of pants like nothing I’ve ever seen, but I like it better when it’s filling my hand.” He kneads both globes of my ass and lowers his head.

I prepare myself for the feeling of his tongue on my hole and hope I’ll last longer than last time, but he kisses and teases me everywhere except where I need him.

“Are you trying to kill—ugh...fuck, yes,” I cry when I finally feel his warm tongue in the right place.

“Shh, be quiet, or it’ll be game over for both of us.”

“Sorry, but Christ, Milo. Do that again, please.” I’m not beneath begging or indulging in something that feels so good. Which is the reason I keep buying those damn brioches and my stomach is no longer flat.

“You taste so good. I could be here forever,” he says against my hole. More goosebumps, and then he’s seeking entry with his tongue.

I reach for my dick because it all feels so good and I need more. I also discreetly reposition the bottle so it’s in a better position.

I’m not cheating myself out of an orgasm.

“I saw that,” he says, grabbing the bottle and squirting a good amount of lube on his fingers and some directly on my hole.

“Shit.”

He comes up to kiss me, but his hand stays put, with his finger gently massaging my rim.

“Afraid I won’t let you come?” he asks, kissing my jaw.

His finger presses harder on my hole, and I relax to let it in. Once it’s in, he crooks it, finding my prostate straight away. My body convulses, and I have to hold on to Milo and think of rotten food, sports, or something to stop myself from coming too soon.

“Not anymore. You keep doing that, and I’ll come before your dick is in me.”

I turn my face to kiss him, and he swallows every moan I let out while he's opening me.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod. "Please, Milo."

He sits back, and I watch his face as he lines up his cock with my hole. The look of concentration and self-restraint tells me we're so much on the same page.

Milo has a decent-size cock, so it takes a few tries until he's able to release his hand and just use his hips to push through.

"God, you feel so big," I say.

"You can take me, Ellis. Just relax a little, baby."

Our eyes meet when he uses the term of endearment, and for a split second, I see the old Milo back. Unsure if what he said was okay or afraid of how I might react. I just kiss him and wrap my legs around his waist.

He responds to my kiss, pushing forward and settling more of his body weight on me.

Before long, he's fully seated inside me.

"Fuck, you're tight. Tell me when I can move," he says.

His balls are resting against my ass. My cock is hard and trapped between us. Sweat runs down his brow, and I know we're both hanging by a thread.

"Move, Milo. Give me everything you have. Show me how much you want me. Make me forget everything else."

"Fuuuck." He pulls back a little and pushes in.

I gasp, and he does it again and again until he's practically fully withdrawing his cock before slamming into me again.

Every other time he does it, he changes the angle so he's hitting my prostate.

"I'm close, baby," he says without stopping. I take my cock and stroke it until I'm on edge.

My orgasm builds until it's right on the crest. I know I don't need anything else other than Milo.

“I’m ready, Milo. Do it.”

He rests his face in the crook of my neck and his moves become jerkier, less refined and controlled. I feel his moans against my skin and have to pull the other pillow onto my face.

We’re practically glued to one another. The only part of him that moves are his hips as he nails me faster and harder, seeking his relief.

I come without needing to touch myself. An orgasm so strong that I bite the pillow.

The aftershocks are still reeling through my body when I feel the warmth of Milo’s release inside me. He’s panting against my neck.

I put the pillow to one side now that I no longer need it.

Neither of us moves. His cock is still hard inside me, but I feel it slowly softening.

He pulls back, and with energy I certainly don’t feel, kneels and watches as his release leaves my body.

Our eyes meet, and then he looks down again.

“I wish I could be inside you longer,” he says.

I smile. “I’m sure there will be some of you left behind, even after I clean up.”

He pulls me into a sitting position, and I scrunch my face at the thought of the mess on his sheets.

“Let’s have a shower. Then you can help me change the sheets.”

“Yes, boss,” I say teasingly. He slaps my ass.

We have to take turns in the shower because his doesn’t fit both of us. Milo lets me go first, for obvious reasons, while he grabs the towels and then disappears for a while.

Unlike him, I’m happy checking him out while he has his shower.

“You’re a pervert,” he says but puts on a show for me, sensually stroking his cock with one soap-covered hand while

thoroughly cleaning his balls and ass with the other.

“How can you even get half-hard after two orgasms?”

He comes out of the shower dripping wet, so I throw him a towel. I have mine wrapped around my waist as I lean against the sink.

“That’s not me,” he says, wrapping his towel around his waist, water still dripping from his hair onto his chest. “That’s all you.”

He kisses me, and I’m tempted to see if he can go a third round, but it’s getting late.

“I’d love if you could stay the night, but I’m working tomorrow, and you might not want to be here when Florrie comes over to babysit Sara.”

“That’s okay.” I grab a small towel and dry his hair. “I’ll see you in the soup kitchen on Tuesday?”

“Definitely.”

“We could grab some food after or before, whichever works better for you.”

He smiles. “Pick me up from the store at four. There’s a place on the road to Windsor that sells the best and cheapest crab rolls in the world.”

“Is that your expert opinion?”

“Sure is.”

“Okay then, it’s a date.”

We get dressed, and I see he’s made the bed with fresh sheets.

I get back in my car to drive home.

This is definitely the right decision, but I wonder if there will ever be an opportunity to spend a night with Milo or if we’ll just have these brief moments together.

I berate myself for even thinking about it. Am I not the only one worried about the sixteen-year age gap between us?

Besides, we’ve just spent a whole day together, not to mention had the best sex I’ve ever had. I need to just enjoy this while it

lasts.

ELLIS



“OKAY, you were right. Those were the best crab rolls I’ve ever had,” I say, wiping my mouth with a napkin and finishing my drink.

“Told you so.”

We’re sitting outside the small dive. There’s a bench with a view of the valley below, which is filled with rows upon rows of purple.

“This place is stunning,” I say.

“I used to bring my mom here. We’d spend hours looking at the view. That’s Reed Knox’s lavender farm down below.”

“Really? I know Reed. He helped out in the spring with the fair. I didn’t realize his farm was this huge.”

“Yeah, and apparently, Aiden Lawton and his husband live around here too.”

“No way, *the* A. Lawton? The author?”

“Yup.”

“Can’t say I blame them. Can you imagine waking up every morning to a view like this?”

Milo smiles. “It’s a nice dream to have.”

“Come on, let’s get back to town before we’re late and Tyler fires us,” I joke.

Milo calls Florrie to check on Sara while I drive us back. I find my usual parking spot by the church and we walk into the hall

together.

Tyler looks at me and then at Milo.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Sure. Milo, Emy, is sick today. She picked up some bug her kid brought home from kindergarten. I’m going to need you out front if that’s okay.”

Milo tenses. “Um...are you sure?”

Tyler comes over to Milo and puts a hand on his shoulder. “I need you there. If there are any issues, we’ll deal with it, okay?”

Milo nods.

We prepare the hall together while the others work on the food.

“What did Tyler mean?”

“Nothing, it’s not important.”

We’re carrying a table over to the center of the hall.

“Milo, I saw your reaction to Tyler’s request. It’s not nothing.”

He ignores me and lines up the table with the others, then goes back to the stack of chairs.

“Milo—”

“Just leave it, okay? It’s really nothing.”

He clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, and I doubt Tyler will say anything, but it doesn’t mean I’ll take my eyes off Milo until the end of the shift.

People spill in at the usual time, gathering in their groups.

I notice a few looks in Milo’s direction.

Milo himself is trying everything not to look up. He’s filled the cutlery baskets and brought the bread out, but every time he finishes something, he doesn’t make eye contact with anyone.

Tyler rings the bell and the line builds.

Milo is between Dave and me, serving soup.

The usual whispers get louder as people approach our stations. I start to make out what they're saying.

"I can't believe it. If I didn't need this food so much, I'd stop coming here."

"That family." The words are said with such venom that I see Milo recoil a little.

One by one people pass us, but no one picks the soup.

"I heard rumors he worked in the back but never saw him."

"That poor little girl. Would be better off with a foster family."

That does it for me. Whatever the hell they're talking about, I'm not letting anyone question Milo's parenting.

I step onto a chair and ring the bell.

"Can I have your attention, please?" Close to a hundred faces stare at me. "I'm new here, as you know, but I've attempted to get to know you, and I'd like to think we can talk when things get tough. I don't know what's happening, but I've been hearing a lot of words directed at Milo that no one should have to hear. Especially not when they're working, giving up their time to make sure you have a good meal every night you come here. The reason you're here is because you all know you can't take anything in life for granted, but slapping the hand that feeds you is not right. That's all. Please resume your meal."

I step down from the chair and see the team staring at me.

Tyler looks furious, and Milo is no longer there.

I walk over to Tyler. "I'm sorry. I couldn't listen to it anymore."

"He's gone out back," he bites out, but I ignore him.

I go through the double doors, but Milo isn't in the kitchen. There are a few other rooms through a hallway, so I try every single one until I find him sitting in a corner with his knees pulled up to hide his face.

"Milo." I go over and kneel beside him.

“You had no right,” he says without looking up.

“I couldn’t stand there listening to what they were saying.”

He looks up, and his face is covered in tears. “It wasn’t your place to defend me. I could have finished the shift, and next time I’d be back in the kitchen, and everyone would forget they ever saw me here.”

I wipe the tears from his face. “Milo, I thought you were the most unforgettable person I’ve ever seen, and that was even before you spoke to me. I’m so sorry I did something that’s hurting you. Please tell me what’s wrong, what I did wrong, so I don’t do it again.”

“They all hate me and my family.”

“Why?”

“My dad worked at the mill in Chester Falls. He had just been promoted when there were rumors about the factory closing down. The neighborhood was like a family, so they all went to him, hoping he could convince his bosses to keep the factory open. When they didn’t, they blamed my dad. Said he didn’t try hard enough. Said that because he was a manager, he probably got a settlement while everyone else got nothing. It was all a lie. My mom told me they promoted him to use him as the go-between for the factory workers and higher management. He did the dirty work while they kept their hands clean, and he never got one cent, just like everyone else.”

I sit on the floor and pull Milo into my arms.

“You must have been a child. How can any of this be your fault?”

“I was six, Mikey was three, and my mom was pregnant. My dad tried to find another job, but it was hard. Dad traveled for hours every day because he could only get a job somewhere that no one knew about the factory or him. My dad started drinking, and there were a lot of arguments about how they could afford another child. My dad took out a life insurance policy, and then one night, he drove into a tree to make it look like an accident. He thought that when he died, we’d all be

taken care of, but the coroner said there wasn't enough alcohol in his blood to make him lose control of the car. The police investigation concluded from the weather conditions and lack of any tire marks on the road that it wasn't an accident. Mom never got any insurance money, and then she lost the baby because of the stress and grief. She was going to have a girl."

"Oh, Milo." I kiss the top of his head. "You know this is still not your fault, and people shouldn't talk to you like it was."

"That's not the worse part."

MILO



FOR THE SECOND time in less than a week, I'm reliving the wounds of my past. The history that follows me everywhere in this town because I can't afford to escape.

For a hair's breadth of a moment, I thought I had a chance with Ellis, but who would stay with someone with so much baggage?

"Tell me, Milo."

His voice is soft, almost soothing. I don't hear any judgment, so I tell him the rest. At least he'll know, and then he can decide for himself.

"Most people stopped talking to my mom. Things were hard, but we managed, except Mikey was too young to remember when people were nice to us. All he ever saw was the nastiness, so he rebelled. Petty theft. Threatening people for no reason. Doing drugs. Mom didn't know what to do to help him. He was so angry all the time, and she worked two jobs to keep our heads above water. As he grew older, the crime and drugs got worse. The neighborhood became a hell to live in. Some of his friends died of an overdose, and some ended up in juvie, but he always got out of trouble. We couldn't afford to move away, then Mom got sick. I dropped out of high school to work to help her out. After Mom died, I tried to keep us together, but that only lasted three years. As soon as Mikey turned eighteen, he left."

"When people hurt, it's harder to forgive those that hurt them. Even when the truth is staring them in the face. They know it's

not your fault, but you're the only one they can aim their anger at."

"It wouldn't be so bad if they were just angry with me. But Sara is a baby. This isn't her fault. She never asked to be born. If I could, I would take her away from here, from Stillwater. We'd start all over again in a new place where no one knows us."

Ellis holds me tighter. "Where would that leave me? Who'd scan my groceries? Who would I lust over when I stare at my backyard?"

"What? You...still want me?"

