



THE MILES FAMILY SERIES BOOK ONE

BROKEN EN
miles

CLAIRE KINGSLEY

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BROKEN MILES

THE MILES FAMILY SERIES BOOK ONE

CLAIRE KINGSLEY

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To my crazy little family, for always having my back.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Broken Miles: The Miles Family Book One

This trip home would be a hell of a lot easier if she wasn't here.

Zoe. My ex-wife.

Fixing the broken finances of my family's winery is a little below my pay grade. But if I don't help, they might lose their land. The trouble is, she's everywhere, and I can't avoid her.

Seeing Zoe again dredges up feelings I'd rather ignore. Hurt. Regret. Desire. So much fucking desire. She's sassy and tough, and still the sexiest woman I've ever known.

I shouldn't want her like this.

I let her go once, and I don't deserve a second chance. But the more time I spend with her, the more I realize what we lost. What we could have again.

It might be crazy, but crazy was always our thing. And this time, I'm not going down without a fight.

ONE

ROLAND

All your shit's gone, and I'm just trying to figure out what the hell happened.

~Text from Roland, four years ago

THEY WANTED A DAMN MIRACLE. I looked over the email again, already formulating a strategy. What my boss was asking for was tough. But, as the saying went, that was why they paid me the big bucks. I was the youngest CFO in Dimension, Inc.'s history for a reason.

I was a goddamn miracle worker.

Glancing at the time, I had to do a double take. It was already after nine. I hadn't realized it was so late. But I worked late most nights, and it wasn't like there was anyone around to bitch at me about it. I didn't have plans with Farrah tonight; she was out of town. And even when we did have plans, she got it. She worked as much as I did, and she understood what it took to make it at this level. I never had to worry about that with her.

My cell buzzed, vibrating on the desk next to my laptop. Looking down, I winced. My parents' number. Their business number, to be specific. Which meant it could be either one of them calling. I didn't particularly want to take the call, but if I didn't answer, I'd have to call them back. Better to get it over with.

I picked up the phone and answered. "Yeah."

“Hey, it’s Leo.”

That was odd. My younger brother never called. An occasional text, maybe, but it wasn’t like we were close. This probably meant bad news.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You need to come out here.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Mom and Dad are on the verge of losing the winery,” he said. “It’s a mess.”

I sat back in my chair and pinched the bridge of my nose. *You’ve got to be kidding me.* “What do you mean, lose the winery?”

“The business is in debt up to its eyeballs,” he said. “Dad’s been hiding shit. It’s bad.”

“What do you expect me to do about it?”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Leo said. “Do you think I would have called you if it wasn’t a big deal? This is serious. You need to come home.”

Fuck. Home? That was the last place I wanted to go.

“Now?” I asked. “I can’t just drop everything. I’m sure Dad will figure it out.”

“Roland,” Leo said, his tone sharp. “Dad’s the one who fucked everything up. He’s not going to fix it. We need you out here, man. If this is about Zoe...”

“It’s *not* about Zoe.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose again. Just thinking about Zoe gave me a headache. Why my mom had hired my ex-wife to work at the family winery was beyond me. Although, normally I didn’t give a shit. I was in San Francisco, almost a thousand miles from my hometown in central Washington. It’s not like it had any impact on my life if she worked there.

“Because we can, I don’t know, find ways to keep some distance between you two or whatever,” he said.

“I already said it isn’t about her. I’m an adult, I can be in the same room with Zoe.”

“Good,” he said. “Then get your ass home.”

“Leo—” I stopped because I heard the click of the call ending. I tossed my phone back onto my desk. “Fuck. Fuck you, Leo. And fuck you, Dad.”

I checked my calendar. Tomorrow was out, but if I flew out early on Thursday, I could get to the winery and finish up my day from there. I sent my assistant, Danielle, a text, telling her to book me a flight to Seattle and reserve a rental car.

My concentration was shot to shit. I wasn’t going to get any more work done tonight. But it was late anyway. I closed my laptop, grabbed my things, and went home.

I’D BOUGHT my condo for the view. During the day, I could see all the way to the water. At night, the lights of the city twinkled in the darkness. It had cost me a shit-ton of money, but every night when I stood looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows, I knew it had been worth it.

I went to the kitchen and took a bottle of Glenlivet out of the liquor cabinet. Poured a glass and took a long swallow. It burned going down, spreading warmth through my chest.

Danielle texted me back with my flight details for Thursday. I blew out a long breath and took another drink of Scotch.

Home. I’d grown up in Echo Creek, a small town in the Cascade Mountains. Growing up on a winery sounded idyllic, but I’d been glad to leave it behind.

How long had it been since I’d been there? Eighteen months? More? That didn’t sound right. But I hadn’t gone back for the holidays last year. It probably had been that long.

I felt a twinge of guilt at that. It wasn’t that I disliked my family. True, my dad and I butted heads, and my siblings liked to give me crap for having moved away. But I knew my mom would like it if I came home more often.

I was just so damn busy. It was hard to carve out the time for a trip that wasn't business related. And I'd have to endure the inevitable guilt trips. *Why don't you visit more often? Can't you stay longer? Don't you want to come back and join your brothers in the family business?*

No, I fucking didn't. But none of them had ever understood why I hadn't fallen in line. Why I hadn't taken up my proper place at the winery.

I was made for bigger things than running a goddamn wine business in a small town out in central nowhere. There was no challenge to it. No risk. And the potential rewards—particularly financially—were much too low for me. Money wasn't everything, but honestly, it was most things. And I was good at making money. Great, even. I'd made my company a hell of a lot of money in the last several years.

I was respected here. People deferred to me. Trusted me with millions of dollars. I had my own office, an assistant, a penthouse condo with a priceless view. Enough money that I could have more or less anything I wanted.

I was living my dream, and I didn't understand why my family couldn't just be fucking happy for me. Why they had to harp on the fact that I wasn't there all the time. My brothers had stayed. My sister would probably wind up back home after college. They even had my ex-wife. What the hell did they need me for?

I took another sip of Scotch and wandered over to the window, wondering what my dad had done that had Leo so riled up. Leo and I rarely saw eye to eye. He wouldn't have called me over nothing. The big question was, did my dad know he'd done it? Were they expecting me to ride in with my MBA and save the day? Or was Leo going behind their backs to drag me into their mess?

I guess I was about to find out.

Thinking of home brought my thoughts back to Zoe. I went into the bedroom and set my drink down. With a glance over my shoulder—as if half-afraid someone would catch me—I pulled a small box down off a shelf in the closet.

There was only one thing inside. Zoe's wedding ring.

I'd found it sitting on the kitchen counter of our old apartment the day she'd left me. The rest of her things had been gone. Her side of the closet, empty. Her drawers in the bathroom, cleaned out. She hadn't taken much that had been ours—the things we'd accumulated together. I'd brought some of it to her later—the things I'd thought she'd want to keep—and given away the rest. But not her ring.

Keeping it was the stupidest thing. I didn't know why I still had it. It wasn't even very nice. We'd eloped when we were twenty—just a couple of poor college students. I'd saved for months to get it, and at the time, I'd been pretty damn proud of myself. Looking at it now, it was rather pathetic. Just a plain gold band with a tiny excuse for a diamond. Zoe had loved it when I'd given it to her—said she hadn't expected a ring at all.

But we'd been different people, then. Young. Rebellious and wild. Idiots, really. We'd thought teenage hormones had been the real thing. Maybe they had, in their own way. But that hadn't been enough.

It hurt to look at it, and I wondered why I did this to myself. I didn't pull it out very often. Once when I'd randomly remembered it was her birthday. Another time on what had been our anniversary. Occasionally, thoughts of her would creep into my mind and refuse to let go, and I'd find myself right here. Nursing a glass of Scotch and staring at the cheap piece of shit I couldn't bring myself to throw away.

I closed the box and put it back on the shelf. Maybe I'd get rid of it for good someday. A colleague of mine had proudly flushed his ex-wife's ring down a public toilet. Another guy I knew had taken his ring off and dropped it in a garbage can in a park near his office.

I didn't have my ring anymore. I'd lost it a few years after we'd gotten married. Zoe and I had been visiting my family for Christmas, and it had snowed. We'd been outside, embroiled in an impromptu snowball fight with my brothers. None of us had been dressed for the cold—no coats, hats, or

gloves. Just a bunch of dumbass kids tossing snow at each other until our bare hands hurt. Back inside, I'd realized my ring had come off. We'd looked, but never found it.

It had been prophetic, in a way.

But I was past that now. Zoe and I hadn't worked out. She hadn't been happy, so she'd left. Moved back to Echo Creek. Started working for my parents. She was fine, and so was I.

In fact, I was more than fine. I was at the top of my game. Whether or not my family could appreciate it, my life was pretty fucking good.

I would do what I had to do. Spend a few days at home, look at their books, probably find a few errors. Argue with my dad. Talk shit with my brothers. Let my mom fuss over me a little. Then I'd be right back here, where I belonged.

TWO

ZOE

The stack of shit on my desk never seemed to get any smaller. I'd been downstairs for most of the morning, hauling out decorations for a wedding tomorrow. It was going to be indoors, which was good. Spring in the foothills was beautiful, but chilly. It was early April, and not very warm, even though the sun was out.

The couple I was working with were fucking adorable. Both in their sixties, both on second marriages. They'd waited a long time before deciding to marry again, and to see them look at each other, I knew they had a shot at forever.

People like them were my favorite part of my job. I handled more than weddings, and I certainly had my share of first-time nuptials. Those were lovely, too. But there was something special about those second-chancers. They reminded me that love could surprise anyone, and it was never too late for a happy ending.

I took a sip of coffee and winced. It had gone cold. Gross. Glancing down, I noticed a spot on my white t-shirt where I'd dripped some. I wondered if I'd been walking around in a dirty shirt all morning.

Oh well, fuck it. It was too late to worry about it now.

I put the traitor coffee down—I'd have to get more later—and dug around the mess on my desk for another shirt. There was one beneath a bent spiral notebook, so I tugged it out and gave it a look. No stains. Sniffed it. Smelled fine. I pulled off

my offending t-shirt just as Cooper stuck his head in my office.

“Zo—what the fuck?” He turned around. “Zoe Marie Sutton, why are you getting naked in your office?”

“I’m not getting naked,” I said, laughing at his attempt to call me by my full name. “I got something on my shirt so I’m changing. And my middle name is Elizabeth.”

“Zoe Marie sounds better. And have you heard of doors?” he asked. “They do this amazing thing where they close so people don’t see you in your bra.”

“Who wouldn’t want to see me in my bra?” I pulled on the clean shirt. “I have great boobs.”

“True,” Cooper said. “You do have an excellent rack.”

I laughed. Technically, Cooper was my ex-brother-in-law. Also my boss’s son, and my co-worker. But mostly he was one of my favorite people on the planet. The little brother I’d never known I wanted.

“You can look now,” I said. “Although I don’t know why you’re being weird about it. You’ve seen me completely naked. More than once, if I recall.”

“Yeah, and it’s awkward every time you give me a goddamn boner.” He came in but didn’t sit in the chair on the other side of my desk. Cooper rarely sat down. “And I think I’ve only seen you naked once.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “There was that one time you walked in and—”

“Stop it, Zoe; I don’t need to be reminded.” He made a show of adjusting his dick. “Since technically we’re not related, I’m not immune your hotness. Even though I’m not the least bit sexually attracted to you.”

I smirked. “If you’re not sexually attracted to me, why is just the memory of my naked boobs giving you a chubby?”

“I’m a guy,” he said with a shrug. “Nice boobs equals hard-on.”

Cooper was about six years younger than me, and way too cute for his own good. He did that messy-haired, ripped abs thing quite well. People never expected him to be the farmer in the Miles family. Although he looked like a pretty boy who ought to be posing in front of a camera—except for the dirt perpetually beneath his fingernails—he spent his days working in the fields. He took care of the vineyards like they were his babies.

Adorable as he was, I'd never seen Coop as anything other than a brother. And despite the way he joked about my boobs making him hard, he saw me the same way. We just had fun messing with each other, and sometimes our banter got a little raunchy. Another reason I loved him.

“Did you come up here to talk about my boobs, or...?” I asked.

“No,” he said, and wrinkled his nose.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Well...”

“Just get it over with, Coop,” I said.

“Fine. But I want you to know ahead of time, this is all Leo’s fault. So if you’re going to get feisty with anyone, go find him.”

“Get feisty?” I asked. “Why would I get feisty with Leo?”

He grabbed the chair and tilted it backward, rocking it on its back legs. “Roland’s coming home.”

It took every bit of self-control I possessed not to let my face—or body—react to the sound of my ex-husband’s name. But I was determined to remain unaffected, and the first step in achieving that was to show no emotion.

“Why?”

“I don’t know the whole story,” he said. “Leo said something about things being worse than he thought, and we need Roland to help us sort it out. I guess something’s going on with Dad.”

Cooper's parents, Lawrence and Shannon, owned Salishan Cellars, the winery where I worked as the events manager. I'd come back here to Echo Creek after I left Roland, and much to my surprise, Shannon had offered me a job. Considering her oldest son and I were getting a divorce, it had been unexpected. But I'd worked for them before Roland and I had moved to San Francisco, and Shannon had been thrilled to have me back after my personal life went nuclear.

I was grateful to the Miles family for not ostracizing me just because I was their son's ex. For a lot of people, working for their ex's family would be a nightmare. For me, it was a godsend. And it didn't really matter that Roland's family and I were still close—that I worked for them, saw them daily, and was good friends with all three of his siblings. It didn't matter because Roland was never here.

San Francisco wasn't all that far, but Roland might as well have lived on the other side of the planet. He never came home.

"I'm confused," I said.

"You and me both," he said. "Leo won't tell me what's going on, but he wouldn't have called Roland if it wasn't serious."

That was very true. Cooper and Leo didn't exactly get along with their older brother. Roland had always resented the family business, but Cooper and Leo loved it. They lived and breathed this place, and I didn't think they'd ever understood how Roland could just leave.

I took a deep breath. I didn't love the idea of Roland being here, but it wouldn't be the first time. He came home to visit occasionally, though it had probably been at least a year and a half since I'd last seen him. Sometimes I wondered if it was me that kept him away. But of course, even when we'd still been married, he'd never wanted to come home.

"Look, I don't hate him or anything. We can get along just fine."

"Yeah?" Cooper asked.