Ellis cleans my tears and cradles my face so I have to look at him.

"I don't *still* want you. I want you, Milo. My want isn't conditional. Hell, it's not even up to me. It's just there, like a living thing I can't control."

He leans over and kisses me. It's gentle and caring, and I'm half a heartbeat away from falling all the way in love with Ellis.

I miss his lips when he breaks our kiss.

"Can I ask you something?" he asks.

"Sure."

"The way you reacted when Florrie mentioned the playground at the lake. Does it have anything to do with this?"

I look down at my hands, but he takes them in his, making me look at him again.

"She wants me to fight for the playground. Fight for the good memories."

"And you don't want to?"

"Many times when I was playing there, kids used to repeat to me the stuff their parents would say at home. It hurts when I think about all those memories. When I think about it becoming a parking lot, I'm ashamed to feel relief that I won't have to face those memories. The good ones, like Mom

pushing me on the swing or Mikey hanging from the monkey bars pretending to be a real-life monkey...they almost feel like they're not real memories. Detaching myself from the playground issue is the coward's way out, I know."

"I can understand that, and you're anything but a coward. You're the bravest person I know, Milo."

I take a deep breath and try to get up. I won't go out into the hall, but I can still do the dishes. Ellis stops me.

"Why do you volunteer here?" he asks.

"Because I want to help those who are less fortunate. I don't have much, but so far, I've managed...well, mostly...to keep food on the table."

Ellis tells me about the first time he saw me here. I feel my face heat from embarrassment.

"Hey, you don't need to be ashamed. You work so hard and never complain about it. You appreciate when people do nice things for you. You don't take anything for granted."

I lean on him so much that I'm practically in his lap and rest my head against his.

"I think I've been in survival mode for so long that I don't know how else to be."

He kisses my lips gently. "You have Florrie, me, my family. We're all here for you. The question is, can you let go of the past so you can heal and move on?"

"You think I should fight for the playground?"

"No. I think you should do whatever feels right for you. You don't need to be involved with anything unless it serves you."

I try to stand, and this time, Ellis doesn't stop me.

He follows me out of the room.

Dave is in the kitchen doing the pans when we walk in. He doesn't say anything but gives me an encouraging smile as I head toward the double doors.

I take a deep breath and go through.

Most people are still in the hall, so I take the bell and stand on the same chair Ellis did.

“Can I have your attention, please? Most of you know me, and most of you think you know the truth about what happened with my family. I don’t owe anyone my story, but all I ask is that you look at what’s in front of you. I’ve lost my whole family apart from the one gift my brother left me. You see me at the grocery store. You see me raising a child I love more than anyone can imagine. I was one of you when I was six and barely understood what was happening, and I’m still one of you now. I will continue to volunteer here like I’ve done since the first day. I hope, whatever your opinion of me is, that you either speak to me, get to know me, or move on. Life is already hard enough in this neighborhood for us to turn on each other.”

I step down from the chair and stand behind the soup I was supposed to serve earlier.

My hands are shaking from adrenaline, and I half expect everyone to boo me out of the hall.

Instead, something else happens. One by one, everyone stands and starts lining up in front of my post.

“Can I have a small portion, please?” someone asks.

I take a bowl from the stack and serve her the soup. Within minutes, the soup is gone.

“As far as olive branches go, that was kind of awesome,” Anne says.

“Thank you.”

I look at Ellis, and his proud smile warms me and gives me strength. He would have supported me if I hadn’t done this, I know that. But I did it for Sara and for me. We both have a place in the community and deserve to be treated kindly.

At the end of the evening, Ellis walks me home.

Sara is asleep and Florrie is reading her book when we come in.

“Oh, my lovely boy,” she says, almost in tears. “I’m so proud of you.”

“That knitting club gossip mill sure does run overtime,” Ellis says.

Florrie waves him off and goes to her place.

Ellis follows me to the nursery when I go to check in on Sara.

“She’s so precious,” he says.

“She’s my whole heart.”

Sara never stirs as we talk. Ellis gives me a good-night kiss and leaves.

It takes a couple of seconds for my brain to catch up. I run outside.

“Ellis.”

He turns around. “Yeah?”

“I’m working a late shift tomorrow. Do you want to stay over?”

He smiles and walks back in my direction. When he’s close enough, I pull him to me and give him the kind of kiss that promises more.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

ELLIS



“PLEASE DON’T BE WEIRD,” I beg.

“Pfft, who me?” Fletcher says. “Like I would ever. But I called it first, so whoever gets the next round, I’m getting a bubble... double.”

Harrison rolls his eyes. “You’re getting a double glass of water. That’s what you’re getting.”

Fletcher pouts. “This isn’t fair. What’s my reward then?”

Harrison whispers something into Fletcher’s ear that makes his entire face go bright red, which is always more visible when he wears his long blond hair in a bun, like today.

“Okay, I can be on board with that.”

Levi comes in with the drinks. I slip out of the booth so he can sit next to Arlo.

“Can someone explain to me why I’m the last one to know? Where are my bartender privileges? You’re supposed to pour your heart out, then I make you *the* best cocktail in the world, and we’re friends happily ever after.”

“That’s it. I’m going if you’re all going to be weird about it.” I stand.

“Where are you going?”

Four big grins face me as the voice behind me puts a smile on my face.

I turn around, and Milo has his hands in his jeans pockets. His smile is shy and uncertain. A reminder of the person I met all

those months ago, but now I know he has depth, confidence, and a sense of humor.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi.”

“Awwww, they’re so cute together,” Fletcher says behind me.

I roll my eyes, and Milo smiles.

“Where’s Tyler?” I ask.

“He’s parking the car.”

“Can I talk to you outside?”

He frowns. “Sure.” And then he follows me.

Before we get to the front door of The Academy, I pull Milo into the hallway that leads to the restrooms.

“I thought—” he starts, but I stop him with a kiss. His hands come up to hold my shirt as I press him against the wall.

He tastes like strawberry, which is Sara’s new favorite fruit. He must have had some too. It’s delicious and refreshing, or maybe that’s just how Milo always tastes.

“Wow.” He puts his fingers to his mouth, and I love that his lips are already swollen from my kiss.

Since when am I so possessive?

“I missed you,” I say, and he melts into my arms.

“I missed you too. Sorry I couldn’t work at your place this weekend. Gerald is being a dick again.”

A big part of me wants to go to the store and put Gerald in his place, but I know that’s wrong. I can’t interfere with Milo’s primary job, no matter how much I want to punch his manager.

“Come on, let’s join the group, or they’ll come to find us.”

“Did you want anything? Why are we here?”

“I did, and I got it,” I say, giving him a peck on the lips. “I would have done it in front of the guys, but as you can tell from their stupid grins, they’re ridiculously and unexplainably invested in our relationship.”

Milo smiles. “So we’re in a relationship then?”

“Are you seeing anyone else?”

“Nope,” he says, shaking his head with an even bigger smile.

“Me neither.”

He pulls my hips against his, and I feel the tell-tale sign of his arousal.

“In that case, if you’re not busy later, maybe you can take me to your place and...” Someone walks past us to the bathroom.

“And...?”

“Take me to your place, and I’ll fill the blanks later,” he says.

“Can you stay the night?”

He nods. “Florrie has Sara. It was actually her idea.” He bites his lip. “Apparently, we’re not as quiet as we think, and the walls are paper thin. Florrie said her friend Vera introduced her to gay romance novels. They’re quite...descriptive. She says she doesn’t want to think about what we might be doing on the other side of the wall now that she’s read about what...might be happening on the other side of the wall.”

“I guess I can understand that. And as a bonus, I get to keep you all night.” I take his hand and we walk back to the group.

Tyler has arrived and already has a drink, so I grab one from the bar for Milo and join them.

“There’s never a dull moment in this town,” Arlo says. “First, we saved the craft fair from the claws of that woman, then we saved the school Spring Fair, and now we’re trying to save a playground. For a place called Stillwater, not much stands still.”

“Sorry I’m late.” Sage pulls out a chair and sits at the end of the booth. “Hi, all...Milo...”

He says Milo’s name like he’s more than pleasantly surprised.

“Hey,” Milo answers back.

“It’s been a while,” Sage says.

From the corner of my eye, I catch the guys looking at each other, but my eyes are on Milo.

“Yeah, it has,” he says.

“If you want to catch up, just give me a call anytime.”

What the fuck?

“Is it me, or do we need to start saving a bigger table? These booths are cozy and all, but in case no one noticed, it’s summer,” Harrison says.

“Quite true,” Levi says. “I suggested to the owners we should invest in bigger ones for larger groups of friends. The glass partitions help keep the noise down.”

“Anyway,” Tyler says. “You guys up for helping clean up the playground or what?”

It’s a yes all around, but I can’t take my eyes off Milo. He’s not exactly uncomfortable with Sage’s presence. I’ve been to his store, Birchcraft, and Sage helped a lot with the Spring Fair. Is there something between them? Or maybe there was in the past?

I put my hand on Milo’s thigh under the table, and he looks at me and smiles. Then he laces our fingers together.

“The knitting club ladies are fierce,” Sage says. “They’re ready to burn their bras in front of town hall, but they’ve had an idea to do a silent protest.”

“Shoot,” Tyler says.

“We go around the neighborhood and ask people if they have old photos of kids playing at the park before it was overgrown. We blow up the photos and put them on an exhibition wall in the middle of the playground. It shows people the history of the playground and community.”

Is it normal for me to dislike Sage a little for bringing forward such a great idea?

It’s definitely not normal for me, or for any sane adult.

“I love that,” Fletcher says. “Arlo and I could paint around the photos. Some frames or something artier.”

We spend an hour making plans for the photograph exhibit before we move on to the more important part. The cleanup, which will require some expertise.

“I can’t really do weekends,” Milo says. “I can start with the grounds. Pulling weeds and turning the soil to prepare the areas that will eventually have grass. But I need to do it around my grocery job.”

“Why’s that?” Sage asks.

“Um...because during the weekend, I’m usually at Ellis’s place.”

Sage looks at me, and then it’s like something clicks. “Oh my god. I’m really sorry about earlier. I didn’t know you two were a thing. Not that I have a habit of hitting on just anyone.”

Arlo coughs, and Sage gives him the finger. “But Milo and I have been...we’ve known each other a long time. I’m sorry, Ellis.”

I smile. “No harm done. What Milo means is that he’s been working in my backyard during the weekends.”

“I’ll bet,” Fletcher says, wiggling his eyebrows.

Everyone looks at Harrison. He raises both hands in apology. “Hey, I didn’t break him. He came to me like this. You knew him first. I just love his crazy.”

“Awww, baby. I love you too.”

They’re kind of adorable to watch.

“Hold on, so does that mean you’re not...” Sage says.

“No, they totally are,” Levi replies.

“Ugh, the best ones are always taken.”

“Can we focus on the job at hand?” Levi asks. “We need to pick up Ava from my sister’s place, or she’ll want to stay the night.”

Tyler raises his hand. “I know some guys who might help restore the swings and the slides. I’ll get back to you on that.”

“Okay, sounds like everyone has a job,” I say. “Look at the time. It’s getting late.”

I get up and pull Milo with me.

“Yeah, nine o’clock is totally the new midnight,” Fletcher says.

Milo leans against me, and I put my arm around his back.

“Nice to see you all,” he says. “You too, Sage.”

We walk out to my car.

“I guess that went well,” Milo says.

“The guys behaved.”

“What do you mean?”

I unlock the car, and he gets into the passenger seat.

“They’ve been teasing me about you since the summer festival.”

Milo’s expression is one of shock before he hides his face in his hands.

“God, I’m such a loser. I saw you there, and I was so nervous. I don’t know if I wanted to ask you about the GED for the GED or just talk to you somewhere outside the store. It clearly didn’t go that well because I could barely string together a sentence.”

I pull him closer to give him a kiss. “You were so adorably dorky. I just wanted to take you home and look after you.”

He bites his lip again. “Well then, what are you waiting for?”

MILO



THE DRIVE to Ellis's place is filled with tension...the sexual kind.

I haven't seen him in days, and we haven't had any time together since last week. I'm so desperate for him. I palm my erection through my jeans.

"That meeting took far too long," I say.

We stop at a red light and Ellis sees what I'm up to. He almost growls and places his hand over mine, applying pressure. My cock fills to an uncomfortable level.

"In case you didn't notice, that wasn't a meeting. That was the guys making sure you passed their assessment."

I laugh. "I know what cereal they prefer for breakfast. If I'd known it was a test, I would have made my own presentation beforehand." I place my hand over Ellis's, encouraging him to rub my cock.

The light turns green, but he doesn't take his hand away. Instead, he unbuttons my jeans and puts his hand inside, stroking me through my underwear.

"Fuck...Ellis. That feels so good..." I let my head fall back against the headrest and close my eyes.

"They can assess all they want, but it doesn't change the outcome," he says.

I'm not sure how he expects me to keep up with an actual conversation when he pulls my boxer shorts down just enough so he can tease my cockhead.

“Hmm...” I bite my lip. “What’s the...outcome?”

He pulls into his driveway and turns the car off before tucking my dick back into my jeans and pulling me in for a kiss.

“The outcome is that you’re going to fuck me against the wall as soon as we get inside.”

He puts a small packet of lube in my hand and gets out of the car.

I scramble to get out after him, almost getting stuck in the seatbelt in the rush.

“Shit.”

He locks the car from the front door of the house just as I catch up to him.

We stumble into the hallway, kissing and groping each other. Locking the front door is almost an afterthought when he presses me against it and pushes the lock in place without even stopping his assault on my mouth.

“God, I missed these lips,” he says.

“Me too...yours, not mine.”

His hands go under my shirt until they find my nipples. He teases them into peaks and then helps me out of the shirt, which is when he lets go of my mouth.

He goes down on his knees and pulls my jeans down just enough to release my cock. The relief of having it in his mouth is quickly replaced by the need for more.

Looking down at him almost undoes me. He looks so good with his lips around my cock. His hair has grown since the early summer, and I see more of the salt and pepper hairs on the sides. They curl up a little, making him look younger.

With his mouth on my cock and moaning like he’s enjoying it more than I am, he really looks like a kid in a candy store.

He releases my cock and stands.

“I hope you’re ready because I’m more than ready for you, Milo.”

He turns around and leans against me. I help him out of his shirt, kissing his neck as it goes over his head.

He pushes his ass against my dick, and we both groan.

“You wanted the wall,” I rasp.

He steps forward to face the wall and pulls his pants down to his knees, taking down his underwear.

“Lube,” he says.

I appreciate his perfect ass for a moment, running my hands over it, giving it a slap and loving how it jiggles slightly. He moans.

“You like that?”

“Uh-huh.”

I caress his skin and give him a few more slaps until it’s pink and warm under my touch. With every slap, he moans more, which turns me on to no end.

“Lube up, please,” he says.

That’s a strange request, considering I haven’t prepped him.

I kneel, ignoring his pleas, and then I discover two things. Why each of my slaps sounded so pleasurable to him and why we only need a small packet of lube.

I stand and rub my cock along his crease.

“Were you that desperate for me?” I kiss the back of his neck.

“You have no idea.”

I coat my cock with lube and throw the packet on top of the discarded clothes.

“I think I have an idea.”

I pull out the butt plug he’s been wearing since god knows when and immediately replace it with my cock.

“Oh fuck, fuck...nghhh.”

He’s still so tight even after wearing the plug. My dick feels like it’s trapped in heaven.

“Was this what you wanted? For me to fuck you hard and fast against the wall?”

“Yes.”

I pull out a little, and his ass follows my dick.

“Nuh-uh. I’m in charge here. You made the request, so you’re going to get what I’m giving you.”

“Fuck yes, Milo. Please.”

I wrap my arm around his waist to keep him steady, and he presses his hands against the wall.

This is the most desperate, animalistic sex of my life. Anyone passing by his house will probably hear us through the door, but I don’t care.

I fuck him as hard and fast as I can until I’m on the crest of my own orgasm. Our breathing is labored like we’re running a marathon neither of us trained for.

When Ellis pushes his ass back at the same time as I thrust farther inside him, I can tell he’s getting close.

I’m about to reach for his cock when he shouts my name, and I feel warm cum hit my hand. This is the fucking train ride of my life, and I’m about to crash right now.

A few more thrusts into him, and I’m coming, pushing him until he’s flush against the wall.

I can’t move. I don’t want to. My forehead rests against the back of his neck.

He’s silent. Too silent.

“Did I hurt you?” I ask.

He hisses when I withdraw my deflating cock and then pulls his pants up before turning around.

My chest is pounding, and I’m scared I’ve done something wrong. That I was too much, too rough.

He turns around slowly. When his eyes meet mine, I’m already in too much panic to be able to read him.

“No,” he says, almost as a whisper. “You didn’t hurt me.”

“Talk to me, Ellis.”

His eyes turn shiny and a tear falls.

“This is my fault,” he says.

“I don’t understand, baby. Please tell me what’s wrong.” I cradle his face and clean the stray tears with my thumbs.

“I went and did what I promised myself I wouldn’t do again.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve fallen for you, Milo. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

I hold him in my arms as more tears fall.

There may be a reason he’s breaking down over this, but he doesn’t realize he’s just saved me. He’s done what no other man I’ve been with has done before. He’s made me feel like I’m worth loving.

I don’t think he’s ready to hear it back, even though it’s on the tip of my tongue. Somehow, I don’t think he’d believe it.

“Come on. Let’s have a shower and go to bed. I can still stay the night, can’t I?”

He nods.

I grab the clothes from the floor and take him upstairs.

Once in his bathroom, I help him get fully undressed and turn the water on in the shower.

He’s no longer crying, but he’s retreated inside his mind. I can give him time to figure out his feelings, but there’s nothing in the rule book that says I can’t take care of him, so I wash his hair and clean his body.

Somehow, Ellis Bradford wants to love me but thinks he can’t. Does he realize he probably loved me before tonight?

All the small things he’s done for my daughter and me. That’s his love language. Taking care of people. From his students to his family and now me, Sara, and to an extent, Florrie.

I dry myself quickly, use the same towel on him, and then take him to bed.

There's no point bothering with clothes. I want to feel him against me all night.

My first full night with the man I love.

"I love you," he says, whispering in the dark.

"You won't believe me if I tell you I love you too, will you?"

He lets out a choked laugh. "Probably not."

"Then I'll just have to show you."

"Okay."

"Sleep, my love."

I hold him close and wait until he's asleep to let my own emotions out.

I look up at the ceiling. "Thank you, Mom."

I wake to the sound of my phone ringing, and it takes me a moment to realize where I am.

Ellis's arm is around me, and he's sleeping so soundly that I don't want to wake him up, but it could be Florrie. I carefully move his arm and grab the phone from my jeans pocket.

The ringing stops by the time I get to it. I don't have a chance to see who was calling before I'm grabbed from behind and carried back to bed.

"Who said you could get up?" Ellis asks, yawning and cuddling up to me again.

I chuckle. "You were sleeping."

"I fail to see your point."

He kisses me, and I forget about everything until the phone rings again.

"It's Florrie."

He smiles and runs his hand over my chest as I answer the call.

“Hey, Florrie. Is everything okay?”

“Good morning, sweetie. I hope I didn’t wake you up. I waited as long as I could.”

I sit up.

“What’s up? Is Sara okay?”

“Yes, yes, she’s okay. She slept all night and just had breakfast.”

I look around for a clock and see it on the other side table. It’s after nine in the morning. I must have been a kid the last time I slept this late.

“Okay, then what’s up? You’ve got me worried.”

“Yesterday evening, this woman knocked on the door asking for you. She was dressed all nice in expensive clothes. I asked her what she wanted, and she said she wants to talk to you because she’s Sienna’s mother.”

I feel all the blood drain from my body. Ellis tenses next to me as if he can feel my anxiety.

“What...what did you tell her?”

“I told her you were working and you’d be back tomorrow. She didn’t argue with me, just asked if she could leave her phone number. She said she’s in town for a few days and staying at the B&B on Main Street... Milo, I don’t think she knows about Sara.”

“Okay, I’m on my way home.”

I end the call, and for a moment, I can’t move, trying to process what Florrie said and the implications.

“Are you okay? You’re shaking,” Ellis says.

I look at him. “Florrie said Sienna’s mom came to my place last night.”

“Do you know what she wants?” he asks, holding me tight.

“No. Sienna always made it out like she didn’t have any family. Florrie said the woman wants to speak to me.” I run

my hands through my hair. “She can’t take Sara from me. She can’t. She’s my only family.”

“She won’t. It’ll be okay. Do you want me to be there with you?”

“Will you?”

He kisses me. “Of course, baby.”

We get dressed quickly, forgoing breakfast because I need to see Sara with my own eyes and know she’s at home.

Florrie comes over to hug me as soon as we’re through the door.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have opened the door, but Sara had just gone to sleep, and I didn’t want her to wake up with the noise.”

“That’s okay, Florrie. You had no way to know. Hell, I didn’t know Sienna had any living family. The way she spoke about them, which was rarely, it sounded like they were all dead.”

She gives me a piece of paper with the woman’s number.

“I’ll be next door. Let me know if you need anything from me, okay?”

“Thanks, Florrie.”

Sara is in her high chair, so I pick her up, inhaling the comforting scent of her baby shampoo. I almost break down when she calls me Dada.

“I have to call her, don’t I?” It’s a rhetorical question, but I want Ellis to say that I don’t have to do anything I don’t want and that Sara is mine.

My hands shake as I dial the number.

Why does it feel as though life always wants to take something from me just as I gained something else? What is it about me that indicates I can’t have it all?

ELLIS



I CAN'T BEGIN to unpack everything that's happened in the last twelve hours because right now, I need to be strong for Milo.

He doesn't know how much I feel his pain, and it's not the right time to tell him.

No. Now is the time to put on a brave face and fight for him and his family.

He hands Sara over to me and dials the number. I know when someone picks up because he tenses and grabs my hand so tight it almost hurts.

"Hi, I'm um...Milo Allen. You came to my place yesterday."

He goes quiet while he listens to her. His Adam's apple bobs up and down as he tries to remain calm.

I take my phone out, type out a note, and then show him the screen.

Suggest meeting at Bittersweet.

He looks at me and nods.

It's so painful to watch him hurt, not knowing this woman's intentions or if Florrie's instinct is correct and she doesn't know about Sara.

"Yes, okay...um, I'll see you later."

He ends the call and looks at me with red-rimmed eyes.

"She's looking for Sienna. Oh my god, Ellis. How can I tell her the truth?"

“One step at a time, baby. Let’s meet her first and go from there.”

I place Sara in her high chair and pull Milo onto my lap.

“What I said yesterday...I’m here, Milo. And if you need to fight for Sara, I will be here. Always. Okay?”

He holds on tight, and we stay like that for a few minutes until we have to go.

We leave Sara with Florrie, agreeing that if Milo feels it’s the right thing to do, we’ll introduce her to Sienna’s mom.

We arrive at Bittersweet early, so I get us a drink while we wait. The sun shines like this summer will last forever. Only we know the storm that could be brewing.

I see the woman before Milo does. It must be her. Dressed like someone who comes from money and holding herself straight.

“Milo?”

He turns and stands.

“Hi, I’m Gloria Seymour. Thank you so much for agreeing to meet me.”

“Hi. This is...” He looks at me.

“I’m his boyfriend, Ellis. Would you like something to drink?” I ask.

She smiles. “I’d love an iced coffee, please. It’s such a warm day, isn’t it?”

I leave them to place the order with Julius. When I return, Gloria has sat down, but it doesn’t look like they’ve exchanged any words. One looks as unsure as the other.

“Milo, I’m so sorry to appear out of the blue like this. I’ve only recently found your details.”

Julius brings out Gloria’s drink. She takes a sip and then a deep breath.

“Sienna is my only child. We’ve always had a complicated relationship. I guess we are just too different, and I haven’t always understood her choices. One day, out of the blue, she

tells me she wants to marry this boy she met in rehab, Mikey. I couldn't agree with it. She was too young, and I hadn't even met him. We had an argument and then compromised. Mikey would move in with us so I could get to know him, and then we'd talk about marriage at a later date."

Milo reaches for my hand, and I hold it.

"It was clear Mikey needed help, but also that he cared for my daughter a lot. They lived with me for a year. Mikey found a job, and they were taking the right steps. I felt that, for the first time, Sienna and I were getting closer. On her twenty-second birthday, they both went out, and when they came home, it was clear they'd been drinking. Sienna knew this was a step back in recovery for both her and Mikey. We had an argument about it, and the next day when I got up, they'd left. I tried to track her phone and credit cards, put a search alert to the police, but nothing came back."