“Yep,” I said. “Not a big deal. I’ll be too busy to notice, anyway. I have a shit-ton going on.”

“Good, because he just got here and he’s downstairs.” He dashed out of my office.

“Now?” I called after him. “Coop?”

Fan-fucking-tastic. I had eight billion things to do, but I had to go make nice with my ex-husband. Now, apparently.

I wasn’t lying to Cooper. I didn’t *hate* Roland. The man knew how to push my buttons better than anyone in existence. But I’d never hated him. Not even when I’d first left. And four years later, I still didn’t.

However, I didn’t exactly want to spend time with him either.

But I figured I should get it over with. He’d be here for a couple of days, at most, and I was sure he’d be busy with whatever Leo had called him here to do. He’d probably just be locked in an office with his parents, and I wouldn’t have to see him more than once or twice.

I stood and tightened my messy excuse for a bun, then went downstairs to get the obligatory greeting out of the way.

The Big House, as we all called it, was just that. Big. It was the winery’s showpiece, with the main lobby, tasting rooms, and our biggest indoor event venue downstairs. The second floor had a smaller event space, and several offices—mine; one for Jamie, who did the winery’s marketing and helped me with events; and a couple that weren’t being used.

Shannon and Lawrence both had offices in the building next door, which had been the original winery. The Miles family home was also on the winery property, though only Lawrence and Shannon lived there now. Cooper lived in town with his friend Chase, and Leo lived in one of the small guest houses on the property. Brynn, the youngest and only girl in the Miles clan, was going to college about half an hour away out in Tilikum.

I went down the wide staircase and paused when I caught sight of Roland. He stood in the lobby, leaning against the

front desk. True to form, he was dressed in slacks and a button-down shirt with the sleeves cuffed, showing his forearms. His dark hair was a bit different and his stubble a little thicker—it was a good look on him. He had his phone out, which was not at all surprising. The guy was always working.

His attractiveness annoyed me. Mostly because I didn't want to see him as sexy anymore. I wanted to be indifferent to him. To be unaffected. Maybe time would take care of that eventually, but it hadn't happened yet. The first thought that came to my mind was how good his arms looked with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up.

I rolled my eyes and continued downstairs. Fine, so Roland was attractive. Gorgeous, even. He was lean and muscular—I could tell he still worked out by the lines of his shoulders and chest. And those arms—god. Beautiful blue eyes. Thick dark hair. A few days' growth of stubble on his chiseled jaw.

It wasn't what was on the outside that was the problem. Never had been.

“Well, look who's here,” I said.

He looked up from his phone, a flicker of surprise crossing his features. “Oh, hi Zoe.”

We eyed each other for a moment.

“You have something on your shirt,” he said.

I stretched my shirt out and inspected it. He was right; there was a tan coffee splotch near the bottom. “Goddammit. I thought this one was clean.”

“Guess not,” he said. “How've you been?”

“Fine,” I said with a shrug. “Busy. You know, the usual. You?”

“Yeah, fine. Busy.” His phone buzzed in his hand and he looked at the screen. “Shit. I have to take this.”

I watched him walk outside, putting the phone to his ear. Heard his voice as he started to talk. Short, clipped words that I didn't process.

Well, that was anti-climactic.

With a scowl at no one in particular, I went back upstairs to my office. I guess I should have been glad I didn't have a contentious relationship with my ex. It was the same every time I saw him. A brief hello. Sometimes a few words, usually small talk. When our marriage had first ended, we'd had a few fights—mostly on the phone. But since then, there was just distance. A cool acceptance that this was how things were now.

It made me a bit sick to my stomach. I pulled at the hem of my shirt and rubbed my thumb across the coffee stain he'd noticed. Things felt awkward between us now, and I kind of hated it. There had been a time when Roland had been my best friend. The one I'd turned to when I was happy, or sad. The first person I told when I had good news. I'd once thought he was my soulmate. The person I was meant to spend the rest of my life with.

Now we were basically strangers.

How could that happen in just a few short years? We'd dated for three before getting married. And our ill-fated marriage had lasted another six. Almost a decade together, and what did it mean now?

Nothing to him, apparently.

That shouldn't have still hurt. After all, I was the one who'd left. I'd packed up my things and moved out. And I didn't regret my decision. Roland had cared about his career far more than he'd cared about me. I had become nothing more than an accessory. Someone to hang on his arm and look pretty at corporate events. When he hadn't needed me to play the part of the good wife in front of his colleagues, he'd barely remembered I existed. That had been no way to live.

I sighed and picked up my phone, flipping to my calendar. I had a client meeting in half an hour, so I needed to go home and change. It was one thing to run around in jeans and a dirty shirt when I was hauling twinkle lights and garlands out of storage, quite another when I was meeting with a client.

I'd simply have to push thoughts of Roland out of my mind. And hope he didn't stay in town long.

THREE

ROLAND

I ended the call—being away from the office was going to be such a pain in the ass—and put my phone back in my pocket. I wondered where Cooper had gone. Since arriving about fifteen minutes ago, I hadn't seen anyone else. I didn't expect to see Leo. He rarely came out of his cave. Cooper had met me when I first got to the Big House, but before I could ask where to find Mom and Dad—and what the hell was going on—he'd told me to wait and gone upstairs.

As soon as he'd come back, he'd rushed out the door again. A minute later, Zoe had appeared.

Seeing her had been fine. She'd been cordial, and so had I. No problem.

It had been weird to feel the urge to move closer and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Like an instinct I no longer needed but hadn't lost yet. And yeah, she looked good, even if she was wearing a stained shirt.

Of course, Zoe always looked good. She had blue eyes that contrasted with her brown hair. High cheekbones. Full lips. She cleaned up nice, when she tried. But there had always been something appealing about messy Zoe. That girl with careless hair and clothes that didn't match. Little tattoos on her wrists and a tiny stud in her nose.

I let out a breath and shook my head. No point in following *that* train of thought. It didn't matter how beautiful Zoe was. I wasn't here to see her, anyway.

Cooper reappeared. He was dressed in a faded Salishan Cellars t-shirt, worn-out jeans, and work boots. He adjusted his cheap sunglasses. “So, everything okay?”

I knew what he was really asking, but I wanted to ignore anything having to do with Zoe right now. “Other than the fact that I still have no idea what the fuck I’m doing here, yeah.”

He nodded. “Cool. I don’t know what Leo’s doing. I guess we should go find Mom.”

“Is Dad around?” I asked.

“I think so,” Cooper said. “Haven’t seen him today, though.”

“Does he know I’m coming?”

“That’s a good question,” Cooper said.

I let out a sigh. Great. This should be fun.

We walked across to what was now known as the Little House. It had been the original winery until they built the Big House about ten years ago. Guests didn’t come here anymore, which was a good thing. The remodel had been half-finished for years. The former lobby was cluttered with construction materials, and big sheets of plastic covered one of the walls, which had been torn down to the studs.

I’d known when my dad had started work on the building that it was a bad idea. Mom had agreed, but Lawrence Miles had a tendency of doing what he wanted.

The second floor looked the same as it had last time I’d been here. Dad hadn’t done any demo up here, so the walls were intact. My mom, Shannon, was the head winemaker, so I wasn’t sure how much time she actually spent in her office, but that’s where we found her.

My mom had long dark hair streaked with silver and she always wore it in a ponytail. Fine lines around her eyes hinted that she was in her mid-fifties, but she didn’t look much older than forty. She was dressed in a plain black t-shirt and had a pair of dark-rimmed reading glasses perched on her nose.

“Hey, Mom,” Cooper said.

She looked up from her laptop and her eyes widened. “Roland?”

“Yeah, hi, Mom,” I said.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” she asked, setting her glasses down. She stood and walked over to wrap me in a hug. Her head only came up to my chest. I’d inherited my father’s stature; Mom was tiny.

I glanced at Cooper and he shrugged. “It was last minute. Leo called me.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah, he said something about the winery being in trouble?” I asked.

Mom sighed, and her shoulders slumped. Her skin was pale and I noticed faint circles beneath her eyes. “We’ve been having financial troubles for the last year. I think it’s gotten worse, but you know how your father is.”

I did know. He was tight-lipped and defensive. “Where is he? And where’s Leo? I’ve texted him three times to tell him I’m here.”

“I’m sure Leo’s at home,” Mom said.

That was probably true. He didn’t come out unless he had to. But why wasn’t he answering me?

“I can go check,” Cooper said. I had a feeling he just wanted an excuse to go back outside. He didn’t like being indoors.

“Look, I disrupted my entire week to come out here because Leo made it sound like there was an emergency,” I said. “Was he messing with me, or are you really on the brink of losing the winery?”

Mom’s mouth opened slightly, and Cooper made a strangled sound in his throat. “On the brink of... Leo said that?” she asked.

I brought out my phone and called Leo. He never answered, but I’d leave him a voicemail. I was sick of this

already. It was the same old bullshit. No one talked to each other around here—at least not about anything important. They had no problem dissecting the details of my failed marriage over dinner, but sharing information about the family business? Not so much.

Leo's voicemail picked up. "Leo, where are you? I'm standing in Mom's office, she didn't know I was coming, and I have no idea where Dad is. Why am I—"

"Hey, Roland."

I stopped mid-sentence at the sound of Leo's voice behind me and ended the call. "I was just leaving you a message."

"Sorry."

Leo stood sideways, keeping the left side of his face and body tilted toward the hall outside Mom's office. As a teenager, Leo had been a clean-cut, smooth-jawed football star. Now he wore a shaggy beard and long hair that draped over the sides of his face. He'd served in the Army, and during a tour in Afghanistan, he'd been caught in an explosion. He'd suffered burns down the entire left side of his body. He was lucky to be alive, but the scars were brutal.

He'd covered most of his left arm and leg with tattoos, but there wasn't much he could do about his face. Even after several corrective surgeries, the lower part of his face was mangled on the left side.

"I'll go find your dad," Mom said. "I'll meet you downstairs."

I followed Leo and Cooper down to what had once been the main tasting room. Now it was set up like a farm-style version of a conference room. It had a long rustic table with matching chairs—probably all built by Ben, Salishan's longtime groundskeeper and handyman. There were framed black and white pictures on one wall—vintage photos of my great-grandparents, who had founded the winery, and my grandparents, who had seen it grow from a tiny operation to something closer to what it was today.

My great-grandparents had bought the first plot of land and planted a vineyard, decades before most of the other wineries in this area had been built. They'd named it Salishan Cellars as a nod to the Native Americans who'd once lived here. Salishan was the name for the family of languages spoken in this region—languages that were almost extinct now.

Leo took a seat on one side of the table, at the end so he wouldn't have anyone sitting on his left. Cooper paced, wandering up and down the length of the room. I sat, but checked my email while we waited for my parents. God, I had so much to do. I hoped I could get this wrapped up quickly.

My dad's heavy footsteps heralded his entrance. Lawrence Miles was always in a hurry. It didn't seem to matter what he was doing—working, walking through a theme park on a family vacation, or coming downstairs for breakfast—he moved at the same frenetic pace.

Mom came in behind him. Dad's hair was peppered with gray, and he was thicker in the middle than I remembered. He stopped when he spotted me.

“Roland.”

“Hi, Dad,” I said.

“What are you doing here?” His gaze moved around the room, pausing on each of us. I could see his defenses going up. He thought we were here to gang up on him.

I supposed we were, although I still didn't know exactly why.

“I called him,” Leo said. “I know the truth, Dad. I had to do something.”

Dad crossed his arms. “What are you talking about?”

Leo sighed. “The bank is going to foreclose on us.”

For the space of a heartbeat, there was silence. Then the room erupted with voices, everyone trying to talk at once. Dad barked at Leo, Mom yelled at Dad. Cooper shouted, but it was impossible to tell who he was yelling at. Leo stood and

pointed at Dad, saying something I couldn't hear over all the noise.

I slammed my hand down on the table with a loud crack. "Shut the hell up, all of you!"

Amazingly, they all went silent.

"Everyone, sit down," I said. "If you want to yell at each other, do it over the dinner table. This is a business. Let's act like it."

Leo lowered himself back into his seat, and Cooper took the chair next to me. Mom sat, but Dad stood next to the table. I didn't bother pushing the issue. Had to pick my battles with Dad.

"Leo, why do you think the bank is ready to foreclose?" I asked.

"I went through Dad's office," he said.

"You what?" Dad asked, his voice filled with outrage.

I held up a hand. "Dad, hold on. Leo?"

"I talked to Chase recently," Leo said. Chase was Cooper's roommate and longtime best friend. He was also the mechanic who worked on the winery's machinery. "He didn't want to make it awkward for Coop, so he came to me. We owe him a lot of money. Apparently it's been months since we've paid him."

"What the shit?" Cooper asked.

"Watch your mouth, Cooper," Mom said.

"That's not the first time I've heard we weren't paying our bills," Leo said. "We all knew things were tight, but this is Chase. That's personal."

"Leo, you should have talked to Dad about it," Mom said.

"I did," Leo said. "He blew me off."

Cooper and Dad both started to talk, but I held up my hand again and glared at them both. "Wait."

“I was suspicious,” Leo continued. “Like I said, I knew we were behind on other bills, too. I tried to ask where we stood, but...”

Leo trailed off, and I could guess what had happened. Dad had gotten angry, so Leo had dropped it—and apparently decided to find out the truth on his own.

“And the bank?” Mom asked.

“Threatening foreclosure,” Leo said. “I don’t have all the numbers, but we must owe a lot of money for it to have gone this far.”

“Is that true?” Mom asked, turning to my dad.

“Yes, but I’m working on some things,” Dad said.

“How could you let it get this bad without telling me?” Mom asked.

It was a very good question. My brothers and I stayed quiet and waited to see if Dad would answer.

“I have it under control,” Dad said, grinding out the words through clenched teeth.

I forced myself to pause before I spoke. The younger me would have made a sarcastic remark, but it only would have sparked a pointless argument. I’d spent half my life arguing with my father. Right now, I didn’t need to be Roland the son, I needed to be Roland the businessman. The guy with solutions, who could make financial miracles happen. Because if the bank was threatening foreclosure, that’s what Salishan Cellars needed—a miracle.

“The first thing Salishan needs is stability,” I said. “Let me use my connections with the banks to take the edge off.”

“Roland—”

“Dad,” I said, cutting him off, my voice smooth and even, “you run things like usual while I stop the hemorrhaging. I can buy you some time.”

He cast a quick glance at Mom, then looked at me again and nodded.

“I’ll need a couple of days,” I said. “And I can take a look at the books to see what else I can do.”

“I don’t think so,” Dad said. “It’s one thing for you to call in a favor with the bank. It’s quite another to give you access to all our confidential financial information.”

“Lawrence,” Mom said, “he’s our son.”

“Our son who doesn’t work here,” Dad said.

Don’t react. This was business. I wasn’t going to let him make it personal. “I can put a bandage on the wound. But it’s only going to start bleeding again, and you’ll be right back here in six months.”

“Let him help,” Mom said. “We can’t lose this land, Lawrence. We *can’t*.”

I hated the fear in my mom’s voice. This place had been in her family for generations. Thankfully, my brothers held their tongues. If one of them started in again, they’d all wind up yelling, and we’d never get anywhere.

Come on, Dad. Do the right thing.

“Fine,” Dad said. “I’ll get you what you need tomorrow. I have too much to do this afternoon.”

I kept my face still despite the flare of annoyance. Tomorrow. That meant today was half wasted. “Okay.”

Dad’s eyes darted around to everyone again, and Leo met his gaze without flinching. I had to respect that. Standing up to our father had never been easy.

“I have to get going,” Dad said. Without another word, he walked out the door.

Leo got up and squeezed Mom’s shoulder before leaving. She touched his hand and thanked him. Cooper hugged her and kissed her forehead, then nodded to me.

Mom didn’t get up, so I waited while Cooper shut the door behind him.

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell me,” she said.

“He was hoping he could fix it and you wouldn’t have to know.” I didn’t particularly want to defend my dad, but that was probably the truth. “He doesn’t want you to worry about the business side of things.”

“I should worry about the business side of things,” she said. “I’ve always let him handle it, but I should be more involved.”

“Well, maybe now you can be,” I said. “This gives you a good reason.”

She nodded. “You can use one of the offices upstairs in the Big House while you’re here.”

“Sure, thanks.”

“Do you want to stay at the house with us?” she asked. “Or use one of the guest cottages?”

“I was just going to check into a hotel in town.”

She scowled at me. “Roland, you do not come home and stay at a hotel in town. Especially not when we have so many unused beds right here. You don’t have to stay at the house, but at least use the Hummingbird Cottage. It’s all made up and ready.”

That was my mom for you. I was thirty-one years old, and she was still trying to mother me. The winery grounds had several guest houses, all with corny names like *Hummingbird Cottage*. My grandmother had insisted every building have a name, and the guest houses were decorated inside to match. They’d been built for paying guests, but Salishan had gotten out of the overnight hospitality business years ago. Now they were used for family and other guests who came to visit.

I didn’t really want to stay on the property, but if it would make my mom happy...

“Hummingbirds it is,” I said.

She smiled and put her hand over mine. “Thank you for coming. I’m glad you’re here.”

I cleared my throat to suppress the flare of emotion that stole through my chest. “Don’t worry, Mom. You guys aren’t

going to lose the winery. I won't let that happen."

Her eyes shimmered with tears, but she swallowed them back and sat up straighter. "No, we're not. I won't let it happen, either. Let me know what I can do to help. Even if it's just running interference between you and your dad."

I nodded. Keeping space between me and my dad would be better for everyone.

But I wouldn't be here for long. I kissed my mom, then went out to grab my stuff and take it over to the guest house. I needed to get set up in that empty office. I had a shit-ton of work to do.

FOUR

ROLAND

A week. I'd been here an entire fucking week. I hadn't spent this much time in Echo Creek since I was married to Zoe.

God, why did I choose *her* as my metric? It couldn't have been *since I lived here*, or *since college*? I had to measure things in terms of my ex?

I didn't know why she was on my mind. I'd barely seen her.

Since I'd convinced Dad to let me dig in and help with the finances, I'd been spending most of my time in what Cooper was now calling *Roland's office*. I reminded him daily that it wasn't *my* office. I had an office, in a high-rise building in downtown San Francisco. With a great fucking view. And an assistant sitting at a desk outside my door who had been madly rearranging my schedule as my *quick trip home* stretched out indefinitely.

I was still doing my actual job, just from here. All I needed was wifi, and thanks to Leo, the internet here was reliable. But between conference calls, answering emails, and basically trying not to sabotage my career, I was buried in the disaster that was Salishan Cellars.

And Zoe? I didn't know where she was most of the time. I could hear her come and go. Her office was two doors down from where I was sitting. But when she was in there, she kept the door closed. And the rest of the time, she was out and about, doing her thing. Always busy.

Or maybe avoiding me.

I needed to quit thinking about her.

My phone buzzed, vibrating against the table. I pushed my laptop aside and checked. My brother.

Cooper: Stop working. Come drink.

Me: Thanks, I'm good.

Cooper: Not acceptable. Get your ass down here.

Me: Where?

Cooper: Mountainside Tavern

I stared at my phone, waffling between telling him no, and sucking it up and going down there. I had a lot of work to do, but if I didn't, he'd probably keep bugging me.

And there was a small part of me that was glad for the invite. Glad to be included, like I still belonged here.

Me: Fine.

I saved the files I'd been working on and closed my laptop. The time caught my eye. Was it really after ten? I hadn't realized it was so late. I guess I'd done enough for one day.

Cooper was indeed at Mountainside, in a booth with Chase. The winery had a serious cash flow problem, but I'd made sure Chase had been paid about a third of what they owed him. We'd get him the rest, it would just take a little time. But like Leo had said, this was Chase. It was personal.

Coop raised his beer to me, then glanced over his shoulder and waved to get the bartender's attention. "Good man. Come. Sit. Order a beer. Take a load off."

I took a seat across from Chase. His dark hair was slicked back, like he'd been wearing a baseball cap all day. Even though he was eight years out of high school and no longer playing school sports, he hadn't gone the way of a lot of the guys around here, who had beer guts before they were thirty. Like Cooper, Chase kept in good shape.

"Thanks again," Chase said. "For helping get shit under control."

“Yeah, no problem,” I said. The bartender came to the table and I ordered a Mack and Jack’s African Amber. “We’ll get things squared away with you as soon as we can.”

“This whole thing still pisses me off,” Cooper said. “I was basically stiffing you. Such bullshit.”

“It’s not like you sign the checks,” Chase said. “Are things really as bad as people are saying?”

“What people?” I asked.

Chase shrugged. “Word around town is that Salishan is pretty much screwed. On the brink of closing.”

“Hell no,” Cooper said. “The fucking bank will have to haul my cold dead corpse off that land before I’ll leave it.”

It was weird, but I realized the vehemence in Cooper’s voice wasn’t for show. He wasn’t exaggerating. I had a sudden vision of him standing at the entrance to the property with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, guarding the family land. In some ways, Cooper had been born in the wrong era. He should have been a homesteader back in the Wild West.

“It’s not going to come to that,” I said.

“Don’t listen to those assholes, anyway,” Chase said. “Gossipy bitches.”

Things were bad. That was true enough. And after a week of trying to get a handle on things, I still didn’t know what they needed to do about it.

“No Leo tonight?” I asked.

Chase paused, his beer partway to his mouth, and Cooper cleared his throat.

“Uh, no,” Cooper said. “Leo doesn’t leave the property.”

He said that like I was an idiot for not knowing.

“He doesn’t go anywhere?”

“Nope,” Cooper said. “Hasn’t left once since he came home.”

“How is that possible?” I asked. “He’s been home for three years, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah, and he hasn’t left the property in three years,” Cooper said.

I could tell Cooper was getting annoyed with me, but this was freaking me out. “That can’t be right. How does he get groceries, or go to the doctor? How did he get all his ink done?”

“He orders shit online,” Cooper said. “And has people come to him. I’m telling you, Leo hasn’t set one foot off Salishan land since he came home.”

How did I not know that? “Shit,” I said.

Chase’s eyes widened, and he grabbed a baseball cap from the seat next to him, then shoved it on his head and pulled the brim low.

Cooper snort-laughed. “Dude, isn’t that Shelly?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Chase hissed.

“Wait, did you hit that?” Cooper asked. “When?”

Chase scowled. “A few weeks ago.”

I glanced over at the bar. A pretty blonde wearing an off-the-shoulder red shirt and skin-tight jeans stood chatting with the bartender.

“She’s cute,” I said. “What’s the problem?”

Chase hunkered down lower in the booth. “Nothing. It would just be better if she doesn’t see me.”

“So you’re saying you don’t want me to get her attention?” Cooper asked.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Chase said.

Cooper snickered.

“Look, I hooked up with her a few times, and it was cool,” Chase said. “But I’m not into the whole relationship thing, so I called it off. She wasn’t thrilled about that.”

“We should see if she’ll throw a drink in his face,” Cooper said.

“Fuck you, dick,” Chase said. “I just don’t want to hurt her feelings or whatever.”

“Admirable,” Cooper said. “I’ll let it stand.”

The girl in red—Shelly, apparently—walked past our booth. Chase twisted in his seat and pretended like he’d dropped something. I couldn’t help but laugh. Cooper and Chase had been like this since we were all kids. Always giving each other shit. Now they had well-earned reputations as Echo Creek’s resident playboys. I kept wondering when they’d outgrow it, but they both seemed happy to keep living the single life. Maybe they just hadn’t found the right girls to settle them down.

Movement caught my attention from the corner of my eye, and I glanced over. There was a couple sitting at the bar who hadn’t been there a moment ago. I didn’t know the guy, but I did a doubletake when I saw the girl. Was that Zoe?

“What’s up?” Cooper asked. He leaned over me to look, then muttered *oh shit* under his breath. “Sorry, man. I didn’t know she’d be here.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

Chase raised his eyebrows at Cooper.

“Knock it off, assholes,” I said. “I’ve seen her around a bunch of times. It’s not a big deal.”

I *had* seen her around, and it hadn’t been a big deal. But it had just been *her*. Now she was with some guy? Who the fuck was he? Not that I gave a shit who she was with. I had no right to care.

But seriously, who was he?

“That’s Van.” Cooper said.

Ah, hell, was it that obvious what I’d been thinking?
“What?”

Cooper nodded toward the bar. “The guy with Zoe. His name is Van.”

What the fuck kind of name was *Van*? “I didn’t ask.”

“Yeah, but you wanted to know,” Cooper said.

“I just didn’t know Zoe was dating anyone,” I said, trying to sound casual. Because I was. I didn’t care.

“She’s not really *dating* him,” Cooper said. “He’s just her boycycle.”

“Boycycle?” I asked.

“You know,” Cooper said. “They’re friends, but she takes him for a ride once in a while.”

That was weird. It didn’t sound like Zoe.

Chase laughed. “That’s not a thing. You made that up.”

“It’s definitely a thing,” Cooper said.

“If that’s a thing, I’m down to be someone’s boycycle.” Chase took another drink, then set his beer down. “Especially if she’s as hot as Zoe.”

“Knock it off, asshole,” Cooper said. “Zoe’s off limits.”

“I know,” Chase said. “I said *as hot as Zoe*. I didn’t say Zoe. Even you have to admit, Zoe is hot as fuck.”

“No shit,” Cooper said, and I shot him a glare. “What? It’s just the truth. Any man can see she’s hot.”

“I bet your spank bank is full of Zoe pics,” Chase said. “Do you take them at work when she isn’t looking?”

I leveled Chase with a stare. I was two seconds from hauling him outside and beating the shit out of him. Not that he couldn’t give me a run for my money. But I was mad enough, I didn’t fucking care.

“Chase, no,” Cooper said, shaking his head.

“Too far?” Chase asked.

“Definitely too far,” Cooper said.

I picked up my beer and took a long pull, deciding to ignore Chase, and willing myself to not look in Zoe's direction. What the fuck did I care if she had a boyfriend? We'd been divorced for years. I'd moved on. I'd been dating Farrah for almost a year. She'd moved on, too. Perfectly normal.

But I was still fuming inside.

Cooper and Chase started talking about something else, but I was only half listening. Had Zoe noticed I was here? Was she going to come over and say hi? Oh god, was she going to introduce me to her douchebag boyfriend?

It made me think about what it would be like to bring Farrah out here. Introduce her to my family. Show her the winery. What would happen when I introduced her to Zoe?

I could picture it. It would be awkward, but Zoe would be friendly. Hell, she'd probably even be happy for me. So why did a sick feeling spread in the pit of my stomach at the thought of introducing Farrah to my ex-wife?

I pulled out my phone and checked my messages. I'd texted Farrah to let her know I'd be out of town for a few days, but I couldn't remember if she'd replied. She hadn't. That wasn't too surprising. She was busy, and about the most low-maintenance woman I'd ever known. She didn't need to talk to me all the time—didn't need constant reassurance. We often went a week or more without speaking, but it was because we were both busy. She was as career-driven and focused as I was. It was why we worked.

For a second, I thought about texting her again to see if she was back in town. But I didn't know how long I'd be out here, so I didn't bother. I'd see her when I got back to San Francisco.

Which had to be soon. I couldn't be away from the office for too much longer. But there was still so much shit to do here. The winery's financial records were a mess. I was still trying to sort out who they owed money to, and the list kept growing.

“Quit thinking about work,” Cooper said.

I blinked. “What?”

“You’re babysitting your beer and thinking about work,” Cooper said. “Lighten up. When did you turn into such a *suit*?”

“Whatever, farm boy,” I said.

“Your insult game is a disgrace,” Cooper said. “Seriously, I thought I raised you better than that. We need to get something other than half a beer in you, or I’m going to throw your ass out.”

Cooper got up and went to the bar. He elbowed Zoe, and she punched him in the arm. While Cooper talked to the bartender—rubbing his arm where she’d hit him—Zoe glanced toward our booth. Our eyes met, and she nodded before turning back to whatever-the-fuck his name was.

And that was it. We were just two people who used to know each other. Nothing more.

Cooper brought back three shots of whiskey and slid them onto the table. I grabbed one and swallowed it, then snatched Cooper’s before he could drink it. Downed that one, too.

Suddenly, I didn’t want to be quite so sober anymore.

FIVE

ZOE

It's not an ultimatum. It's too late for that. I made a choice.

~Text from Zoe, four years ago

ROLAND'S PRESENCE in the bar made my back prickle. I faced forward on the stool, like drinking this beer was the most important thing I had going on tonight.

I was going to have Cooper's ass for this. It was bad enough that Roland was still here after a week—spending his days in an office two doors down from mine. Now he had to show up at *my* bar? With *my* friends?