The more Gloria tells her story, the more I feel Milo is upset and anxious. He seems to be holding it together, but I can tell he's hanging on by a thread.

"The police told me to give up. Sienna is an adult, so she probably decided to move on with her life. I've been searching ever since. Some days I feel her presence near me, and others, I feel like I'm too late. It was Sienna's birthday a week ago, and I finally gained enough courage to go into her room. I saw a note in Mikey's handwriting. It said: *step one, reach out to Milo*. And there was an address. I went to the address yesterday, but the person in the house said you lived in a different place on the same street."

"I moved after my mom died and Mikey left. I couldn't afford the rent."

Gloria looks down at her hands.

"I was wondering if they made contact with you. If they came to see you." She takes a tissue from her handbag and wipes a tear. "I'm already expecting the worse, but I just want to know something. Anything that gives me hope or closure."

Milo's hand is shaking under the table. He looks at me, and I hope he can see that I know how strong he is.

He moves to the chair next to Gloria's.

"I'm so sorry."

As soon as Milo says the words, it's clear Gloria understands their meaning.

"Yes, Mikey came home and brought with him this really amazing girl who became a little sister to me," Milo continues.

I watch in awe of Milo's courage, once again sharing the story he told me only a couple of weeks ago. He just leaves out a baby-sized detail, which I can't blame him for.

Gloria cries, holding on to Milo.

"Thank you for telling me. I can go home now and move on with my life." She takes a deep breath and stills herself. "At least I know she was happy and loved until the end, right?"

Milo looks at me, and I nod, hoping to convey how much I am here for him.

"Gloria, there's someone I'd like you to meet, but first, would you like to see Sienna?"

Gloria nods, still holding Milo's hands. "My car is at the B&B."

"We can take you in my car," I offer.

The drive to the cemetery is silent. Milo is so tense next to me that I'm afraid to touch him, even though I want nothing else but to offer him some comfort. I know he isn't going to relax until he sees Gloria's reaction to Sara.

I give them space as they visit the grave, but I remain within earshot.

It's so painful to see Milo go through the emotions he's had to deal with all on his own for the last nine months, and it's hard to tell if Gloria's presence is a good or a bad one.

"Before I leave, I'll come back with some flowers. Your favorite," Gloria says, touching the stone with Sienna's name.

“Thank you for bringing me here, Milo. I’m sure you know how much it means to me to see where she’s laid to rest.”

“This isn’t our last stop,” Milo says. “Remember I said there was someone I wanted you to meet?”

Gloria follows us to the car again.

When we get to Milo’s place, it’s clear he’s nervous.

“Gloria, would you give us a moment?” I ask.

“Of course.”

I walk outside with him. “Baby, you’ve got this. It’s the right thing to do.”

He nods. “I know. She seems like a nice person.”

“She does. And remember, I’m here for you.” I give him a kiss of encouragement. “Go get your daughter.”

I walk back inside, where Gloria is sitting at the kitchen table.

Milo comes in a minute later with Sara.

“Gloria, this is Sara. She’s your granddaughter.”

MILO



“OH MY GOD.” Gloria’s hand goes to her mouth, and I can almost feel the shock, the disbelief, the full range of emotions. I’m feeling them too. “How is it possible?”

“Sienna found out she was pregnant shortly after they came here. Sara was born the night my brother died. When we got the news, Sienna was in shock. She...she made me sign the birth certificate to say I’m Sara’s father. I’m sorry. I didn’t know about you. She always said she had no family.”

Gloria’s eyes are on Sara. “Can I hold her?”

“Of course.”

My heart will be in my hands every moment from now until she utters the words I need her to say.

“She’s so beautiful. She has Sienna’s eyes, but I can see so much of Mikey too.” She straightens Sara’s dress in that way grandmothers do. I’ve seen Florrie do the same thing so many times. “You’ve been looking after her all this time on your own?”

“She’s my daughter. Maybe not biologically, but I held Sienna’s hand as she pushed. I heard Sara’s first cry. This girl has been my world since the day she was born.”

I’m the one crying now, but I don’t care. I need Gloria to know I haven’t just been looking after Sara. She’s my only family.

“We don’t have much, but Sara has her own nursery. She has her favorite toys, and I’ve spent so many nights watching her sleep and wondering how it’s possible for someone to sleep

with her hands tucked under her chest and her butt sticking up.”

Gloria looks at me and smiles. “Sienna used to sleep like that. My late husband wouldn’t come to bed until she moved to a better position on her own. I think in her first year, he slept less than I did.”

She places a kiss on Sara’s head and gives her back to me.

“She’s really the most precious thing,” she says.

I sit at the table with Sara on my lap. “Will you tell us more about Sienna?”

“I’ll make some coffee,” Ellis says and starts looking around my cabinets.

Gloria spends the next two hours talking about Sienna. From when she was a little girl to a rebellious teenager. I tell her what I learned about her when she came here with my brother.

By the end of the afternoon, I feel lighter because this meeting with Gloria has been unexpectedly enlightening, but I’m still on edge.

Neither of us has mentioned what happens to Sara now that she has another living relative, and I’m too scared to bring it up.

“Thank you so much for today. I think I need to go back to my hotel, cry some more, and make a few phone calls,” Gloria says. “Could I visit with Sara again tomorrow?”

“Um...it’s not...I’m working.”

“That’s okay. I understand. When will you be free?”

“Wednesday?”

She nods. “I guess that gives me a couple of days to get some shopping done. I have a new granddaughter to spoil.”

“Would you like me to take you back to your hotel?” Ellis asks.

“Thank you. That would be really nice of you.”

Ellis gives me a kiss on the lips and leaves, promising to come back straight after.

As soon as they leave, Florrie comes over.

“I’ve been worried sick since you told me that the woman is Sara’s grandmother. What happened? She’s not threatening to take her away, is she?”

I sigh. “Not yet. I don’t know if she will. I don’t know what rights I have. I don’t know anything.”

She wraps her motherly arms around me, and I let myself be comforted by the closest thing I have to a mother.

“I grew up on a farm, honey. I may be old, but I can still throw a punch. No one’s gonna take this baby girl from you. I promise.”

I stand and shake myself. “Right. No point worrying about what I can’t control right now. I’m going to feed my daughter and then play with her because that’s what we do on Sunday nights. Isn’t that right, sunshine?”

Sara waves her arms like she understands what I’m saying.

“I’ll leave you to it then. Goodnight, my dears.”

I prepare Sara’s food since Florrie gave her a bottle of formula earlier, and even when she decides it looks better on me than in her belly, I can’t stop laughing.

“You’re a little terror, you know that?” I point to her full belly. “I need better reflexes because you throw a mean punch.”

She starts one of her long conversations that makes her giggle a lot, so I reply, making jokes about her coming home before ten when she’s a teenager and how I’ll veto every person she might be interested in...but only when she’s twenty-five.

I give her a bath and read her a book before putting her to bed.

It’s not until I consider having a shower that I realize Ellis hasn’t returned.

I check my phone, and there are no messages, so I grab my shower. When I get out, I check it again, and there’s a message waiting.

Ellis: Sorry, baby. I got caught up doing something. I'll see you on Tuesday before the soup kitchen. I'll meet you at home.

I reply *okay* and pull down my bed. It's probably a good time to do some studying for my exams. They're just around the corner, and I don't want to fail.

Hopefully, it'll also keep me distracted from other thoughts.

Like Gloria taking Sara away from me.

Like Ellis getting cold feet on our relationship because there's just too much drama with me.

Even though he said he loved me, and love is unconditional, right?

"Ugh. Stop thinking so much," I say to myself.

"Hey, hun," Pauline says when I arrive at work on Tuesday morning.

"Morning."

"You look tired. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just a few things going on at home."

She looks to the door. "Does this have anything to do with the rich woman that was buying a bunch of toys and talking about Sara?"

"What?" I turn to her, closing my locker so quickly that I almost get my fingers stuck.

"Yeah. A woman was asking about the best place to buy toys and baby stuff yesterday. When I asked if she had someone in mind, she said she has a new granddaughter, Sara. I didn't think too much of it until just now. Who is she?"

“She’s Sara’s grandmother. Fuck.” I rub my hands over my face. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing really. It’ll sort itself out.”

She looks at me like she has some doubts, but my shift is starting, so I have to go open my register.

Jimmy waves at me and smiles while he’s serving a customer. I wave back but ignore him, thanking the gods that customers are waiting so I can get straight to work.

“Gerald is off today,” Jimmy says when his line subsides.

“That’s great for him.”

I smile when I see my next customer.

“Ethel, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

She waves me off. “You’re a charmer.”

“But I don’t lie. What have we got today?”

“Just a few essentials.”

I ring up her stuff and take the payment.

“How’s your new hobby going?” I ask.

“It’s great. I gave some of my fish to the vet out in Chester Falls, and he’s going to put them up for sale there. Can you believe it? He’s such a sweetheart too. I wouldn’t want anyone else looking after my cats but Doctor Micah Sawyer.”

I try to keep my laughter in. I wonder what the poor vet thinks of Ethel’s *crocheted* fish. “That’s very entrepreneurial of you, Ethel.”

“Just goes to show it’s never too late to do something you care about. You remember that.”

“I will, Ethel. Do you want help to the car?”

“No, I’ll be fine, dear.” She leans over the counter and whispers, “My son thinks I can’t see what he’s doing, parked out there spying on me. I’m not du-lah-lah yet. And I can still do everything myself.”

I smile. “Ethel, I want to be just like you when I grow up.”

She blows me a kiss and off she goes, holding on to her walker with her groceries in the basket.

“So, is it true? You and the school teacher are a thing?”

I bite my tongue and put on a fake smile before I turn around.

“Who wants to know, Jimmy?”

He puts his elbows on the counter and leans forward.

“Maybe *I* want to know.”

“Why?”

“Because maybe I think you and me together would make more sense? If that woman who’s going around saying she’s Sara’s grandma takes her away to look after her, you’d be free from that responsibility. Maybe you could start acting like you’re twenty-six instead of sixty-six.”

I stare at him in disbelief. He couldn’t have just said what I think he did.

“So what do you think? Ditch the old teacher and come out with me?”

I leave my register and head toward his. He smiles, thinking he’s won me over, but I see the moment he realizes that couldn’t be further from the truth.

I grab him by the collar of his shirt. “Don’t you ever talk about me or my daughter in that way, or any way, for that matter.”

“She’s not your daughter,” he bites between gritted teeth.

Red boiling rage builds inside me. I’ve never wanted to punch someone so much, and I’m so close to doing it. Jimmy sees it in my eyes because he tries to get out of my hold.

“Milo. Leave him. He’s not worth it.” I listen to Pauline’s words and release him. The last thing I want is to do anything that could jeopardize my custody of Sara.

“You wouldn’t be so precious about your little perfect teacher if you knew why he came to live in Stillwater,” Jimmy says.

“Jimmy, you shut your face, or I’ll shut it for you,” Pauline threatens.

“What are you talking about?”

Jimmy sniggers. “Your teacher was fired from his last job because he had an affair with a married teacher at his school. The guy had a wife and a kid on the way, and he tried to destroy their lives with lies about the kid. Saying the kid was his. So maybe he’s not that gay after all. Or maybe he’s with you to get his hands on Sara.”

Pauline punches Jimmy so fiercely that he falls to his knees. He stands back up as if he’s ready for a fight, but then he sees the customers looking at him and thinks better of it.

I close my register and run to the break room.

Pauline comes in straight after me.

“Why did you do that? You’re going to get yourself fired.”

She shrugs. “He deserved it. He’s been deserving of it for a long time, but you guys seemed friendly, so I kept it to myself. I don’t like how he’s been talking about you behind your back, especially to Gerald. He can fire me all he wants. I’m going anyway.”

I give her a hug. “You’re a good friend, Pauline.”

“You forgot gorgeous.”

I chuckle. “You’re a good, gorgeous friend.”

“Yuck, no, you can’t fake it enough to make it sound right.”

“You’re certifiable, but I love you,” I say.

“I know. I’m pretty awesome. Why don’t you go? Gerald isn’t here. I’ll cover for you. Jimmy won’t say a word, or I’ll put a complaint against him.”

“Thank you.”

I kiss her cheek and leave the store, running home as fast as I can.

First, I need to see Sara and then speak to Ellis.

ELLIS



ALICE'S squeal is so loud it almost makes my ears bleed.

"God, woman, get a hold of yourself."

"I can't help it. You know I'm a hopeless romantic, and this is beyond romantic."