Hell no, Cooper. Hell no.

Of course, I wouldn't ask Coop to choose between me and his own brother. But still. Did they have to come *here*?

Sitting here with Van, in front of Roland, felt oddly shitty. I couldn't sit still—constantly shifted on my stool, like I was doing something wrong.

Obviously, I wasn't. I'd bumped into Van at the store earlier, and he'd asked if I wanted to grab a beer. I didn't have other plans, so I figured, why not? It was just a beer. The fact that Van and I went to the bedroom rodeo sometimes didn't have anything to do with... well, anything. It certainly had nothing to do with Roland.

"You okay?" Van asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry, I guess I’m just worn out. It’s been a long week, and it’s not even Friday yet.”

“That sucks,” he said.

It *had* been a long week, and not just because Roland was here. It felt like my to-do list was longer at the end of each day than at the beginning—like I added twice the number of things I checked off. Plus, I’d had a vendor flake out on me, and a bridezilla bitch me out on the phone earlier.

I sipped my beer and listened to Van for a while, giving short replies so I wasn’t being a total asshole to him. Van was a cool guy. He was fun to hang out with, at least.

He’d never been married, and never wanted to be. Didn’t want a family. Liked his life the way it was. Despite my divorce, I was open to the possibility of trying again. In fact, I wanted that. I wanted to find the right man. Get married. Do it right this time. Van didn’t, and he’d told me that when we’d met.

I’d appreciated his honesty and returned it. Said I liked him, but I didn’t see us having a future together—and that I did want a future with someone.

We’d reached an understanding. Which in practice meant we hung out sometimes, and usually wound up in bed.

It worked. We had fun together, and a casual sexual relationship was fine. I’d dated a couple of men before Van, and they’d been cool guys, too. But those relationships hadn’t gone anywhere. We’d had some fun, but there hadn’t been a future in it for me, and I’d known it. I hadn’t wanted to lead them on, so I’d ended things.

Which brought me back to sitting in a bar with Van, my ex-husband in a booth behind me.

“You seem out of it,” Van said. He reached over and rubbed a few circles across my back. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m sorry, was I not listening?”

He smiled. “Not really. You wanna get out of here?”

That meant, *do you want to go somewhere and have sex?* Usually, I would have said yes. A nice fuck was a good way to de-stress. But the thought of sleeping with Van left me with a weird feeling in my tummy. Not a happy *let's go have an orgasm* feeling. A shitty *you'll regret it if you do* feeling.

“I think I’m just going to call it an early night,” I said. “Go home and get some sleep.”

He hesitated, his hand still on my back, and I wondered if he was going to push.

“All right,” he said, dropping his hand. He gestured to my beer. “Do you want another, or are you done?”

“I’m done.”

He motioned for the bartender.

“You don’t have to buy my drink,” I said.

“It’s cool,” he said. “I think you got mine last time.”

That was probably true. We tended to alternate picking up the tab, more or less.

“Thanks.”

I put on my coat while he settled with the bartender. Roland was still in the booth with Cooper and Chase. They had a line of shot glasses in the middle of the table, and Roland had his buzzed face on. Eyelids a little droopy. Mouth relaxed with a hint of a smile.

For a second, I thought about going over to talk to them. It shouldn’t be a big deal. It was no secret I was good friends with Cooper. I hung out with him and Chase all the time.

And Roland was fun when he was buzzed. Or he had been, when we were younger. But thinking about drinking with Roland led to thinking about what we’d always done *after* drinking.

Sex. Lots of sex.

Crazy, freaky, out-of-control monkey sex.

And suddenly my fun zone was all lit up, like the memory of some drunken sexual encounters had flipped my arousal switch past *on* and straight to *overdrive*.

Okay, so calling them *drunken sexual encounters* was selling the whole thing short. Way short. Trashed or sober, Roland and I had been hot enough to melt steel.

I should have been able to admit that now—think about it and acknowledge it for what it was—without soaking my fucking panties. Jesus.

Shooting a glare at Cooper for bringing Roland here, I pulled my hair out from the collar of my coat. I had a very uncomfortable throbbing between my legs, and it was all Roland's fault. He was throwing me off, making everything feel awkward. I should be dragging Van to his place—he lived closer—for a tension-relieving orgasm.

But all I could think about was how Roland's orgasms hadn't just been tension-relieving. They'd been fucking mind-blowing.

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and followed Van to the door. Why was I letting Roland cockblock me like this? It wasn't like he cared. There was no ring on my finger. Those divorce papers were signed, sealed, and recorded. I could sleep with Van if I wanted to. I wasn't hurting anyone.

Just before leaving, I glanced over my shoulder. Roland was turned in his seat, looking right at me. Watching me leave the bar with another man.

The back of my throat burned, and I was a little worried I might vomit all over the sidewalk. How would I explain that? I'd puked on this sidewalk before, but only when I'd been stupid enough to do shots with Cooper and Chase. Or that one time when I'd been here with some girlfriends and we'd had all those margaritas. Tonight I'd had one beer, and I hadn't even finished it.

The cool air outside helped, but I was still all knotted up inside. Frustrated. Annoyed. Stupid cockblocking ex-husband. Stupid hot sex memories. Stupid raging hormones.

I said goodbye to Van—he still looked hopeful until I pulled out my keys—and drove home. I was cranky and uncomfortable, wondering what the hell was wrong with me.

MORNING CAME ALL TOO SOON, and I was *not* in the best mood. I hadn't slept well. Despite resorting to my battery-operated boyfriend, the self-indulgence hadn't been very satisfying. My mind kept wanting to show me scenes from my sordid sexual history with Roland. I didn't *want* to fantasize about my ex-husband in order to get off. It was weird and frustrating. I hadn't fantasized about him once since our relationship had ended—at least, not about having sex with him. I'd pictured hitting him over the head with something solid a few times, but not sex. But last night? Every image in my head had become him.

Something was very wrong with me.

I rooted around on my desk, looking for a pen. I really needed to spend some time cleaning this thing off, but it never seemed to make it to the top of my priority list. I found one—purple, not blue or black, but it would do—and proceeded to look for the notepad I'd had in my hand two seconds ago.

“Morning.”

I glanced up at Roland's voice, staunchly ignoring the way my heart skipped at the sight of him. He stood in the hall outside my half-open door, dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks. His hands were in his pockets, and he shifted closer.

“Hi,” I said.

“I'm surprised you're here already.”

I looked over at my computer screen, checking the time. It was eight-thirty. I was here by eight most mornings, although my schedule varied on days I had an event to manage.

“Why?” I asked. “I'm usually here at this time.”

He lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. “You were out drinking last night.”

“Out drinking?” I asked. What was he talking about? I’d arrived at the bar after him and left before he did. “I had a beer. That wasn’t really *out drinking*. You were the one doing shots with the goofball boys.”

He winced a little, and I noticed he did look a little rough this morning. Not enough that most people would be able to tell, but I knew him. He needed a glass of ice water, a black coffee, and a greasy breakfast. In that order.

“Yeah, we had a few drinks,” he said. “But I went home alone and got a full night’s sleep.”

I spotted my notepad and opened it, flipping to a blank page so I could jot down a few things. I was about to reply with *So did I*, when I realized what he’d just said. *I went home alone and got a full night’s sleep.*

Was he giving me shit about leaving the bar with Van?

He still had his hands in his pockets, but there was fire in his eyes. He *was* giving me shit about Van. That was rich. I was sure he hadn’t been celibate since we’d broken up.

For a second, I thought about lying to him. Making some comment about being tired after a trip to pound-town last night. What can I say, I’m only human. But I didn’t.

“Yeah, I did too.”

“You... oh,” he said. “You went home alone?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I went home alone. Went to bed.” *Didn’t sleep because you cockblocked me out of a perfectly decent orgasm.*

He shifted his feet and his shoulders slumped—just a tiny movement, but I could tell I’d deflated whatever fight he’d been hoping to pick with me.

“I wasn’t trying to get in your business,” he said. “I just saw you leave the bar with...”

“Van,” I said.

His lip twitched in a hint of a smile. “Van? What kind of a name is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

His face froze. I had no idea if he had a girlfriend—I didn’t really want to know—but judging by his expression, he did.

He cleared his throat. “Farrah.”

A hot spark of anger flared to life in the pit of my stomach. He’d stopped by my office at eight-fucking-thirty to give me a hard time about leaving a bar with another man, and he had a *girlfriend*? I could look past it if he’d just been pumping me for information—looking to satisfy his curiosity about my relationship status. But he’d been with Cooper and Chase last night. They would have filled him in.

“You can quit with the passive aggressive thing,” I said. “If you’d like to say something about my personal life or who I spend time with, just come out and say it.”

“I don’t have anything to say about your personal life,” he said.

“Right.” I stood up and slipped my phone in my back pocket. “That’s why you’ve been here for over a week and the first time you talk to me is after you see me leave a bar with someone.”

He opened his mouth like he was going to argue, but closed it and looked away. “I’ve talked to you. I’ve just been busy. So have you.”

Of course he had. Roland was *always* busy. It was still a lame excuse. But I didn’t want to argue with him.

“Yeah, I have been,” I said. “I’m sure you are, too.”

He nodded, meeting my eyes. For a heartbeat, my irritation at him melted away, and I just saw *him*. Roland. With his thick hair and sexy stubble. The guy I used to know.

The guy I used to be really fucking in love with.

“You have something on your shirt again,” he said.

I blinked and looked down. There was a tan splotch on my shirt, right across my left boob. “Fuck. This is a nice shirt, too.”

Roland grinned, and I shot him a glare. I was back to being annoyed. “Speaking of busy, I have a lot to do, so...”

His expression fell, his smile quickly replaced by his usual serious-and-distracted look. “Yeah, me too.”

He walked away, and I rolled my eyes. The nerve of that guy. God, why was he still here?

And once again, I needed a new damn shirt.

ROLAND

I went down the hallway to my office. No, wait... it wasn't *my* office. It was *an* office I was using. Temporarily.

Although I'd managed to buy some time with the bank, the winery's books were a mess. My dad was good at some things, but he'd started doing a lot of the accounting himself a few years back. He probably thought he could save money if their accountant had less to do, but the result was a fucking nightmare to deal with.

I wanted to consolidate their debt and lower their monthly overhead. Should have been easy, but with my dad's haphazard records, it was proving to be a lot of work. Plus, I still had my own job to do.

Zoe's door closed as I sat down at the desk. No doubt she'd closed it to keep me from bugging her. I didn't know what had possessed me to stop and talk to her. She was right, I hadn't tried to make conversation since I'd been here. Nothing more than a quick *hi* if I happened to see her, more out of politeness than anything.

But the image of her walking out of the bar with that guy was burned into my memory. Like a bad dream I couldn't shake, hours after waking up.

I knew I had no right to be bothered by it. But really, *that* guy? He had prick written all over him. And Cooper had said he wasn't even her boyfriend, just a guy she hooked up with sometimes. I didn't get it. Zoe wasn't the kind of girl to be some douchebag's fuck buddy. In fact, it would have bothered

me less to see her with an actual boyfriend. At least that would have been good for her. Why was she wasting her time with someone who didn't give a shit about her?

My phone rang, and I was surprised to see Farrah's name on the screen. I still hadn't talked to her since I'd left San Francisco.

"Hey," I said. "Are you back in town?"

"Yeah," she said. "Got in late last night. Are you in the office today?"

"No, I'm still in Echo Creek," I said.

There was a muffled sound, like she was talking to someone else. She must have been in her office. "You're where?"

"Echo Creek, Washington," I said. "You know, the family winery. My brother called. They're having financial trouble. I texted you."

"Oh," she said. "When will you be back?"

"I don't know," I said. "I should have been back by now, but things are taking longer to sort out than I thought."

More muffled talking. "Okay. No, put that on my desk, and yes reschedule my three o'clock. Sorry, I'm trying to get caught up. I lost yesterday to flight delays. I'm buried."

Farrah's schedule was always hectic. It was a toss-up which one of us spent more time at the office. "Yeah, it's fine. How long are you in town?"

"Let me check." She paused for a second. "I'm here until Wednesday morning, then I'm in New York for a week. After that I'm going straight to London."

Damn. With all the work I still had to do here, I wouldn't be back before she left again.

"What do you think about flying out here for a few days?" I asked. "I'm staying in one of the guest cottages. It's kind of like being at a bed and breakfast. And obviously there's no shortage of wine."

“This weekend?” she asked. “God, Roland, you know I can’t do that. I’m too busy to take time off right now.”

I was hit by a surprising sting of disappointment. “Yeah, I know you’re busy. Things are just stressful out here. My dad has this place swimming in debt. The bank was—”

“Roland, hold on.”

I stopped mid-sentence and waited while I heard more muffled talking on her end.

“Sorry,” she said. “Why don’t you fly home for the weekend? We could at least do dinner.”

A quick trip home wasn’t a bad idea. I’d lose the travel time, which wasn’t ideal. If I could spend those hours dealing with the winery shit, I’d be able to go home for good that much sooner. But who knew when Farrah and I would have a chance to see each other again.

And maybe a couple of days away from this place would help me get my head back on straight. Spend a night in my own bed—or hers—to press the reset button. Then I could come back next week and finish up. Put a plan together for my dad and leave it at that.

“Yeah, I’ll see if I can get a flight tomorrow,” I said. “Can you do a late dinner? I’m not sure when I’ll get in.”

“Late is fine,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

She ended the call halfway through her hurried goodbye.

I tossed my phone on the desk, feeling oddly unsettled. Going home for a couple of days was fine. But it would have been nice if Farrah had been willing to give up some time for me. Was it just her schedule that led her to say no to coming out here, or did she not want the pressure of meeting my family? Although, I’d never met hers. Truthfully, I didn’t know much about them.

But I was probably being unreasonable. I’d started dating Farrah because we had similar lifestyles. That was why it

worked. It wasn't fair for me to suddenly expect her to be different just because I was dealing with family stuff.

I sent Danielle a text so she could book my flights and make a dinner reservation. I'd go home for a couple of days, spend a night with Farrah, and everything would be fine.

I GLANCED AT THE TIME. I'd come over to the office in the Big House early to get a few things done before I had to leave to catch my flight. I still had some time, but I wanted to get in a run before I left. Working as much as I did, I spent a lot of time at my desk. Getting in my workouts, no matter where I was, had to be a priority.