She spins around her living room.

"My big brother is in love again."

She throws herself on her couch with a long, happy sigh.

I roll my eyes.

"Look, I didn't come here to tell you so you can go all heart eyes and forget about the serious stuff."

"What serious stuff?"

I give her a look.

"Oh..."

"Yeah."

"It's not a deal breaker, is it? Everyone has a past. Didn't you say Sara isn't his biological daughter? So he has a past too. What's the big deal?"

I lean back in the armchair.

"When... Boston happened, I was broken and lost. I promised myself that I wasn't going to fall in love again."

"Well, that's a stupid thing to promise yourself because it's obvious you were going to break that promise," she says.

“What do you mean?”

“Ellis, you’re the most loving person I know. Do you know how often you randomly mentioned Milo in conversation before you even got to know him?”

I frown. “I did?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Constantly. *‘I went to the store, and Milo was talking about this book he read. Did you know Milo has a daughter? I don’t know why Milo is so shy when he’s the nicest person,’*” she says, imitating my voice.

I want to argue with her, but thinking about it now, it’s obvious there was always something about him.

“Don’t you think the age gap between us is too big? He’s twenty-six. God, when I was twenty-six, he was a child.”

“Yeah, and when he’s forty-two, you’ll be fifty-eight. Congratulations, we can both do math,” she says. “Don’t be silly. Milo isn’t like any other guy his age. He’s mature, responsible. He’s absolutely perfect for you.”

“But what about when he wants to do fun stuff and I don’t because I’m old and set in my ways?”

She leans forward and rests her elbows on her knees. “In the time you’ve been together, has he ever given you the impression he’s bored or not having fun?”

“No. Quite the opposite. He’s great to talk to, and we don’t need to do anything extravagant in order to have fun.”

My memories take me back to the crab rolls we shared. Milo insisted on paying for them, and I let him because it was his idea to go there and they were cheap enough.

We sat looking at the amazing view, and nothing in my life ever felt so right.

“That look on your face,” Alice says.

“What about it?”

“I’ve never seen it before. I know how much you loved...you know who. But the kind of love you feel for Milo? That’s a completely different kind. It’s the forever kind. Can I be honest?”

I chuckle. “When have you ever not been?”

She throws one of her decorative couch pillows at me. “When you told me about the surrogacy, I thought you were joking.”

What?

“Why?”

“Because I felt you were the only one who wanted it. Being a parent when you’re part of a couple is a two-person job, even when you disagree. I don’t think he ever wanted it as much as you did.”

Her words make sense, but they’re also a dagger to my heart because I was the one who lost everything in the end.

“I know what you’re thinking, but trust me, all the pain you went through will feel like it was worth it when one day you get to walk down the aisle and marry Milo. Or when you take Sara for her first day of school.”

A lump forms in my throat.

“Oh, Ellis.”

I could never hide anything from my sister, so it’s no surprise that she knows how much those things matter to me. How much and how long I’ve wanted them.

“I’m going to tell him, but I don’t know if this is the right time. He’s got all this stuff going on with Sara’s grandmother turning up, and he’s scared of losing her.”

“Will you tell him you spoke to Harrison?” she asks.

“Of course. I’m meeting him at his place before we go to the soup kitchen, so I’ll tell him then.”

“Okay then. Deal with one thing at a time. Put him first if you think that’s what he needs, but don’t forget, you’re also important.”

I nod. "Milo would never make me disappear. If anything, he lifts me up every time he so much as looks at me."

"Fuck, I'm going to cry. I need a glass of wine now."

She gives me a hug and ushers me out the door to go be a knight in shiny armor, as she puts it.

When Milo opens the door, he throws himself at me, holding tight.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

"Just...hold me. Only for a moment, okay?"

His voice sounds broken.

"Baby, I'll hold you forever if that's what you need."

I see Sara playing with her musical animals on her high chair.

"Do you want to sit or lie down and talk?" I ask.

He nods.

"Gloria has been going around town to all the stores, buying things for Sara and telling people she's her grandmother. I don't know if she wants to have Sara or if she expects me to give her up. She's coming tomorrow, and I'm terrified, Ellis."

I run my hand through his hair. He leans his head against my palm when it touches his cheek.

"I hope you forgive me for this, but I spoke to Harrison on Sunday. That's why I didn't come back here. It was too late by the time I left their place."

"Okay. What did you speak to him about?"

I cross my fingers mentally, hoping he won't get mad.

"I asked him what your rights were as the named father on Sara's birth certificate."

He gasps. "Really? I totally forgot he's an attorney. Thank you for doing that for me."

"He says that as the named parent on the birth certificate, you have all the rights of a biological parent because it's assumed you are the biological parent. Gloria can, of course, challenge

it and request a DNA test. Chances are that if the mother willingly named you as the father, and you've been caring for the child and providing all their needs like a father, then you'll continue as the parent. She can take you to court, but it may be easier to appeal to her heart and work out visitation rights."

Milo lets out a breath that sounds like it's been held since he met Gloria.

"I guess I might find out tomorrow what her intentions are."

I nod. "We can fight this together. Hopefully, Gloria will decide to work with us rather than against us, but I'll be there every step of the way."

"I love you, Ellis."

I gasp.

"I promised myself I'd wait longer to tell you, but I don't know why. What's the point? Everything we have can be taken away from us at any moment, with no warning. Why shouldn't I be true to you? Please believe me when I say it. I've never said it to anyone before. The word always felt too big to express what I felt at the time. But not with you. With you, it's the easiest thing. And before you stop me, I'm not too young. I know what I want, and I—"

As much as I love to hear him ramble, I want to kiss him more, so I do. I relish in the way Milo melts into the kiss, allowing me to protect him, keep him safe, love him.

"Are you sure?" I ask, still afraid to believe this can be true. "In a few years, I'll be in my fifties, and you'll still be in the prime of your life. I don't want to drag you down, Milo. I want you to experience life and everything you deserve."

He looks at me and frowns. "Do you think I don't deserve you?"

"I think you deserve better."

Milo shakes his head. "Ellis, *you* are my better. No one else will ever match up to you or how I feel about you. If you've changed your mind about us, that's one thing, but if you love me like you say you do, then let me love you back."

“I do. More than I ever thought I would love someone again.”

His lips meet mine with passion and love that cannot be denied. Because it was always bound to happen and because it's hopeless to fight it.

Sara giggles and lets out a few squeaks.

“Not until you're twenty-five,” we say simultaneously. We laugh, and she claps her hands.

Milo turns to me. “I don't know how to bring this up because I don't believe one word of it, but I feel that you should know.”

“Know what?”

“Someone I work with, who, by the way, got the best punch in the face from a girl today, said something about you and the reason you left Boston and moved here.”

I frown. “How would he know? Only my family knows.”

Milo shrugs. “I don't know. Maybe he overheard Alice? Probably he made it up. Hold on, you're saying only your family knows, so Jimmy was right...there is something.”

I hold his hand. “I spoke to Alice about it earlier because I want to tell you. It may explain some of my insecurities or strange behavior.”

“Ellis, I already loved you before I knew there was anything else to know. Nothing you tell me will change that. Unless you bring up the age gap again. I'll have you know I'm one punching opportunity short today, so I might take it on you.”

I laugh. “I know. You're an incredible man, Milo. I know you wouldn't lie, and I believe you when you say you love me, but I don't want any secrets between us, and if anyone starts any rumors, then I want you to be the first to know the truth.”

“Okay.”

“I was in a long-term relationship with another teacher at the school I worked with in Boston. We didn't live together, but we talked a lot about moving in. We basically had two sets of everything in each other's apartments. I've always wanted to be a father, so I discussed it with him, and he seemed happy to

start a family too. We moved in together and started looking at surrogacy options. The first two attempts using my sperm didn't work. We used a considerable amount of my savings, and after two years, we were exhausted, losing hope, and it started affecting our relationship. We even had counseling to talk about it and work through it together.

“One day, he said his best friend was willing to carry a baby for us, but she would only do it with his sperm. At the time, we had some unexpected bills, so I couldn't afford another round of IVF. He offered to pay for it since they were using his sperm.

“He never wanted me to go to any appointments with him, which was disappointing because I felt like I was missing out on part of the process, but I didn't say anything because I felt like our relationship was getting back to how it used to be before.

“About a month later, we got the news that his friend was pregnant. We were so happy. The first scan was okay, and then we found out we were having a boy. We picked names and talked about what school he would go to. I'd never been so happy. Then, when she was six months pregnant, she started acting weird. She'd be really clingy with him and talk about the baby as if it was theirs and not mine.

“One day, she came over before my ex was home from work, and I mentioned to her that we needed to deal with the adoption paperwork. She looked at me like I'd grown a second head. Then she told me they'd conceived the baby the normal way. Basically, they had sex.”

“Wait, your ex is bi? Did you know?”

“No, I didn't know. And his best friend wasn't just his best friend. She was his ex. She used the opportunity to get closer to him. It worked. Before she was due to give birth, he broke up with me and said they were going to raise the child as their own since they were the biological parents.”

Milo holds on to me. “You lost your baby.”

“Yes. Word got out at the school about what happened. Some people were supportive, but then the word spread to the parents, and there were complaints.”

“What reason did the parents have to complain? That was your private life.”

“Our conduct. How we couldn’t be trusted with their kids if we weren’t responsible adults. No homophobia, just misinformation about who did what to whom. In the end, my ex said I should quit and find a job in another school. Even though he was younger than me by a few years, he held a more senior position. I had no choice. So that’s when I moved to Stillwater to start fresh.”

Milo looks into my eyes and says, “I was wrong. What you told me changes something.”

My heart sinks, and I brace myself for the worse.

“If I was already in love with you, I’m even more now. I have no doubt you are the person I want to spend the rest of my life with, but now I know you will always be there for me and Sara because you want it as much as I do.”

We hold on to each other tight.

“You better let me spend the night here with you because there’s no way I’m sleeping on my own when all I want to do is hold you all night,” I say.

“Cook breakfast for me in the morning, and you have yourself a deal.”

I kiss him with all the love I have for him.

When the time comes for us to head out to the soup kitchen, I want to go but also not because staying at home with Milo and Sara is my absolute favorite thing to do.

“Don’t pout,” he says as we walk to the hall together. “I promise I’ll eat your ass like a starved anteater approaching a termite’s nest.”

“I’m not sure if I’m turned on or not.”

“Oh, you will be. I bet I can make you come twice just by teasing your ass with my mouth,” he says.

“Are you sure you want to volunteer tonight? We can still go back.”

His laugh fills my heart, and I make a new promise to myself.

I’ll make Milo laugh like that at least once a day for the rest of our lives.

MILO



“MILO, BABY, COME HAVE SOME FOOD,” Ellis calls from the kitchen door.

“In a minute.”

I’m planting all the flowers Ellis had delivered from a local garden center. The deck is finished, and the furniture will be delivered this week. The only thing that’s left to do is the porch.

Max has a pressure washer, so tomorrow, I’m going to wash the porch so it has time to dry before I paint.

And that will be the end of my work for Ellis, which is why I’m at war with myself.

Part of me wants to see it all done. Ellis goes back to work in three weeks, so he’ll have less time to enjoy his new backyard.

But at the same time, once I finish, there’s no easy excuse to be with him for the whole weekend.

I mean, he introduced himself to Gloria as my boyfriend, but even though we’ve declared our feelings for each other, we haven’t spent any time together except at the soup kitchen or when I’m working in his backyard.

We haven’t had any dates since the crab-roll lunch, but we’ve spent a few nights together, and the sex...fuck me, it’s the best sex I’ve ever had.

It’s like we can read each other’s needs so well that we barely need to exchange words. But it’s hot, fast, and even though we

always cuddle and talk afterward, I'm still left feeling a little empty.

When did I become so needy for affection and attention?

I plant the last flowers in the row and go inside.

Since the work I'm doing is less physical, I wash my hands and return to the kitchen.

Sara is chewing on a piece of apple, sucking all the juice out. It looks sticky, but she seems happy with it.

Ellis fills my cup with coffee and gives me a plate with pancakes and some fruit.

"You really don't have to go to so much trouble to feed me. I'm happy with my sandwich," I say.

He comes around the table and turns me so I'm facing him. He sits on my lap and tilts my head up.

"What if I want to feed you and make sure you're eating properly when you're working so hard outside?"

"I can look after myself."

His brows narrow. "I know you can, but I like looking after you too. What's up, baby?"

I lean my forehead against his chest.

"I haven't heard anything from Gloria since she sent all those toys. I don't know if that means she's out of our lives, which would be sad because I think it would be great for Sara to have a grandmother, or if I should be scared that she's gone away to start proceedings to take her away from me."

Plus all the other stuff about us.

"You have her phone number, right? Why don't you call her?"

"Because I'm too scared of what she might say. It's a little weird, right? She seemed nice, but instead of visiting like she wanted, she got someone to drop off all those gifts for Sara, and it's been radio silence since."

He doesn't need to say it. It's all over his face. He's worried too because he also thinks this isn't normal behavior.

“She also just found out she never got to say goodbye to her only daughter. Maybe she’s grieving,” he says.

“Or maybe she’s realizing that Sara can replace the daughter she lost.”

“Shh,” he says, resting his forehead against mine. “There’s little point in worrying before you need to. Eat something, and then maybe we can go for a drive out of town. Stop somewhere for dinner. What do you say?”

“Okay...that sounds like a good idea. Thank you.”

He kisses me gently and then gets up to go back to his chair.

See, Milo? You’re going on another date. Stop being stupid and needy.

After I eat, I finish planting the rest of the flowers, which doesn’t take long, and then I grab a shower while Ellis feeds Sara lunch.

I avoid thinking about how domestic it all feels. Ellis no longer needs to ask me questions about Sara’s food or how she alternates solids with her formula. He knows what to do from the moment we arrive in the morning. He’s the one that puts her stuff away, makes sure she drinks some water, plays with her, reads her books, and knows when to feed her without asking if it’s time.

We get in his car, and I focus on the outside landscape. Ever since I sold my car to pay for Sienna’s funeral, I haven’t left town much. I forget how beautiful everything around Stillwater is, not just the lake area.

“Have you thought about what you want to do after you get your GED?” Ellis asks.

We haven’t talked much about my exams. I’m starting to get a little anxious about them because there are so many distractions. Thinking about what comes after feels so far away when all I can think about is Sara, Gloria, and what happens when my only source of income is the three days at the store.

“Not much. After what happened with Jimmy, I doubt I’ll ever get a promotion or a better job at the store. Gerald offered me a night-shift job, but I declined because I can’t leave Sara with Florrie every night, and I doubt he’ll ever give me the job if I go back on my word. Right now, the GED feels pretty redundant.”

He turns onto a small road, and I see a metal gate that reads: Knox Farm.

“I thought you might want to show Sara the lavender fields. I looked up their website. There’s also a large garden we can walk around and a kids’ play area.”

“She’s a little too young for that, isn’t she?” I look to the car seat in the back, and Sara’s fallen asleep with the car’s motion.

“Oh no, that’s for me,” he says, and I give him a playful punch on the arm.

We park and carefully transfer the sleeping baby from the car seat to the stroller.

The lavender fields are even more beautiful up close, with their bright-purple color and neat rows.

“I thought you might like it here,” Ellis says.

“It’s...I have no words. It’s so calm.”

“Do you hear the buzzing sound?”

I close my eyes, and I do. It’s faint, but it’s there.

“That’s Reed’s bees. I read on their website that he keeps the beehives in the middle of the fields so the bees pollinate the lavender. His honey is amazing.”

“I’ve seen it in the farmers’ market but couldn’t afford it. I hear people ask about it at the store all the time, but we don’t stock it.”

He kisses my hair. “How about we check out the gardens?”

“Okay.”

I didn’t think the lavender fields could be topped, but the gardens on the side of the main building are even better.

“Wow. My mom would have loved it here,” I say. “You see those roses over there? They’re her favorite.”

Ellis looks at me. “They look like the ones you planted in my backyard.”

I feel my cheeks warm, and not from the sun. “Yeah...I wanted to leave something of myself behind. Like a kind of personal touch.”

He frowns. “Are you planning on going anywhere?”

“No. No, of course not...never mind.”

“Good.”

We hear footsteps on the gravel path, and then a tall guy with dark hair and a lumberjack-type shirt comes from between two hedges. He’s on the phone shouting at someone but then stops when he sees us. “Don’t bother coming back.” He pockets his phone and holds out his hand to Ellis.

“Hey, Teacher. How’s it going?” he asks Ellis.

“Hi, Callan. We’ve come to visit the lavender fields and your gardens. This is Milo, and this is Sara,” he says, then turns to me. “Callan is Reed’s farm manager.”

“Hi, nice to meet you. I’m so in love with your gardens. Whoever looks after them does a great job.”

Callan wipes the sweat off his forehead. “Not any longer he doesn’t. What you just witnessed was him getting fired. Why is it so hard to get good workers these days? Anyway, I don’t want to disturb your visit. Come by the farm restaurant when you’re done. I’ll set up a honey tasting menu for you on the house.”

He takes his phone out and waves us off as he heads to the main building.

“I guess you’re going to try Reed’s honey after all,” Ellis says.

I laugh. “Are you saying you brought me all the way here, and you weren’t going to treat me?”

Ellis pulls me closer until his lips touch my ear. He nibbles my earlobe, and his warm breath makes me shiver in the best way.

“If you wanted to try Reed’s honey, you could have told me. I have some at home. I propose I accidentally spill some of it on me so you can help me clean it up.”

I swallow. “That’s a...yes, please.”

For the rest of the day, it’s easy to forget everything else happening in my life. The honey tasting is wonderful, and I spend the whole time wondering how it’ll taste when I eat it off Ellis.

He squirms in his seat and keeps giving me heated looks, so I know he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

Since we’re quite full from honey and bread, we decide to buy three crab rolls and take them home in time to give Sara her dinner. I wasn’t prepared for us to be out, so I have snacks but no actual food and no extra formula.

Ellis invites Florrie to join us while I get Sara’s dinner ready, and it’s the end of a perfect day.

That is until my phone rings and I see Gloria’s name pop up on the screen.

I answer, and for a moment, there’s just silence.

“Hello?”

“Hi...Milo. This is Gloria. I’m calling to apologize for missing my visit with Sara. I hope she likes the things I bought for her.”

Her voice has an edge to it that I can’t read. All I want to say is that Sara will be ten months in a few days. She doesn’t know or care about gifts, but I bite my tongue.

“Thank you for your generosity, Gloria. I hope you’re able to return to visit Sara soon.” I don’t mean the words. At least, I don’t think I do. I want Sara to have a grandmother. I’m just too afraid of her right now.

“I’m sure I will. I’ve been thinking a lot about Sara and her future. You’ve been doing a great job raising her so far, but I can imagine it’s not easy for a young man your age to raise a child on his own.”

“Sara is my daughter. My age is irrelevant. I love her and will always put her first.” Now I’m the one on edge. What is she getting at?

“I know, Milo. I’m not disputing that, and I could see how much you care for her. I just want to tell you I’m looking into some options.”

My knees give way, but Ellis is there to catch me.

“Options?” I ask. My voice is as shaky as my hands holding the phone.

“Nothing for you to worry about. I just want to know my rights as Sara’s grandmother. You must understand this all came as a surprise and a blessing to me too.”

“I...understand.”

“Splendid. I’ll be in touch soon. I’m looking forward to seeing you and Sara again.”

I’m left holding my phone and staring at it as though it could self-destruct any moment now. Or maybe that’s just my life crumbling right beneath my fingers.

Today I can’t bear looking at the sky because for the first time since my mom died, I feel hopeless, numb, and alone.

ELLIS



THE PLAYGROUND IS a hub of activity. I've never seen so many people in or around it at the same time.

Tyler set up a pop-up shelter that works as the coordination center, which Florrie is managing. Who knew she'd thrive so much on bossing people around?

"Once a teacher, always a teacher," she says, justifying her whip-cracking.

I approach her to check in on things. "Ellis, dear, can you see that we have enough bags for the landscaping waste? Dave is almost finished pulling the weeds."

"Of course."

I check Tyler's van and find some extra compost bags, so I take those to where several residents are helping out by collecting the waste.

Fletcher and Arlo are working together using chemicals to remove the old paint from the swings. There's a cordoned-off area around them to ensure no one gets hurt.

For the first day of the playground cleanup, it seems we're on target.

"Hey, Ty, have you seen Milo?"

He points to the hall, so I run over there.

I find him in the kitchen making sandwiches and muttering to himself. There's a small radio playing music in the background.

He smiles when he sees me even though the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Hey, has Alice called? Is Sara okay?"

"Alice hasn't called, and I'm sure Sara is okay. I just came to check on you."

"Why? I'm okay. The sandwiches will be ready by lunchtime, and Julius called just a minute ago to say he's closed Bittersweet, and he'll be getting here within the hour to serve coffee and cold drinks."

I lean against the counter and cross my arms. "Yes, that's good, but I'm still checking on you."

"I don't understand."

"Milo, you've been avoiding talking about Gloria's call last weekend. You've practically been avoiding me too."

He fills up the bread and pushes both sides together with such force that he's practically flattening the sandwiches into pancakes.

"Milo, baby."

"No, Ellis. I don't want to talk about it, okay? Can I forget this is happening? You wanted me to help out the playground, so I'm helping out the playground. You wanted me to take the GED exams. I'm taking them next week. I don't know what else you want from me."

He's practically shouting. I know it's not directed at me, but it still stings.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" I ask.

He puts the knife down. "No."

"Tell me how I can help you, baby."

"I don't know, Ellis. That's the problem. I don't know how to solve anything anymore."

I wish he would lean on me, but I feel like he's slipping through my fingers, too lost in his pain to see how many people he has around him, ready to stand up and help.

A knock on the door stops our conversation. An older man comes into the kitchen, stopping when he spots Milo.

“Brian.”

“Hey, son.”

Brian?

Milo looks like he’s seeing a ghost.

Brian, who I assume is *the* Brian that keeps refusing to come to the soup kitchen, is rooted in place, his hands together in front of him, but I can see them shaking.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” Brian asks.

“It has.”

“I just wanted to say that your old man would have been very proud of you. I know I’m a cantankerous old bastard. I do all the things I shouldn’t and very few of the ones I should. But I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for what happened. I wish I’d seen it coming, but I was too blinded by my anger. Your father was my best friend, and I let him down. I let you all down.”

Milo gets closer to Brian and places his hands on Brian’s shoulders. “Someone very wise keeps telling me that when we spend too much time thinking about the things we should do, we forget about those we can do.”

“Wise words indeed.”

“I’ll introduce you to her later. Do you want to help me with the sandwiches?”

Brian smiles and rolls up his sleeves.

“I’ve always done a mean sandwich. Your dad used to barter for them when we had lunch together at the mill.”

“Really? I didn’t know,” Milo says.

“Let me tell you a few more things about your dad. Not many people knew him like I did.”

I leave the kitchen silently so as not to disturb their conversation. I have a feeling that after this, Tyler won’t need

anyone to convince Brian to come to the soup kitchen.

It takes almost two hours to remove all the compost and load it into the van someone managed to borrow from a friend.

With it all gone, the playground already looks like a completely different place.

Florrie rings a bell. “Lunchtime, troops.”

“I hope that’s not how you used to call your students,” I say.

She chuckled. “No, I called them little bastards, but in those days, we got away with a lot more. Nowadays, they’re all angels who can do no wrong.”

My phone rings, and I see Harrison’s name pop up. “Hey, Harrison.”

“Hey, Ellis. I know you’re busy with the playground stuff, but since I’ve got all the kids here, I was wondering if you could stop by. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Sure, give me twenty.”

I get in the car and drive to Harrison and Fletcher’s place. There’s a lot of noise coming from the back, so instead of ringing the bell, I go through the side and into the backyard.

There’s an inflatable pool on the grass, and the kids are all playing and splashing around.

I see Harrison sitting with a bottle of pop in the shade, overseeing the activities.

“On lifeguard duty?” I ask.

“Oh man, I’m not fit enough for this. How do they get so much energy? We’re used to Megan, George, and their friend, Ava, but with everyone helping at the playground, this is like a living hell. How you do this for a job, I don’t know.”

I laugh.

“They’re expected to behave at school, so I have that advantage. Plus, there are no wading pools there either.”

He raises his bottle. “True. Anyway, take a seat. Can I get you a soda or something?”

“I’m good, thanks. What did you want to talk about?”

“What I’m about to do is beyond unprofessional, but I’m doing it as a friend. Since Milo brought you with him after he received the call from Sara’s grandmother, I feel it’s not totally unethical to discuss this with you.”