A low hum of noise downstairs greeted me as soon as I opened the office door. I wondered if it was a wedding, or something else. The winery's events schedule was booked solid, which was good for cash flow. They already had weddings scheduled well into next year. I had to give it to Zoe, she did a damn good job.

I went downstairs and when I got to the front, I held the door open for a guest. Right behind her came Zoe—a very frazzled Zoe.

Her hair was curled in soft waves, and her blouse was neatly tucked into her slacks. It wasn't her appearance that was disheveled, although a strand of hair fell across her forehead, and she aggressively swiped it away. It was her eyes. I could see the strain behind them. She was about to lose her shit.

She paused just inside the door, blinking at me like it had taken her a second to realize who she was looking at.

"Thanks," she said.

"Sure," I said. "Are you okay?"

She let out a long breath and glanced around the lobby. "Yes... No. This day is a fucking disaster."

"What's going on?" I asked. "Difficult bride?"

"No, it's not a wedding," she said. "Corporate retreat. But the caterer completely screwed me over. They brought the

wrong food, which is bad enough. But I have seventeen vegans with nothing to eat because everything contains animal products, even the salad that was not supposed to have goat cheese. And we ran out of the salad because it was all the twenty-four vegetarians had to eat. They forgot the bread, Roland. What kind of caterer forgets the bread? It's a good thing we're a fucking winery. If everyone in there wasn't rocking a wine buzz, I'd have a goddamn riot on my hands."

"What about the stuff from our kitchen?" I asked. The tasting rooms served food, but the winery always worked with outside caterers for larger events.

"Well, the kitchen would be better stocked if the last delivery hadn't been delayed due to some issue with our account," she said. "But it wouldn't have been enough anyway."

I had to stop myself from groaning. An issue with the account probably meant yet another vendor that hadn't been paid.

"Look, I'd love to stand here and fill you in on how extraordinarily shitty my day is, but I have to go figure out how to salvage this." She turned and started toward the back.

"Wait, Zoe."

She paused and glanced over her shoulder.

I pulled out my phone and glanced at the time. I could spare an hour if I skipped my run. "Would it help if I went to the store? If you text me a list, I can get whatever you need to fill in the gaps."

"Um..." She walked back toward me, slowly, like she was uncertain. "Yeah, actually that would help a lot."

"Okay." I held up my phone. "Text me while I'm en route."

"Right... I don't have your number," she said.

"It's the same."

She pulled out her phone. "Yeah, well, I deleted it. Can I have it again?"

Why did hearing her say she'd deleted my number feel like a kick in the balls? I couldn't remember the last time we'd texted or talked on the phone. She didn't have a reason to keep my number. But it still bothered me.

I cleared my throat, trying to get rid of the feeling, and gave her my number.

"Thanks," she said. "I have to go make sure my client isn't planning to have me killed, but I'll text you in a minute."

I watched her hurry down the hall, then went out to my car and drove to the store. Her text came through just as I was pulling into the parking lot. Then another. And another. She'd sent me a long fucking list.

It took me a little while to find everything she needed. The lady at the bakery next door saved my ass—or Zoe's ass, at least. I explained the situation and she quickly packaged up enough bread to feed an army.

I texted Zoe to let her know I was on my way back. In addition to the bread, my car was full of cheeses, fruits and vegetables, a variety of butters and spreads, olives that had cost as much as a good steak, and three more bags of stuff I'd never even heard of.

She met me outside and we quickly unloaded through the side entrance into the kitchen. I went out to get the last of the bread. When I came back in, she was at the sink washing her hands, an apron tied around her waist.

"Can you slice?" she asked.

I glanced at the time. I'd be cutting it close if I didn't leave soon, but I could at least help Zoe slice bread. "Yeah, sure."

"Awesome." She tossed me an apron and nodded toward the sink. "Wash your hands. You remember where everything is?"

"I'll figure it out."

I washed up and put on the apron, then got to work on the bread. She pulled out bread boards and I lined up the slices in neat rows. I didn't know where the caterer had gone, but it was

just the two of us in the big kitchen. Maybe she'd fired them while I was out.

By some sort of Zoe-magic, she turned the stuff I'd brought into platters of tidy finger food. She had me run upstairs to her office for note cards and a pen, which she used to label everything with *vegan* or *vegetarian*, and listed the ingredients.

"This is a start," she said, stepping back to eye our—well, mostly her—handiwork. "They'll go through this in about ten minutes, but better to tide them over. Then I can get another round of food going. Let's get this out there before they all die of starvation."

I hesitated, checking the time again. If I didn't leave now, I was going to miss my flight.

But I was looking at a two-hour drive just to get to the airport. Then ninety minutes of waiting, and a two-hour flight home. My return flight was tomorrow afternoon. I'd be in San Francisco for less than twenty-four hours. Then all the travel time to get back here. It would be nice to see Farrah, but that was a lot of travel for one dinner.

It wasn't really about Zoe. Now that I was looking at the timing, it just didn't make sense for me to go.

"Yeah, give me a second." I sent Farrah a text, letting her know I had to cancel. She traveled all the time, so I knew she'd understand. And we were both so busy, canceled plans were nothing new for us.

I grabbed two trays of food and followed Zoe. It reminded me of when I was a kid and my parents would rope me into helping when they were short-staffed. I'd learned how to serve wine before I'd learned to drive.

Her corporate crowd—I would have bet a thousand dollars they were a PR and marketing firm—applauded when we came in. She gave a little bow, playing it up. The mood in the room seemed considerably lighter as people dished up; food had a tendency to do that. I noticed a woman who looked like she might be in charge pull Zoe aside to thank her.

I stayed to help. We prepped, then brought out more food and wine. When she was satisfied that her clients had everything they needed, we wandered back to the kitchen. The hum of conversation in the event room faded behind us.

We put a few things away, wrapping up the excess food and moving the dirty dishes to the sink. With her clients appeased, there was no rush. Things felt relaxed. Comfortable.

She leaned against a counter, a rag in her hands. “So... what have you been working on, all shut away in that office?”

“Going through Salishan’s finances,” I said. “I have a handle on some of it, but it’s taking time to get everything under control.”

“Cooper said the bank was threatening foreclosure.”

There was a slight hitch in her voice. She’d been worrying. “That was before I got here. They’re not going to foreclose.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said. “I know it’s not really my business, but I’d hate to see anything happen to this place.”

“Yeah, of course. I would too. I’ll get them back on track.” I rested my elbow on the counter. “It’s been frustrating, though. I’ve been going through their records and I keep wondering what the hell my dad was thinking.”

She shrugged, and I caught a slight eye roll. “Well, you aren’t the only one who wonders that.”

“It’s like he’s been investing in the wrong things,” I said. “After they built the Big House, they should have focused on saving for more capital investments. Equipment doesn’t last forever, and they have no plan for investing in new technologies. Everything is haphazard.”

“Yeah,” she said. “And there’s so much more competition these days. All these semi-retired people buying land and starting wineries. Even I remember when we were one of just a handful of wine producers around here. Now there are dozens.”

“Exactly,” I said. “They need to be able to adjust for that. Differentiate themselves in the marketplace. But that requires

organization and planning. I don't know what the fuck my dad's been doing all these years."

"I shouldn't talk shit about your dad, but I don't know what the fuck he's been doing either," she said with a little grin. "I don't envy you the task of dealing with him."

I shook my head. "Yeah, he's... challenging. He always was."

"He's certainly no picnic," she said. "You know, once last year I had to kick him out of the Big House because he was making a scene in front of guests."

"No shit?"

"Yeah," she said. "I can laugh about it now, but it wasn't funny at the time. He lost his temper about something and went off on the tasting room staff. I had a brunch in the other room and we could hear him yelling. I pulled him outside and told him to stop being a jackass in front of our guests."

I raised my eyebrows. I wasn't surprised Zoe had stood up to my father like that—she was feisty—but it couldn't have been pleasant. "What did he do?"

She shrugged. "He was angry with me, but he walked away. He knew I was right, but it wasn't like he was going to admit it."

"No, I don't think I've ever heard him admit he was wrong."

"Not exactly his best quality," she said. "I hope fixing all this stuff isn't giving you too many headaches."

"I'll be all right."

"Yeah, you will." She put the rag on the counter. "I'm going to go check on things in the other room. They should be winding down."

"Sure."

Pausing for a second, I watched her go. It was nice to talk to someone about what I was doing here. I had a lot on my mind lately, and it was good to get some of it off my chest.

Share my frustrations with someone who understood. Someone who cared.

I followed her out to see if she needed help wrapping up. The guests were all staying at the hotel next door—which was good because it looked like barely a quarter of them were in any shape to drive. They left in small groups until finally the room was empty.

I brought an empty platter back to the kitchen, but I didn't see Zoe. The side door was open a crack, and I peeked outside.

She stood with her back against the building, a plastic cup dangling from her fingers.

"Looks like you pulled it off." I went out to stand beside her.

"Oh my god, what a day. I'm just glad it's over." She took a sip. "Thanks for your help, by the way."

"No problem," I said. "So let me guess. Tonight's agenda includes a hot bath and a stiff drink?"

"I already have the drink covered." She held out her cup, offering it to me.

I took it from her—whiskey—and enjoyed the burn as it went down my throat. I handed it back, and for a second our eyes met. Spending the afternoon with her had been fine. Pleasant, even. But standing with her here, in the cool evening air, I was hit with a potent mix of resentment and longing. A part of me wanted to pick a fight with her, while another part...

Another part wanted something else entirely.

That was messed up. I shouldn't be thinking about Zoe like that.

As if she could read my mind, she shifted away from me. Stood straight and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I need to finish up so I can go home."

"Do you need any more help?" I asked, knowing the best thing for me would be to walk away, not stay with her longer.

“No, I’ve got it.” She met my eyes again. “Thanks. I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah.”

She went in through the side door, and despite the piece of me that wanted to follow, I let her go.

SEVEN

ZOE

Sunday, I only had a small wedding to contend with. The ceremony and brunch reception went off without a hitch—catering included. It was a relief after Saturday’s shit show. My client had been understanding, but it sucked, having an event go south so badly. I was certainly never using that caterer again.

Thankfully Roland had jumped in to help. I’d been trying to find Shannon—or hell, even Cooper—to see if they’d run to the store for me. But neither of them had been around.

When Roland had offered, I’d almost said no. Because Roland. But it would have been stupid to refuse the help when I’d really needed it. And he’d come through for me like a champ. He’d even been nice to me.

I was off Monday and Tuesday, and I didn’t leave my house. It was glorious. Cooper texted to see if I wanted to catch a movie, but that would have required putting on pants. And a bra. So it was a definite no-go. But more than anything, I just needed a break. From work. From people.

From anyone whose last name was Miles.

I got in early on Wednesday, feeling refreshed. Not long after I arrived, while I was still yawning over my first cup of coffee, Roland passed my half-open door. He paused for a second, like he might stop. But he kept going, down the hall to the office he’d been using.

I rolled my eyes at the sharp sting of disappointment. So he hadn’t stopped to say good morning. So what? It wasn’t

like we were friends.

And maybe that was what had been eating at me. We weren't friends. I hated the feeling of distance between us. The awkwardness. It had dissipated on Saturday, although I'd been so focused on salvaging the event, I hadn't had room to be aloof toward him. I'd simply needed to get things done. But working side-by-side with him... well, it hadn't been bad. We'd both relaxed.

Although I hadn't allowed myself to admit it, I'd been hoping that lack of tension would have carried over to today. That maybe there was a version of reality where we could be friendly. Stop by each other's offices to say hi. Maybe rib each other a little bit. That would be better than feeling like he'd become a stranger.

However, I needed to remember who I was dealing with. He was going to help his parents, and roll on out of here back to his life in San Francisco. It wouldn't matter if we were friends or not because in a few days, he'd be gone. And who knew when I'd see him again.

I opened my calendar and sighed. My bridezilla was coming today for an in-person meeting. I was not looking forward to spending an afternoon with Miss Victoria Jones. And to make matters worse, I'd started my period. My lower back and hips ached something fierce.

When it came to the bridezilla, my only consolation was that she was marrying a man named Victor Cockburn. Not only was her husband-to-be's first name only two letters different from her own, his last name was *Cockburn*. Cock. Burn. It sounded like something he should see a doctor about.

So while Miss Victoria was micromanaging me to death, I amused myself by making up new versions of her impending last name. Burningcock. Cockdisease. Redcock. Cockrash. Not that I'd be anything less than totally professional on the outside. But what went on in my head was none of her business.

She was late—because of course she was—and she brought her maid-of-honor, Heather. They weren't related, but

they looked, and dressed, so much alike, I had a hard time telling them apart. Big blond hair. Bright pink manicures. Leggings with tan Uggs. They were a couple of pumpkin spice nightmares. I plastered on a smile and led them to one of the meeting rooms upstairs.

“Can I get you ladies anything?” I asked.

“No, we’re doing a juice cleanse,” Victoria said.

I wondered how her bestie felt about that. Heather nodded, but her enthusiasm seemed forced.

“Water, then?” I asked.

“Is it filtered?” Victoria asked.

I opened the mini-fridge and pulled out two waters. “Bottled.”

Victoria put her giant wedding binder on the table and set her water next to it. We all took a seat, and Victoria flipped through the thick pages. She had magazine clippings, print-outs, notes—both handwritten and typed—samples, and who knew what else in that binder of hers. The first time she’d met with me, I’d asked her if she’d been working on the binder since she was little. I’d meant it as a friendly joke, but she’d looked at me with a straight face and said she’d started it when she was five.

Okay, then.

“So, I have some changes to the décor to make sure everything matches my vision.” Victoria flipped through a few more pages. “Here. I need it to look like this.”

I took a second to peruse the photos she’d laid out. Her ceremony was supposed to be outdoors, in our main garden area. The photos were all indoor venues.

“Why don’t you tell me which parts of this are the most important to you,” I said. “Because there’s a lot here we can replicate, but some won’t translate to an outdoor space.”

“This is what I want,” she said, gesturing to the entire page.

“Okay,” I said. “Well, these pictures have a lot of lights hanging from the ceiling to create that overhead twinkle effect. We don’t have a ceiling outside.”

“I’m sure you can figure something out,” she said. “Can’t you build a structure to drape the lights from?”

Build a structure? For fuck’s sake. Cocksting. Smokingcock. Victoria Cockpain. “I don’t think new trellises are in the budget, I’m afraid.”

She took a deep breath, like she was trying very hard to control herself. “How many more disappointments am I going to have this week?”

Heather made a sympathetic cooing noise. “Oh sweetie, I know, you’re dealing with so much.”

I was very practiced at keeping my thoughts from showing in my expression when I was with clients. So I kept my face carefully pleasant, even though my uterus was wreaking havoc on my lower half and my bridezilla’s dramatics made me want to bang my head against the table.

I also knew it was usually best to keep quiet and let the bride realize I wasn’t going to jump through hoops to appease her. I’d make her happy to the best of my ability, within the budget she—or in this case, her parents—had set. Outside of that, there wasn’t anything I could do. I’d had to learn early to set boundaries with some of my brides, or they’d demand the moon and throw a tantrum when they realized it wouldn’t fit through the door.

“Well, what can you do with lights outside?” Victoria asked with a roll of her eyes.

“We can light up the garden for you,” I said. “We’ll put twinkle lights in the trees and shrubs. And if you decide to use a trellis or arch for the ceremony, we can use lights on that, too.”

“Well, that’s better than nothing,” she said.

Better than nothing. God, how did this girl find someone to fucking marry her? I felt sorry for Victor and his burning cock.

“All right, twinkle lights in the garden,” I said.

The rest of the meeting was more of the same. About half her ideas were things that would work for an indoor wedding, and the other half were for outdoors. It was like she hadn’t really decided on what she wanted. Or she’d just gone crazy on Pinterest and hadn’t paid attention to the details—just pinned pretty pictures and brought them to me to demand I replicate them.

The more she talked, the more I thought it was probably the latter. Victoria wanted what she wanted, and that was that.

By the time we finished, my face hurt from keeping my expression neutral, and my cramps were reaching the point where all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry. I walked Victoria and Heather out to the lobby and said a polite goodbye, then went upstairs to my office. I wished I could call it a day, but I had a group coming for a breakfast tomorrow. I needed to get the second tasting room rearranged.

After checking my email, I went down to the tasting room to make sure it would be ready for tomorrow’s breakfast. The tables were all separated, and I started moving chairs out of the way so I could push them together.

Roland looked in. “Hey, need a hand with that?”

“Um, sure,” I said. “I’m just putting the tables together.”

He came in started scooting chairs back. I glanced at him, wondering what he was doing. At first, he’d barely acknowledged my existence. Now he was suddenly my helper? It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate him lending a hand. I just wasn’t sure why he was doing it.

We got the tables situated and put the chairs back in place. There were a few extras, so I pulled them off to the side of the room near the window.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, breaking the silence.

I glanced over. “Nothing.”

“Don’t do that,” he said.

“Do what?”

“That thing you do where you’re hurt but you minimize it,” he said.

“I’m not minimizing anything.”

“The fuck you are,” he said. “You keep wincing. What’s wrong?”

I rolled my eyes. Well, if he really wanted to know... “I got my period. I have cramps. Happy now?”

He grunted, rubbing the back of his neck, and I figured that was the end of it. Saying *I got my period* had to be one of the top five ways to get a man to shut up.

“Sit down,” he said.

“What?”

“Sit.” He turned a chair around. “Backwards. Straddle it.”

I eyed him with suspicion. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

I sat, facing backward, my legs on either side. Roland pulled another chair close and sat behind me. He dug his thumbs into my lower back and started rubbing.

“Here?” He pressed his thumbs behind my hips.

“Yeah.”

Silently, he rubbed circles on my lower back, hitting just the right spot. God, that felt good. Really good. The aching tension melted away beneath his skilled hands.

He remembered.

He’d always rubbed my back like this when I had cramps. And he still knew exactly how to do it. Knew right where to put pressure—what would make me feel better.

Leaning forward against the chair, I let my body relax. I tried not to worry about the fact that this was Roland giving me a back rub. That maybe I should be a little more cautious about letting him touch me. None of this felt sexual, but it did feel... intimate. A reminder of our shared past. This was the kind of thing couples did—people who didn’t mind being raw

and real around each other. Who left the bathroom door open and picked up each other's dirty socks. Who'd been through the starry-eyed romance phase, and seen each other at their worst.

We'd been there, once. It seemed like such a long time ago.

He stopped rubbing. "There. Better?"

I realized my eyes had closed. I took a deep breath and opened them. "Yeah. Thank you."

"Sure."

Shannon poked her head in the door. "Oh, hi, Roland. Zoe, the front desk got a call asking about booking an anniversary party. They're sending the woman's contact information to you."

I quickly stood and smoothed my hair down, feeling like we'd been caught doing something we shouldn't. "Sure, I'll call her back."

"Thanks." Her eyes moved from me to Roland, then back to me again.

"Is Dad in his office?" Roland asked.

"He should be," she said.

"I need to talk to him." Roland didn't look at me before he walked past his mom and out the door.

Thankfully, Shannon just smiled and left, following Roland out. I didn't want to answer questions about what we'd been doing in here. The answer, of course, was nothing. He'd stopped to help me move chairs, then given me a back rub. So what? That wasn't significant.

Except it sort of was.

My cramps felt better, but there was another ache growing inside of me. An ache with two distinct sides. The side that longed for those hands to touch me again, and the side that was afraid to face the pain of what it would do to me if they did.

EIGHT

ROLAND

I left the tasting room, both annoyed and glad that my mom had interrupted. Rubbing Zoe's back had been like a reflex. I'd done it for her so many times before, I barely thought about it. Not until I was sitting right behind her with my hands on her back. It was crossing a line to touch her like that. I'd need to be more careful.

Pushing thoughts of Zoe out of my mind, I focused on the issue at hand. I'd sent my dad a preliminary plan to get the winery back on track. It lacked detail—there was a lot on the production side that I still needed to review—but it was a start.

I hadn't seen much of my dad since I'd been here. He was clearly avoiding me, which was just as well. We'd never had a great relationship, not even when I was a kid. Always arguing—bumping heads. He'd been critical of everything I did, later claiming he'd been hard on me to build my character. All it had really done was make me feel like nothing I did would ever be good enough for him.

Eventually, I'd stopped seeking his approval.

I found him in his office. "Hey, Dad. Have you looked over the draft plan I sent you?"

"Not yet," he said, not looking up from his computer screen. "I'll get to it. Hotel reading."

"Hotel?" I asked. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'm out of town for the next few days," he said.

“You know, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about,” I said. “Your travel expenses are really high. That’s one of the places you could cut back.”

He tapped his finger on his desk, finally looking at me. “That’s tough. Travel is part of running this place. I can’t really change that.”

“Well, something has to change,” I said. “I can’t make money appear out of nowhere. You have to cut your expenses, or dramatically increase your revenue. I have some ideas about that, too, but the expenses have to be addressed.”

“It’s not like I’m flying first class and staying in high-end hotels,” he said. “If we have to cut expenses, we should start looking at the rest of our overhead. Salaries, for starters.”

I took a deep breath. Why did business owners always want to start by cutting staff? “If you’re overstaffed, that’s one thing. But you don’t have that many employees. I don’t think that’s the problem. If you start laying people off, morale is going to suffer. And people are going to assume those rumors about Salishan are true.”

“What rumors?”

“Apparently people are saying Salishan is in trouble,” I said. “Although I guess they aren’t really rumors if they’re true.”

His face reddened, and the vein in his forehead stuck out. “What people? Who’s saying we’re in trouble?”

“People in town. Chase and Cooper mentioned it.”

“Damn it.” He scrubbed his hands through his salt-and-pepper hair and leaned back.

I didn’t understand why he was so upset. Since when did he care what people around town said? “A little town gossip is the least of your troubles.”

“Reputation is everything,” he said. “Especially in this day and age. What people say about a place can make or break it faster than you could imagine.”

“Sure, but we’re not talking about a scathing review in a wine magazine,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter.” He closed his laptop and stood. “I have to get moving or I’ll be late.”

“Dad, I really need you to review that draft,” I said. “And I have a lot more questions for you. There are some things in the books that don’t add up.”

He grabbed his things and draped his coat over his arm. “It will have to wait until I get back.”

I stepped aside as he brushed past me and out the door. I took another deep breath—I was doing that a lot lately—and clenched my fists, feeling my fingernails dig into my palms.

Why the fuck was I doing this? He didn’t want my help. He was going to fight me at every turn, either by opposing my suggestions or blowing them off. It was like he’d rather fail than admit I might be right.

Voices carried from outside his office. My mom was talking to him. I couldn’t make out what she said, but there was no mistaking the frustration in her voice. I heard a few sharp words from him, then his heavy footsteps walking away.

A moment later, Mom appeared in the doorway. Her hair was pulled back and her face was calm. But I knew her. She always tried to hide her stress from us kids. When I was younger, I hadn’t been able to see through her façade. I could now—could see the undercurrent of frustration just below the surface of her smile.

This was why I was here. For her.

“Hey, Mom.” I opened my arms and she stepped into my embrace.

She squeezed and patted my back. “I guess he’ll be back Friday.”

“Why does he travel so much?” I asked. He always had, my whole life. I’d never understood why running a winery caused him to be out of town so often.

“A lot of reasons,” she said. “Sometimes he visits other vineyards. We source some of our grapes elsewhere for more variety, and he likes to check up on their operations. He has meetings with our distributors. He likes to meet with people in person.”

“It’s expensive,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Unfortunately, he doesn’t listen to me when it comes to the business.”

Another thing I’d never understood. My mom had grown up here. She’d lived and breathed this place her entire life, but Dad had always kept her out of the business side of things.

“Well, someone’s going to have to start making him listen,” I said.

She smiled at me, but it was a dispirited, tired smile. “Have I thanked you lately for being here?”

“You have.” I put my arm around her shoulders and kissed her head. “I’m working on it.”

The problem was, it was becoming increasingly clear that my dad was doing a shit job of running this place. He blamed everything from a dry season a few years ago to increased labor costs to changes in the economy. But from what I was seeing as I pored over the last ten years of financial records, the problem was him.

Bad decisions. Bad loans. Unfinished projects. Wasted resources. If this had been another business, I would have advised the board of directors to fire the CEO and get someone competent to run the company.

How was I supposed to tell my mom that she needed to fire my dad?

“I’m supposed to meet a friend for dinner,” she said. “But the fridge at the house is full if you want to go over there and get yourself something.”

She was such a mom, still trying to take care of me. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll see you later.”

Mom left, and I walked back to the cottage. It was dinnertime, but I wasn't hungry. I had too much on my mind. My dad. The winery. I wanted to make sure they were secure before I went home, but it was so fucking complicated.

I sat down on the bed and pulled out my phone. Almost on a whim, I called Farrah.

"Hello?"

"Hey," I said. "Did I catch you at a bad time? I know it's late there."

"I'm working, but I'm in my hotel room," she said. "What's going on?"

I paused, not sure what I wanted to say. It was odd, feeling like I needed to talk to her about everything. I dealt with stress at work all the time, but I never vented to her about it.

"Things are just a lot worse here than I thought they'd be," I said.

"I thought Dimension was having a great year," she said.

"No, I'm talking about my family's winery," I said.

"Oh, that," she said. "Aren't you finished with that already? Didn't they just need a short-term loan or something?"

"That's what I mean," I said. "I thought it would be simple, but the books are a mess and—"

"Roland, hold on a second."

The line went silent except for what sounded like the click of her fingernails on her keyboard.

"These numbers are bullshit," she said, although I couldn't tell if she was talking to me, or herself. "I'm going to have to get them to run them again."

"Sounds like you're busy," I said.

"Yeah, I have to get this report done by tomorrow," she said. "I'm back in town next week. Why don't you text Gina and have her put you on my calendar."

Text Gina? Was she serious? “I have to go through your assistant now?”

“Don’t be irritable,” she said.

“Farrah, I don’t even know when I’ll be back in San Francisco.”

“Why not?” she asked.

Had I been talking to myself this entire time? How many times had I told her where I was and what I was doing? “Do you even know where I am right now?”

“I’m in New York, Roland,” she said. “You’re somewhere on the west coast. Does it matter?”

“You know, I’m dealing with somewhat of a crisis here, and I’m getting the sense that you don’t give a shit.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“I’ve told you what’s going on, more than once, but it’s like you haven’t heard a word.”

“I’m not sure what you expect from me,” she said. “My schedule is insane. You know that. I’m in New York, then London, and I don’t even know what’s on my calendar after that.”

“I know you travel a lot,” I said. “That’s not the point.”

“Then what is your point?”

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. That was a good question. What was my point? That I wanted her to be there for me when I was having a rough day? Farrah didn’t have a nurturing bone in her body.

But what the hell was I doing with someone who didn’t give two shits about what was happening in my life? At home, when all I did was work, it hadn’t mattered. Dating Farrah had been simple—uncomplicated. She didn’t need anything from me. Didn’t demand my attention, or complain when I worked late or canceled plans. I’d blown her off last weekend, and she hadn’t said a word.

But she didn’t have anything to give, either.

“Farrah, I’m sorry, but this isn’t going to work.” As soon as I said it, I realized how right I was. Our relationship had only seemed to work until now because it had never been tested. Now that it had, it was failing—hard.

“What are you saying?” she asked. “Are you ending things with me?”

“Yeah,” I said, realization settling over me, like I’d been living in the dark and someone just turned on a light. I could finally see. “Look, you need someone who’s fine with being an afterthought. I really thought I was. But... I think I need more than that.”

“This is so out of the blue,” she said. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did. But you don’t have room in your life for someone who’s more than a diversion when you’re in town. If I walk away, what are you really losing? Someone to have dinner with a few times a month?”

She went quiet for a moment. I didn’t even hear her fingers clicking on her keyboard.

“I guess this is it, then,” she said, her voice subdued.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Goodbye, Roland.”

“Goodbye—”

Click.

I looked down at my phone screen for a long moment. I’d just broken up with my girlfriend, and all I felt was... nothing. No disappointment. Certainly no sadness or regret. Spending time with Farrah had been nice while it lasted, but I didn’t feel like I was losing anything by letting her go.

If that wasn’t a significant sign that I’d done the right thing, I didn’t know what was. And it stood out in sharp contrast to the way I’d felt when another relationship had ended.

God, I didn't want to think about Zoe right now. I massaged my forehead, as if I could rub away my thoughts of her. But she was always there. Seeing her every day was messing with my head. Not just my head. Maybe it was shitty to admit it immediately after breaking up with Farrah, but it was messing with my dick, too.