“Okay. Should Milo be here?”

He sighs. “That’s the problem. I’ve tried to contact him to discuss options, but he’s avoiding me. Hasn’t answered any of my calls. Without his permission, I can’t represent him or start any proceedings on his behalf.”

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees. “I know. I’ve been trying to get him out of his head ever since, and I’m failing too.”

Harrison takes out his phone and taps something. Seconds later, my phone dings.

“I’ve just sent you Gloria’s address. It wasn’t hard to find her, especially since Sienna’s driver’s license on record still had her home address. Milo may want to avoid the situation, hoping it’ll go away, but Gloria is a grieving mother. If she’s ignored, it could backfire and push her over the edge. If I were you and Milo, I’d get on the nearest flight to Chicago and talk to her personally. Appeal to her mother’s heart. I have no doubt that Milo has a good chance of winning a case against her, but it will be costly and emotionally draining.”

“Yeah, I get it. Thank you, Harrison. I appreciate this.”

MILO



I NEEDED one small victory to balance the scales back in the right direction. Brian not only coming to help out with the playground cleanup but specifically coming to me feels like that victory.

After twenty years of false accusations, being almost ostracized in my own community, and seeing the effect it had on my mother and brother, I feel grateful Brian has reached out.

He was my dad's best friend, and he knew, more than anyone, how much my dad fought for everyone, but in the end, he's only human.

Having lost his young wife to cancer shortly after losing his job would have anyone hurting to the point they're not thinking clearly.

I listen as Brian tells me story after story about my dad. The stuff that even my mom didn't know. How he fought for the right things, how funny he was at work. It seems he liked to play small pranks on his friends to lighten the mood.

The time when their work bus got stuck in the snow, and instead of going back home, they pushed the bus all the way to Chester Falls. They were in the factory for three days during the blizzard, but when they came home, they all had a small bonus because being in the factory all hours meant they produced more.

I swallow it like a thirsty child, needing to know everything my parents can't tell me themselves.

Before we take the sandwiches out for everyone, I invite Brian to have dinner with me, Ellis, and Florrie later.

Surprisingly, he doesn't decline the offer.

We set up a table under the pop-up shelter with sandwiches, chips, and other finger foods. It seems enough to feed a battalion, but we've had so many people turn up to help that I grab a sandwich for myself before they're all gone.

I look around for Ellis but don't see him anywhere.

Vera, Florrie's friend, tells me the truck with the flowers has turned up, so I go over and ask them to unload them next to the church in the shade.

After watering them to make sure they survive the heat, I go over my basic drawing for where each flower bed will go.

Tomorrow, once the soil has been turned over and additional nutrients added, I'll be able to plant the flowers. We already have volunteers to take turns maintaining the flower beds and pulling the weeds as they try to grow back.

If the mayor doesn't decide to keep the playground after all this effort from the community, there will be collective heartbreak.

The gate to the cemetery is open, so I go inside and look for my mother's grave.

The rosebush I keep for her in a stone pot needs deadheading, so I sit next to it and remove the dead rose heads to promote fresh growth.

"Hey, Mom. Sorry I haven't been here in a while. It's been a little crazy, but I guess you know that already, right? Sara is so grown up. Well, as grown up as a ten-month-old baby can be. She can walk when she's holding on to things now. I'm sure it won't take long until she's walking all on her own."

I put all the deadheads in a small pile to drop in the trash outside.

"I have so many questions and doubts, Mom. I wish you were here so I could talk to you. Brian spoke to me today. For a

while, it was like Dad was back. Even the way Brian talks is how I remember Dad talking.”

I sigh. “Anyway, I was nearby, so I wanted to see you, but I have to go. Keep an eye on us as always, okay? Love you.”

I place a kiss on my palm and run my hand over the stone.

By the time I’m back, Ellis is still nowhere I can see, but with Florrie in charge of task giving, who knows what she’s got him doing.

By late afternoon, when everyone is packing up to go home, I’m exhausted but also excited to plant the flowers tomorrow.

“Hey, Tyler, have you seen Ellis? I haven’t seen him all afternoon.”

“He got a call earlier and left. I thought he’d be back, but I haven’t seen him.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I wash my hands under the water fountain Anne’s husband managed to bring back to life and reach out for my phone. There are no missed calls or messages. I dial his number, but it goes straight to his voicemail.

Florrie has finished packing her *mission control desk*, as she calls it. A lot of stuff will remain here overnight, such as the pop-up shelter.

“Florrie, can I borrow your car to pick up Sara from Alice’s place? I can’t get hold of Ellis.”

“Sure, honey. I’ll get home and start dinner. Brian said he wanted to grab some old photos for you, so he’ll come over later.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon then.”

I park in Alice’s driveway, half expecting to see Ellis’s car there, but it’s not.

My gut tells me he’s okay, but my brain is worried.

I rush up to ring the bell. Max answers the door.

“Hey, Milo, come on in. Alice is just changing Sara’s diaper.”

“Thank you.”

I wait in their living room. “Hey, Uncle Milo,” Marnie says.

“Oh, hi, Marnie.”

“Can Sara come play with us another time? She’s really cute.”

I nod, trying to process that Marnie just called me uncle. I guess it kind of makes sense for her to think of me that way after seeing Ellis and me together over the summer.

Benji comes running over into my arms. I pick him up and sit him on my lap.

“Hello, Benji.”

“Hi, Miwo.”

“Can I just say your daughter is the best babysitter in the world? I put her in Benji’s high chair, and these two spent the afternoon staring at her with fascination. Can she come over every day?” Alice says, holding Sara.

“Hello, princess. Did you have a good day?”

She mumbles her usual words, but the ones I always recognize and fill my heart every time are Dada and a new one: Papa.

“Hey, Alice, I don’t suppose you’ve heard from Ellis. He was at the playground this morning. Tyler said he got a call and then left. I’m a little worried.”

Her smile is a little contrived. “Oh, it’s nothing to worry about. He had to make a short trip, but he’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

I take Sara and walk to the door.

“Milo? My brother has a big heart, so everything he does is because he always wants the best for everyone around him.”

I smile. “Yeah, I know.”

The drive home isn’t long, but I can’t stop thinking about what Alice said.

He went on a trip? Where? If he’s back tomorrow, he couldn’t have gone far, right?

Boston?

He lived there, so maybe he had some outstanding things to tie up from the move.

His ex...

Someone beeps their horn behind me, and I see the traffic light has turned green. I'm not quick enough and the light turns red again.

"Hey, asshole!" the man behind me shouts.

I roll the window up and focus on the lights so I don't miss them next time.

Florrie knows something's wrong as soon as I arrive to give her the keys.

"Hey, Florrie, do you mind if I don't join you for dinner? I'm not feeling great, so I'm going to give Sara her bath, and then I'm going to bed."

She reaches over and puts her hand on my forehead.

"You're not especially hot."

"What do you mean? I'm smokin'," I joke. "Sorry, Florrie. Maybe you and Brian can still have a nice time."

She crosses her arms. "Are you trying to set me up, Milo Allen?"

I gasp. "Moi? I would never."

She gives me a kiss on the cheek and one on Sara's hair.

"I can see you're not yourself, despite your awful sense of humor. Don't worry, I'll entertain Brian."

"I'll bet. Just keep it down. The walls are paper thin."

I manage to get away from her swat just in time.

"I know just how paper thin the walls are. I wish I didn't," she says.

The rest of the evening is carried out on autopilot. Bathing Sara. Giving her formula. Reading her a story. Putting her to bed.

And when it's just me alone with my thoughts, I start to panic.

What if Ellis got a call from his ex, who wants to get back together? It sounds so ridiculous when I think about it, especially when I know how hurt he was. But just like I can't bear the thought of losing Sara, I can't imagine what it would be like to think of a baby as mine and then have it taken away before I could even meet him.

I must fall asleep at some point during the night because I wake up to a knock on the door.

Rushing to it, I forget I'm in only my underwear.

"Jesus Christ, son. And they wonder why I don't like leaving my house," Brian says, covering his eyes.

I hide behind the door. "Sorry, Brian, I thought you were someone else."

"Clearly." He snorts.

"Florrie asked me to come get you because there's a bunch of people at the playground trying to stop the work. We need all the help we can get."

"Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

I open the curtains in Sara's room to let her wake up while I jump in the shower.

Thank god she always wakes up in a good mood. I get dressed in record time and prepare Sara's breakfast while also checking for any messages from Ellis.

Still nothing.

With Sara in the stroller, I walk to the playground as fast as I can.

I want to cry when I see all the people standing on the freshly prepared soil. At least I didn't plant the flowers because they would be destroyed.

As I approach, I see there's a clear standoff.

On one side are all the community members who've spent the last few weeks gathering materials, begging, donating, and

doing everything possible to ensure we could carry out the work over just one weekend.

Tyler is in the middle, facing a woman, and behind the woman is a group of people. Some of which I recognize from the store.

I don't want to get too close to people in case things get messy. I need to keep Sara safe first and foremost. Florrie sees me and comes over.

“What's going on?”

“That Martin woman has brought her rich friends, and they're protesting against the playground. Tyler is trying to keep them away, but they're pushing.”

“Florrie, can you take Sara and stay as far away from the crowd as possible? I'm going to see if I can help Tyler.”

She does as I ask, and I navigate the crowd to get to Tyler.

“What kind of person wants to destroy a children's playground to build a parking lot?” Tyler asks.

The woman sticks up her nose. “The parking lot is essential to the development of our town. Everything is growing, and there isn't enough space for all the cars.”

“Then build it elsewhere. What makes you think people will want to park this far from the town center, anyway?” he argues back.

“Hello, Mrs. Martin. It's me, from the grocery store, remember?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm. The woman is a homophobic bitch, but her gaydar must be broken because she's always nice to me at the grocery store.

“Milo, what are you doing here with these people?”

“Mrs. Martin, I live here. This is where I grew up, and this playground is where I used to play. I have a baby daughter who I hope will one day play here too.”

She wavers for a moment but stands her ground. “We need a parking lot. This land belongs to the town, and the project

must go forward. Isn't it true that, until recently, this playground was abandoned?"

"Mrs. Martin, families fight, but they always come back together. That's what's happened to this community through no fault of their own. Society and people with money ruined these people's lives. It's taken a long time, but we're coming together now. You are a mother. Surely you must understand."

Something passes through her eyes and her whole demeanor changes.

"Family can also lie and betray you and doesn't always deserve forgiveness."

"Are you describing yourself, Mrs. Martin?" Levi says, coming from behind me. "You've lied and betrayed your family. You've ruined people's lives, but that's not enough. Now you also want to ruin the lives of people who have never done you harm?"

She sniggers. "I should have known you'd be involved in this."

A police siren silences everyone. The car stops, and right behind it, there's another car.

Both a police officer and the mayor get out.

Everyone speaks simultaneously until the police officer uses a megaphone to tell everyone to keep quiet.

The mayor comes over to where we're standing.

"May I speak to Mr. Tyler David?"

Tyler comes forward. "That's me, Mr. Mayor."

"Mr. David, here's some paperwork for you to keep. It's redacted to protect the identity of the person who has completed the purchase of the land on behalf of the community."

"What does that mean?" Tyler asks.

"It means, Mr. David, that the land where the playground sits is now yours, with the condition that it remains a playground for the children of this community."

“I’m sorry. What now?” Tyler takes the envelope from the mayor. He looks as confused as everyone else around.

“Read the paperwork, Mr. David. It’s all in there.”

“Hold on, Mr. Mayor,” Mrs. Martin says. “At the last meeting, the purchase of the land for the parking lot was a done deal.”

“Mrs. Martin, I’m not at liberty to discuss details, but the buyer has made a generous offer the town could not refuse. I am sure we can find other locations within our town to build the parking lot.”

The mayor returns to his car, and the police give a disperse order.

Slowly, people either leave or return to working on the playground.

Florrie comes over and tells me I should go home. Someone’s waiting for me. Sara’s at home too.

Ellis.

ELLIS



AFTER THE RUSH of the last sixteen hours, I'm afraid I've made a huge mistake by getting involved.

I pace the small living room in Milo's house.

He comes rushing in and jumps straight into my arms.

"Ellis."

He holds me so tight I can barely breathe. Then he releases me and pushes me away.

"Where were you? I was worried sick. Why didn't you call me or leave a message?"

"I couldn't. If I told you where I was going, you would have tried to stop me."

He drops down on a chair and covers his face with his hands. "You're leaving, aren't you? You lied. You said you loved me, but you're going back to him."