Whenever I was around her, I noticed... everything. She looked amazing. Smelled fantastic. I'd had it bad for Zoe from the first time I laid eyes on her. We'd met in high school when her family had moved to Echo Creek, and she'd taken my breath away. It was hard to push that into the background, even with our history. She was still sexy as fuck.

I needed to just admit it. I was attracted to her. Insanely attracted to her. Obviously acting on that wasn't an option. My relationship status had nothing to do with that being a bad idea. Zoe and I had been there, done that, and it didn't matter what my cock wanted. She wasn't mine anymore, and she never would be again.

And there was the shitty post-breakup knot in the pit of my stomach. But it wasn't for Farrah. It wasn't for the woman I'd spent the last year dating, nor the handful of women I'd had flings with before her. It was for the woman who should have been nothing but a memory by now. It had been four years. That should have been enough time to get over her.

But I wasn't sure if forever would be enough time to get over Zoe.

NINE

ZOE

Sometimes I think moving back here was a mistake. You're a thousand miles away, but you're everywhere.

~Text from Zoe, unsent

FRIDAY EVENING, I finished work late. There was a small party at the Big House tomorrow, but Jamie was handling it. I was off for the next couple of days and looking forward to the break.

Downstairs, I found Brynn standing in the lobby. She was the youngest of the Miles kids, although she wasn't a kid anymore. She was a gorgeous twenty-year-old woman, with long brown hair and a banging body. It still surprised me to see her looking so grown up—probably because I'd known her since she was seven. She was ten years younger than me, so she'd been a little girl when I'd started dating Roland.

“Hey, Brynn,” I said. “How's school?”

She shrugged. “It's okay.”

“Are you home for the weekend?” I asked.

“Yeah, or maybe a little longer,” she said. “I'm not sure.”

Shannon came down the hall, adjusting her purse strap over her shoulder. “Ready, kiddo?”

“Yep,” Brynn said.

Something was going on, but I couldn't put my finger on what. Shannon looked tense, although that was normal for her

these days. But Brynn wasn't usually so subdued.

"We're going to dinner if you want to come," Shannon said.

"Oh, I don't want to interfere with mother-daughter time," I said.

"It's fine," Brynn said. "Come with us."

"All right," I said. "If you're sure."

We went next door to the Echo Creek Lodge. Salishan had a great relationship with the large hotel. A lot of our guests stayed here if they came for more than a day. They also had a nice restaurant, with good food and a cozy ambiance.

The host seated us, and after looking over the menus, we ordered dinner. While we waited for our food, Shannon asked Brynn about school. Her grades were good, and she liked her classes. I still got the feeling something was wrong, but I didn't ask. It might be something Brynn didn't want to talk about in front of her mom. I resolved to get Brynn alone later, so I could ask her what was going on.

Our food came out and we started eating.

"Your brother is home," Shannon said after the waitress had left.

"Yeah, Cooper texted me," Brynn said. "He's still here?"

Shannon nodded. "He's been helping us with some financial issues."

Brynn glanced at me. "Is that weird?"

"Of course not," I said.

"Liar," Brynn said.

"I'm not lying." I was totally lying. "I barely see him. And when I do, we get along fine."

Shannon eyed me, and I wondered what she was thinking. She knew me well enough; she could probably tell I was struggling with Roland being here.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Brynn said. “I see my ex on campus once in a while and it makes me throw up in my mouth a little.”

“It makes me sad,” Shannon said.

I paused with my fork halfway to my mouth.

“What makes you sad?” Brynn asked.

“Roland,” Shannon said.

I put my fork down. Shannon and I had talked about Roland, more than once. I’d told her why I’d left, and she’d been supportive and sympathetic. I hadn’t burdened her with every detail, but I’d been honest, and she’d been receptive. But she’d also never really told me how she felt about it. Or him. And I’d never asked.

She took a deep breath. “Parenting when you have young children is tough. Babies don’t sleep a lot, they poop out their diapers, make messes. Toddlers get into everything. Don’t even get me started on what Cooper was like as a two-year-old. I’m surprised I didn’t lose my mind. There are challenges at every stage. But nothing prepared me for being a parent of adults.”

“Yeah, well, one of your adult children is Cooper,” Brynn said. “Although I don’t know if *adult* is the right term for him.”

Shannon smiled. “I worry about all of you for different reasons. But Roland is... he’s so much like your dad.”

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from replying. I wanted to argue with her—to defend Roland. I’d never liked Lawrence very much and hearing her compare Roland to him raised my hackles. Although it wasn’t my job to stick up for Roland anymore.

“Lawrence always worked too much,” Shannon continued. “I think at first he felt like he had a lot to prove to my parents. He wanted to show he could take over the winery operations. But he always prioritized work over everything else. Even me.”

Her comment hit way too close to home, and I swallowed hard.

“Roland has always felt like he had things to prove,” Shannon said. “I’d hoped that the people he chose to have in his life would keep him on track. But unfortunately, that hasn’t been the case.”

“He’s a dumbass,” Brynn said.

“Brynn,” Shannon said.

“He is,” Brynn said. “It’s not like we don’t all know it. Just because he’s my brother doesn’t mean I have to like him, or think he isn’t an idiot when he is.”

“You’re going to be nice to him,” Shannon said, pointing her finger at Brynn. “He hasn’t been home in eighteen months, and now he’s here, despite the fact that it’s interfering with his work.”

“That’s the point,” Brynn said. “He hasn’t been here.”

I fiddled with my hair, uncomfortable. It felt like this was a conversation I shouldn’t be hearing.

I’d never wanted to make Roland’s family take sides. I’d almost declined the job offer because I didn’t want to come between them. But I’d realized later that Roland’s family felt a bit like I did—like he’d chosen his career over them.

“I know, mothers are always willing to overlook things in their children,” Shannon said. “That makes it easier for me to look past the last few years. But we need him right now, and he’s here. I’m grateful for that.” She met my eyes. “Even though I know it hasn’t been easy on everyone.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “It’s really fine.”

“How long is he going to be around?” Brynn asked.

“I don’t know,” Shannon said. “The winery’s financial problems are apparently bigger than any of us thought.”

“Mom, if you need me to move home, I can,” Brynn said.

“Sweetie, no.” Shannon covered Brynn’s hand with her own. “College is important.”

“I know, but I can commute,” she said. “It’s not that far. And I was thinking about it anyway because I need to find a new place to live.”

“Why?” Shannon asked. “Did something happen with Carrie?”

Brynn’s eyes shone with sudden tears, and she touched her fingers to her lips. She took a shaky breath. “I, um... I came home the other night and found Carrie with Austin.”

“Oh, no,” I said. Brynn had been dating Austin for about six months, and Carrie was her roommate. “Please tell me you mean you found them flirting in the kitchen or something.”

Brynn shook her head. “Nope. On the couch. And they were...”

“Banging?” I asked.

Brynn nodded, and Shannon raised her eyebrow at me.

“What?” I asked. “We’re all adults here.”

“Honey, I am so sorry.” Shannon reached over and rubbed her back. “You know you can stay at home as long as you need.”

“Thanks,” Brynn said. She sniffed and swiped away the lone tear that had managed to break free from the corner of her eye. “I should have seen it coming. I knew they got along really well, but I figured I was just lucky that my boyfriend and my roommate didn’t fight. I guess it’s been going on for months and they never told me.”

“Oh my god, I will cut a bitch,” I said. “You need me to deal with this, Brynn, you just say the word. I’ll make them both regret being born.”

“Thanks, Zoe,” Brynn said. “I just don’t get it. How can people be so awful to someone they supposedly care about?”

“Unfortunately, the world is full of people like that,” Shannon said. “The trick is to find the good ones and keep them close.”

“Right now, I think I just want a dog,” Brynn said. “Dogs don’t cheat with supposed friends.”

“I can’t believe that asshole,” I said. “And Carrie? Girls who cheat with their friends’ boyfriends are the worst. You know, I should get you drunk tonight. Do this right.”

Shannon leveled me with her best mom expression. “She’s underage.”

“She’s twenty,” I said. “And she grew up in a winery. Somehow I don’t think she has virgin lips.”

“Nope,” Brynn said.

I raised my fist and she bumped it with hers.

“Adult children,” Shannon said with a roll of her eyes. “Someday you’ll both know.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not really going to get her drunk,” I said. As soon as Shannon glanced away, I mouthed *yes I am* at Brynn. Her little smile sealed the deal. I was definitely getting Brynn drunk tonight. Poor girl needed it.

The conversation turned to more mundane topics as we finished our dinner. Brynn talked about her plans to find a new apartment. She already had a lead on a cute studio close to campus. Shannon talked about a new red blend she was planning. I loved listening to Shannon talk about her work. It was fascinating, and she was so animated and passionate about it.

I tried to keep the conversation away from topics like Roland, or boyfriends, or workaholic husbands. When we finished, we walked back to Salishan. Shannon asked Brynn if she wanted to stay in the other guest cottage, and Brynn said she’d love to.

I said I was going to head home, but gave Brynn a quick wink, hoping Shannon didn’t see. We all said goodnight and went our separate ways, but I texted Brynn and told her to meet me at the kitchen entrance of the Big House in an hour.

BRYNN WAS ALREADY WAITING for me when I got to the Big House. The bottles in my grocery bag clinked against each other.

“Shh,” Brynn said, holding a finger to her lips. “I could hear you coming a mile away.”

“We’re fine,” I said. “No one’s around this late.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t hang out in the Blackberry Cottage?” Brynn asked.

“With Roland right next door?” I asked. “Nope. Trespassing at work is preferable.”

Brynn laughed. “Okay, I get it.”

I found the right key and unlocked the kitchen door. We went inside, and I led her to the small tasting room. It had a long rectangular table with a leather upholstered bench seat along one side—a comfy place to sit and have a few drinks. I set down the grocery bags and pulled out my supplies.

“Normally I’m a whiskey girl, but a boyfriend cheating with your roommate calls for tequila,” I said, putting the bottle down. “But pace yourself with this stuff.”

“Yeah, I know,” Brynn said. “I’m twenty, not five.”

“I wouldn’t be feeding you tequila if you were five.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” Brynn said. “I’m just so used to being treated like a baby when I’m home.”

“Believe me, I know what that’s like.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I poured us each a shot. “My brother is fifteen years older than I am. I’ll forever be a little kid to him.”

“I forgot about your brother,” she said. “Do you see him very often?”

“No,” I said. “He lives in Ohio, so there’s that. But he was so much older than me, I didn’t know him very well when I was growing up. He was off to college when I was three. He’d visit, and he was always nice to me. But we were never close.”

“Where are your parents these days?” she asked.

“They’ve been visiting him, actually,” I said. Several years ago, my parents had sold their house and bought an RV. Now they were spending their retirement traveling around the country. “I’m not sure where they’re headed next.”

“That’s pretty cool,” she said.

I handed Brynn her shot. “Yeah, it is. I’m happy for them.”

She held up her glass. “Thanks for this. It’s been one of the worst weeks of my life.”

I clinked my glass against hers and we swallowed. It burned going down. Brynn winced.

“Wow, that’s strong,” she said.

“You seem like you’re handling this whole thing really well,” I said. “I don’t know if I’d be as calm as you are if I found out my boyfriend was fucking my roommate.”

“I got the worst of it out of my system already,” she said. “I freaked out when I saw them. God, I barely remember it. I was crying and screaming at them. I think I threw things. Then I sobbed in bed for the next twenty-four hours or so. Finally, I decided they could both go fuck themselves. But I needed to get out of there for a while.”

I poured another shot. “Having your heart broken sucks.”

“Yeah it does,” she said, and we both drank. She winced again. “Holy shit.”

I got out the waters I’d brought. “Alternate with water. Serious drinking requires hydration.”

Brynn laughed. “Thanks. Speaking of broken hearts, are you okay, really?”

I slid my fingertip along the rim of my shot glass. “Yeah, I guess so. I want to be okay with him being around, but it’s complicated.”

“Why are men such idiots?” she asked.

“That’s a very good question.”

The more Brynn drank, the more she opened up about her breakup. He was only the second guy she'd ever dated. Her brothers had made it almost impossible for her to date in high school, so her first experiences in the—often shitty—world of dating had been in college. So far, her first boyfriend had seemed nice, but he'd broken up with her because he didn't want to be tied down to one girl. And now she'd had a guy cheat on her.

I wanted to rip Austin's dick off and feed it to him. And I wouldn't have minded doing something equally terrible to her roommate. Some fucking friend she turned out to be.

We snacked on the stuff I'd brought—drinking made me crave salt, so I devoured a bag of potato chips—and drank more. It wasn't long before we were both cry-laughing at something, but neither of us could remember what. Which made us laugh harder.

“Zoe, what the hell are you doing?”

I looked over to the doorway and saw Ben, Salishan's groundskeeper and handyman. “Hey, Ben!”

His mouth turned up in a smile, and he shook his head. Ben was in his mid-fifties. A nice-looking guy—rugged and outdoorsy with smile lines around his eyes. Thick beard. Strong hands. For all I knew, he'd always worked here. He was just as much a fixture as any of the Miles family.

“I'm sure you're not here after hours providing alcohol to your boss's underage daughter,” he said.

I giggled and tried to stand up. Oh shit, I was really drunk. “No, course not.”

Brynn was sprawled out on the bench with one leg dangling over the side. “Ben. Hi, Ben. Benjamin. Ben. Benny. Benaroo.”

“Don't listen to her,” I said. “She's just had a day. I mean had a day. A bad one.”

He came over to the table and started cleaning up our mess. “Come on, girls. I think it's time to call it a night.”

Brynn mumbled something incoherent. Ben just shook his head again.

I put my head down on the table while he put the bottle and food wrappers back in the grocery bags. I must have fallen asleep for a second, because his hand on my shoulder startled me awake.

“What? Shit.”

“Come on, Zoe,” Ben said. I glanced up and he had Brynn in his arms, cradled like a baby. “Let’s get her to bed, then I’ll take you home.”

“Yeah.” I got up and steadied myself against the table. “Didn’t mean to so drunk. Get so drunk. Ben, you’re a superhero.”

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Just glad I was here late.”

I stumbled after Ben while he carried the half-conscious Brynn to the Blackberry Cottage. I’d probably had about two shots too many, but I wasn’t too worried about it. I’d regret it in the morning, but for now, I was happily numb.

“You know, Brynn is fun,” I said. “Brynn, this is more often. No. We should do this more often.”