"What? What are you talking about?"

He looks at me, so heartbroken. "Alice said you had to take a trip. You always follow your heart. You wanted your son more than anything."

I have no idea what he's talking about, but I kneel in front of him. "Baby, that boy was never my son. He was a dream I had, and I wanted it so much that I forgot everything else. What you and I have is more important than anything. If there's a child I ever want to be mine, that's your daughter. I want to be able to love her like a father and for her to recognize me as

such. And I want to do that with you. I don't know why you'd think I don't want you or that I'd go back to my ex—”

“Where's Sara?”

“In the nursery.”

He stands.

“Milo...”

I follow him. Sara is on Gloria's lap, playing with one of her favorite books.

She calls Dada, but Milo is frozen.

He looks at me. His eyes filled with tears.

“What did you do?”

“Milo, please listen.”

He walks out of the bedroom.

“I can't believe you'd betray me like this. You went to get her? Is she going to take Sara away?”

He walks to the door. “I can't watch it happen.”

I manage to stop him before he opens the door. “Milo, listen to me, please. No one is taking Sara away. Sara is yours. Please listen to Gloria.”

He cleans his tears with his shirt and sits at the table.

Gloria comes out of the room with Sara, handing her over to me.

“Milo, we need to talk,” she says. “But first, I need to apologize to you.”

He looks up at her.

“Finding out my daughter died at her own hand and then finding out the same day that she left a baby behind was too much for me to handle. I think I was on a happiness and adrenaline train when I bought all the toys. Then I got to my hotel room, and I realized that I hadn't processed any of the information properly. That's why I left and sent the toys through someone else. When I arrived in Chicago, there was

this emptiness. I didn't need to search for my daughter anymore. I had no purpose. So I thought my purpose was to raise Sara. I spoke to my attorney, who, by the way, gave me some bad advice, so he is no longer my attorney. That was when I called you.

“That was a misguided attempt at something I wasn't sure how to handle because I was still grieving. I tried to get back in touch, but you wouldn't take my calls. I didn't know what to do until Ellis turned up on my doorstep last night.”

Milo stares at me. “You flew to Chicago?”

I nod and smile at Gloria.

“Ellis told me he'd spoken to an attorney that suggested we come to an agreement. I've thought about it and don't want to take Sara away from you. If Sienna named you as her parent, it was because she wanted you to raise Sara. All I'd like to ask is to be her grandmother. I'd like to be able to visit her here, and maybe when she grows up, she can come visit me on her vacation. Who knows, maybe I'll move closer. It's not like I have anyone else in Chicago.”

Milo looks like he's in shock. “Are you serious? Do you really mean that?”

“Every word. I can't bring Sienna or Mikey back, but I'm sure we can sew up a new family between us, can't we?”

Milo breaks down again, and I want to hold him so badly. He stands and hugs Gloria. “I think we can do that. I'd like very much for Sara to have a real grandmother.”

Like a real mother, Gloria reaches over to a box of tissues on the table and cleans Milo's tears. “Now, I'm going to finish reading my granddaughter a story while you two talk.”

Gloria takes Sara and goes back into the nursery, closing the door behind her.

Milo looks at me, shaking his head. “I'm so—”

“No.” I break the space between us and kneel in front of him. “You don't get to apologize because you've done nothing wrong.”

“I doubted you. I doubted your love.”

“I went to Gloria behind your back, not knowing if she was going to accept my proposal or not. If anyone should apologize, it’s me.”

“How about no apologies?”

I nod. “Milo, I love you so much. Now I know why it’s taken me so long to find the kind of forever love I’ve wanted all my life. I was waiting for you. And you come in a beautiful, heartfelt, complete package that includes the best plus one in the world.”

“I love you too, Ellis.”

He pulls me closer, and I submit to his kiss, letting him own me, heart and soul. Our friends think they called it before we did, but there was always something about Milo.

In a stormy sky, Milo is the rainbow breaking through the clouds, lighting up my heart, and making me feel like I am enough. I can be loved. There’s nothing boring about me. He’s not settling with me. If that’s not the most powerful and humbling feeling in the world, I don’t know what is.

Our lips part, and we stare at each other, communicating without words.

“You missed the showdown at the playground,” he says. “It turns out Tyler now owns the land and the playground will remain a playground forever.”

“Then I guess there’s a lot of work to be done.”

Milo goes into the nursery. “Gloria, do you mind watching over Sara while we go help out at the playground? There’s a free lunch at one o’clock, so you can come over if you want. Sara’s food is in the fridge. She’ll let you know when she’s hungry.”

“Just like my Sienna,” Gloria says, caressing Sara’s hair with all the love of a grandmother. “I’ll see you later. I may have money, but I’m not stupid enough to decline a free meal.”

“You sure you’re okay leaving Sara with Gloria?” I ask after we leave the house.

“Yes. I looked into Gloria’s eyes. I know what’s in them.”

My man has an unmatched heart.

I wonder if he saw something in my eyes too. If he always knew I was his, even when I didn’t.

MILO



“SIR, would you please put your hands on the fence...that’s it...now stick your butt out...yup, just like that. Perfect.”

I hear the sound of a camera.

“Am I being arrested, officer?” I ask.

“I ask the questions here. Now turn around slowly.”

I do and try to keep a straight face when I see Ellis wearing Benji’s police officer hat and toy badge. I keep my hands raised.

“Now, what’s going on here?” he asks.

I look around and bite my lip, knowing how turned on he gets when I do my whole innocent look.

“It seems, Officer, that I am looking after your...backyard. Is there a problem?”

Sara reaches out to hold the toy badge.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to take you in. My deputy here will be doing the interrogation. Do you have the right permit to carry out this type of work?”

I look down and pat the nonexistent pockets of my shorts.

“It’s here somewhere, Officer. Maybe you’d like to carry out a search?”

He comes forward and takes my mouth in a kiss. He keeps it baby-rated, but it doesn’t have any less of an effect on me.

“Ah, of course, that’s where I keep my permit sometimes,” I say. “Maybe when your deputy is off duty, you can do a more thorough search?”

He kisses me again and then murmurs against my lips. “You bet.”

I follow him inside. “Did you really take a photo of my ass?”

“I did.”

I’m not surprised to see a stack of pancakes and a fresh pot of coffee waiting for me.

“It’s a good thing I’m doing so much physical work these days because your brunches are going straight to my ass,” I moan while adding three pancakes to my plate.

“In that case, there’s a free daily brunch available. Just stop by, and it’s yours. Come to think of it, maybe you should just move in, and then I’ll make sure you have all the brunches you need to keep your ass in top shape.”

He looks up, just realizing what he said.

I laugh. “If you didn’t mean to say it, that’s okay. I still love you. If you meant it and you’re scared I’m going to say no, then don’t worry because I’ll say yes.”

He twists his lips. “Wait...what question did I ask?”

“Doesn’t matter. The answer will still be yes.”

“So...say I suggest we drop Sara with Florrie, go out to The Academy for a light meal, then come back here to celebrate you passing your GED exams...naked...will that be a yes?”

“Did you buy a new pot of Reed’s honey?”

“Yes.”

“Then I reserve the right to change my answer to hell yes,” I say, stuffing my mouth with pancakes, chocolate syrup, and strawberries.

It feels like a lifetime ago, but it’s only been two weeks since we completed the work on the playground.

Arlo and Fletcher are still working on the photography exhibit because they had the idea of making it into a permanent installation. Each new generation will know the history of the playground and how it was saved by the community.

Plus the anonymous donator, of course.

I've also completed Ellis's backyard and already have a bunch of his neighbors asking when I'm free to help them redo theirs, which will be challenging since I'm about to start a new job working with Callan at Reed's farm.

Gerald's face when I resigned from the store will forever be framed in my memory as an unforgettable and totally satisfying moment.

After passing my GED exams, I decided I want to go to college and study landscape design, starting off with becoming a landscaper.

I guess all those books my mom read with me gave me the knowledge to do the job, but now I want to take it further and eventually start my own company.

I'm not afraid to dream and even less afraid of my dreams not coming true. The best one has, so the sky is the limit.

"I can't believe this is your last weekend before school starts again," I say.

"I know. I missed the kids though. It'll be nice going back into the classroom. Although now I'll be looking forward to my vacation time a lot more," he says.

"Did you see the letter from Gloria's new attorney?" I ask.

He nods, eating a bite of his pancake. "It's very generous of her to transfer Sienna's trust fund to Sara."

"Sienna never said anything about coming from money, and she never behaved like she cared about it that much. I guess what she and my brother had really was as true as love can be."

"Hmm, it'll be a nice story to tell Sara one day," he says.

We clean up from brunch and then take Sara back home to Florrie, who's pretending she's not dating Brian, even though he comes over for dinner almost every night.

The Academy has an early happy hour, so we head up to the bar for a drink before dinner. I see Tyler sitting alone, nursing a drink.

"Hey, Tyler, you okay?"

"Yeah, why, do I not look okay?"

Ellis raises a brow.

"No, you look fine, just...never seen you here on your own."

He shrugs and downs the drink in front of him before waving to the bartender.

When he comes over, Ellis orders our drinks too.

"Ty, you helped me when I really needed it. Friendship goes both ways, you know?" I say.

He scoffs. "I don't need a friend. I need an ax murderer."

"Okaaay," I mouth to Ellis,

"Does this have anything to do with the playground land?" Ellis asks.

Tyler scoffs again.

"The mayor said the name of the buyer was redacted. Are you trying to find out who it is? Is that it?"

Tyler stares at his drink.

"I know who it is. They didn't redact the signature. Not that I needed to see it to know who the bastard is."

"Oh. So, you know," I say.

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, don't let me be a downer on your date. I'll go take my murderous thoughts all the way home. I have next week's soup kitchen menu to plan."

I turn to Ellis after Tyler leaves. "That was a little strange, right?"

“Yeah. From what I’ve heard, Tyler’s past is this big black hole of nothing. Do you think this buyer is someone from his past?”

I get closer to Ellis. “I don’t know, but thinking of past...and more appropriately of the future...”

“Yes?”

“How about we order our dinner to go, finish our drinks while we wait, and then have a private date night at your place?”

He kisses me, lingering just a little too long, making the kiss dirtier than suitable for public consumption. “I think you’re very smart. No wonder you passed your GED with flying colors.”

I punch his gut, and he coughs. “I prefer it when you slap my ass.”

“Based on your current behavior, I’d say that’ll be a given. You continue like that and I’ll fuck you against your front door, then on the staircase, and once again in the bedroom. I won’t let you come until I’ve had my fill of you, and when I’m done, I’m going to lather your cock with honey and suck you until you come or pass out, whichever happens first. But I know what it’ll be.”

He holds me closer, and I feel his thickening erection against my thigh.

“Those sweet brown eyes and those full delightful lips hide the dirtiest mind.”

I grin.

“I think I’m not hungry anymore. I have a pack of your favorite brioches and more pancake mix if we’re hungry after.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

He laughs. “Move in with me and I can do anything and everything you want for the rest of our lives.”

I look in his eyes, wondering how I got to be so lucky, but now I know that with my mom as my guardian angel it was bound

to happen.

“Then take me home,” I say, injecting my voice with all the promise of a lifetime of worshiping the man who saw Milo, just Milo, and still fell in love with him.

He drops a few bills on the bar for the drinks, drags me out of the building toward his car and a night full of everything dreams are made of.

Dear reader, I hope you've enjoyed Ellis and Milo's story, and guess what, you can listen to it too narrated by John Solo.

Want to know what's coming next?

I've got you.

Who's the mysterious person that bought the playground for Tyler? Why is Tyler's past such an unknown?

Find out in [Heartstring, Dads of Stillwater book 3](#), how the soup kitchen manager's past comes knocking on his door, and he's not alone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ana Ashley was born in Portugal but has lived in the United Kingdom for so long, even her friends sometimes doubt if she really is Portuguese.

After getting hooked on reading gay romance, Ana decided to follow her lifelong dream of becoming an author.

These days you can find her in front of her laptop bringing her stories to life, or in the kitchen perfecting her recipe for the famous Portuguese custard tarts.

Ana Ashley writes sweet and steamy gay romance set in America, often in small towns where everyone knows everyone.

You can follow Ana on the usual social media hangouts.

For access to exclusive teasers, content, and general book and food related goodness you can now join Ana in her [Facebook Group](#), [Café RoMMance - Ana's Reader Group](#)

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