“I don’t think Brynn will want to do this again for a while,” Ben said.

“What?” I asked, laughing. “She will. I’m super drink to fun with. Wait. Super fun to drink with.”

“I’m sure you are,” Ben said.

We stopped outside the cottage and Ben struggled to get his keys out while holding Brynn. I moved in to help, but the ground seemed to roll beneath my feet. I had the fleeting thought that I was about to land on my face when a pair of strong hands caught me.

“Whoa there, Zo.”

An arm slipped around my waist and I felt the warmth of a body next to mine. I looked up and blinked, my eyes feeling

heavy. “Roland?”

“What the fuck, Zo?” he asked, but there was amusement in his tone. Or maybe I was so drunk, everything sounded funny.

I laughed. “Hey, Miles. Wanna have a drink with me?”

“It looks like you’ve had more than enough,” he said. “Thanks, Ben.”

“No problem,” Ben said. Somehow he’d gotten Brynn’s door open. “I’ll get her to bed. You want me to take Zoe home?”

“No, I’ve got her,” Roland said.

“Ben’s so nice,” I said, giggling. “Why is he so nice?”

“He’s a good guy,” Roland said. “Come on, Zo. Let’s go.”

Roland half-carried me to the cottage next to Brynn’s. My feet didn’t want to work right, my legs felt like jelly, and somehow it was all hilarious.

“Aren’t you taking me home?” I asked.

He opened the door and I shuffled in, still pressed against him for balance. “Nope. You woke me up, and I just want to go back to bed. You’ll have to crash here tonight.”

I laughed again, because in my tequila haze, something about that seemed incredibly funny.

TEN

ROLAND

I dragged a very drunk Zoe inside the cottage. She leaned against me with her arms wrapped around my waist, tripping over her own feet.

I'd been in bed when Zoe's voice from outside had woken me up. I'd come out to tell her to shut up, but found Ben carrying Brynn, with Zoe stumbling behind them. I hadn't even realized my sister was home. Luckily, I knew Ben would take care of Brynn—make sure she was safe tonight. Ben was one of the few people I'd trust with anything, my baby sister included.

"Let's go, drunkie," I said, nudging Zoe in. The scent of tequila mixed with the smell of her shampoo. It was oddly arousing, which made me think I really ought to take her home. But damn it, I was fucking tired. I wanted to go back to bed, not drive her drunk ass across town. I wasn't even sure where she lived.

And I kind of wanted to mess with her. She'd obviously gotten my sister drunk. I didn't need to know what had happened to know whose idea *that* had been.

"I'm not as drunk as you think," she said, then erupted with laughter. "*You're* drunk."

"Nope, I'm the sober one tonight," I said. "Come on, keep walking. We're almost there."

She lurched toward the kitchen. "You need a drink."

I grabbed her around the waist to keep her on her feet, then held her for a moment until she stopped struggling. Her body

relaxed against me, but I didn't keep walking. Knowing I shouldn't, I kept my arms around her, just holding her. She felt good. Familiar.

"Uh-oh," she said. Her body convulsed, and she covered her mouth.

Instinctively, I pulled her into the bathroom and opened the toilet. She crumpled to the ground and for a second, I thought maybe she wasn't going to—

Then she did. I crouched down behind her and pulled her hair back. Waited while she emptied what looked like half a bottle of tequila into the toilet.

"Are you okay?" I asked when she finished. I helped her stand and get cleaned up.

"I'm good," she said, but her eyes were half-closed. "I got this."

I finished wiping her face with a wet washcloth. "Yeah, you've got everything under control, don't you?"

"Everyone is can't be so like you responsible," she said. "Wait, no. Said that wrong. Everyone responsible... no. What was I saying?"

"That you need to go to bed."

She laughed. "No I don't."

"I think you do," I said. "Come on, Zo."

I led her into the bedroom and she collapsed onto the bed.

"Mm, soft," she said, nuzzling her face into the comforter.

"Yeah, it's nice," I said. "What were you doing with Brynn, anyway?"

"Drinking tequila." She hiccupped.

"I can see that," I said. "Why?"

"Cheater, cheater," she said. "Fucking men."

"What?"

“Her fucking boyfriend cheated,” she said. “Imma cut his balls off.”

Hearing that unleashed a wave of anger, pouring heat through my veins. *I* wanted to cut his balls off. “Are you serious?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “So drinks a few. No. Had a few drinks.”

“I’d say it was more than a few,” I said. “Is Brynn okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “She’s a tough girl. But wait till Coop finds out.”

Cooper was going to lose his shit when he found out someone had hurt Brynn. We were all protective of her, but Cooper took it to an entirely different level.

“He’ll be pissed,” I said. “You’re not going to puke again, are you?”

She tapped her finger against her temple, like she was thinking hard about my question. God, she was ridiculous when she was drunk.

“Nope,” she said. “We should get pancakes. Remember the pancakes, Roland?”

“Yeah, I remember the pancakes,” I said.

The first time we’d gotten drunk together, we’d been high school seniors. Although, it was more accurate to say Zoe had gotten me drunk. I’d grown up around wine—alcohol hadn’t been much of a novelty for me. But tasting your mom’s latest cabernet and getting wasted with your crazy girlfriend on cheap whiskey were two very different experiences. We’d decided we needed pancakes at two in the morning and walked across town to a diner that was open all night. I still remembered those pancakes as being one of the best things I’d ever eaten.

Whiskey will do that to you when you’re seventeen.

She giggled, and I couldn’t help but smile. I hadn’t seen Zoe this drunk in a long time. There was no way she’d remember this tomorrow.

“Why you smiling?” she asked.

“Because you’re funny when you’re wasted,” I said. “And because you’re going to freak out when you wake up in the morning.”

“I will not.”

“Yeah, you will,” I said. “You’re in my bed, and I’m going to sleep next to you. When you wake up, you’re going to wonder how the hell you got here.”

“You can’t sleep with me,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I’m not moving you,” I said. “And I’m not sleeping on the couch. So you’re stuck with me.”

“Hmm,” she said, humming like she was deep in thought. Either that or she was on the brink of passing out. It was hard to tell. “Not freaking out in the morning.”

“You will,” I said. “You aren’t going to remember this conversation.”

She draped her arm over her forehead and groaned. “Yes, I will.”

“Nope,” I said. “I know you, Zo. You’re past the point of no return.”

“Why did I drink all that fuckin’ tequila?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

She rubbed her eyes. “Brynn needed me. This is whatcha do.”

Brynn needed her. Maybe she had. Zoe had been a part of my family for years—since Brynn was little. And here she was, years later, still with them. Still working for my parents. Hanging out with my brothers. Being a big sister to Brynn. She’d left me, but she hadn’t left them.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“I can’t sleep here,” she said, curling up and tucking her hands underneath my pillow. Her eyes drifted closed. “This is your bed.”

“I know it is,” I said. “That’s why it’s funny.”

“What if your girlfriend comes over?”

“She wouldn’t anyway, but she’s not my girlfriend anymore.”

“What?” Her eyes opened and focused on me. “What happened?”

“I broke things off,” I said.

“Why?”

For a second, Zoe looked awfully sober. Maybe she *would* remember this tomorrow. But then her eyes drifted closed and her head relaxed against the pillow. A few seconds later, she was asleep.

“Because I guess I need someone who cares,” I said. “And she never did.”

I laid down on my side, facing her. Pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. She was out cold—didn’t even flinch. I traced her cheek with the tips of my fingers, feeling her soft skin. Her lips parted, and her breath came out in a raspy snore. It made me smile again. She always snored when she passed out drunk, and always denied it later. I’d have to tease her about it tomorrow.

Of course, tomorrow she’d be sober, and there would still be this gulf between us.

ELEVEN

ZOE

My stomach was raw, and my head hurt, but the warm body next to me felt so good, I didn't mind. I nestled in closer to his back, curling up against him. I had the vague sense that my hand was down the back of his underwear, my palm splayed across his tight ass. It almost made me giggle, but I didn't want to wake him. I never slept over with Van, but apparently I had last night. It wasn't like I was in love with the guy, but he was cuddly to sleep with. Who knew?

I took a deep breath, his scent flooding through me. God, he smelled great. Why had I never noticed how good he smelled? It was a heady masculine scent that lit up a deep primal part of my brain. Despite the fact that a raging hangover was rearing its ugly head, warmth spread through my core. I traced my nose along the back of his shoulder, breathing him in. It was too bad Van wasn't generally a snuggler. This was nice.

He shifted, making a low sound in his throat, and I froze. Wait. This wasn't Van. I hadn't even seen Van last night, let alone spent the night with him. Had I?

The previous evening came back to me. Drinking with Brynn. Way too much tequila. Ben picking her up and carrying her back to the guest cottage. And—

Oh my god. Roland.

I very carefully cracked one eye open. There was indeed a man sleeping next to me. He was in a t-shirt, his muscular back moving with his soft breathing. I was tucked so close, I

was practically on top of him. One of my feet was wedged between his legs and yes, my hand was down the back of his underwear.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

Why the fuck was I in bed with Roland? And why was I grabbing his ass?

Moving as slowly as I could so I wouldn't wake him—*oh my god please don't wake up and catch me with my hand in your pants*—I slid my hand out of his underwear. He didn't move. I carefully shifted my leg, then rolled onto my back, separating myself from him.

He stayed where he was, still apparently asleep. I let out a long breath. My head was killing me, and my stomach felt like something had died in there. I loved tequila, but I probably needed to admit I was too old for this shit.

And for the love of everything, why was I in bed with Roland?

We were in the Hummingbird Cottage, where he'd been staying. I could tell by the hummingbird curtains and the watercolor picture of a hummingbird on the wall. He must have brought me in here last night. But why? Brynn was staying in the cottage next door, so he must have come out when I was bringing Brynn home. Or, more accurately, when Ben was bringing Brynn home. I was pretty sure Ben had offered me a ride, so why hadn't Roland just let him take me home?

But he hadn't. My memory was spotty, but I could recall bits and pieces. Suddenly I remembered puking in his bathroom. God, I'd really had way too much to drink. But Roland had handled it. Held my hair, helped me clean up. Then put me to bed. With him.

I vaguely remembered him telling me it was going to be funny in the morning because I wouldn't remember how I got here. *Ass.*

I found myself suddenly wondering about his girlfriend. What would she think if she knew he'd slept in a bed with his

ex-wife last night?

But wait. Hadn't he said something about her? Maybe I'd asked. But I remembered him telling me he didn't have a girlfriend anymore. He'd broken up with her. Did I remember that right?

Not that it mattered. He could be with anyone he wanted. He didn't owe me anything.

I needed to pee something fierce, but I really wanted to avoid the awkward morning conversation that was sure to happen when Roland woke up. I'd thank him later for helping me last night and letting me crash here. But if he never knew I'd been sleeping cuddled up next to him with my hand on his ass, that would be a very good thing.

And I was *not* going to think about how good it felt to sleep next to him. Absolutely fucking not.

I slipped out of bed—thankfully I was still fully dressed—and grabbed my shoes from beside the bed. Roland slept on as I tip-toed out of the bedroom. My purse was on the floor next to the front door, with my phone and keys inside. Good. I didn't have to go hunting for any of my stuff. I couldn't remember if I'd been wearing anything else besides my t-shirt and leggings—maybe a hoodie or cardigan. I didn't see anything lying around, so I crept out the front door, shutting it as quietly as I could.

The cool morning air felt good. I took a deep breath and let it clear my head a little. I still needed a vat of coffee and a greasy breakfast before I'd feel human, but fresh air had its merits.

I went next door to check on Brynn. Poor thing. I might have gone a little overboard last night. I wasn't sure how often she got shit-faced. I'd done it enough times to know exactly what to expect—and how to counteract the worst of it—but Brynn was young. It took some experience to handle a night of ill-advised tequila.

I knocked softly and waited. If she wasn't awake yet, I could check in with her later. "Hey, Brynn? Are you up,

sweetie?”

“Yeah.” Her voice was muffled through the door, but she sounded miserable. “Just a sec.”

I ran my fingers through my tangled hair while I waited. God, I needed coffee. If she didn’t have any, this was going to have to be a very short visit.

Brynn opened the door. She was dressed in an oversize Tilikum College sweatshirt and black leggings. Her hair was a mess, she had makeup smudged beneath her eyes, and I had a feeling she’d spent some quality time praying to the porcelain god last night. But she still smiled.

“Morning, sunshine.” I sniffed, detecting the scent of brewing coffee coming from her little kitchen. “Glad you’re still alive.”

She shook her head. “Barely. Want to come in for coffee?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice vehement. “I think I’ll die in the next five minutes if I don’t get some.”

“Same,” she said. “It’s just about done. Come on in, I’ll get it.”

I glanced toward Roland’s cottage, slightly afraid I’d see him peeking out the front door, looking for me. But I didn’t see any sign of him. I went in and shut the door behind me, then ran to the bathroom.

When I came out, I sat on the couch. Brynn brought me a mug of black coffee.

“Thanks,” I said and took a sip. My stomach was still not happy with me, but I was pretty sure I could handle the coffee.

She sat down with her mug. “Sure. Although I can’t decide if I love you or hate you right now.”

“Sorry,” I said. “But let’s be honest, tequila and good choices don’t exactly go together. And we had fun, right?”

“True, and yeah, we did,” she said. “When should I try to eat?”

“How much did you puke last night?” I asked.

“A lot.”

“You poor thing,” I said. “I’m sorry. Drink some coffee and we’ll go from there.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “Maybe this is dumb, but I’m glad you didn’t stop me last night. You’re the only person around here who doesn’t treat me like a child. It’s kind of cool that you let me be stupid.”

I smiled. “I guess... you’re welcome? I don’t know, sometimes I think I’m too old to be stupid like that anymore.”

“You’re not *old*,” she said.

“I’m going to be thirty-one soon,” I said. “Maybe not *old*, but I can’t keep pretending my twenty-first birthday was just a few years ago.”

“Well, maybe you’re just living it up now because when you were twenty-one, you were already married and stuff.”

I took another sip. “I lived it up a lot then, too. I think you were just too little to notice.”

She laughed. “Even with Roland?”

“Especially with Roland,” I said.

“No way,” she said. “Roland is the world’s biggest stick-in-the-mud ever.”

“He wasn’t back then,” I said. “Have I really never told you any of the crazy shit we did?”

“No,” she said. “But I’ve always avoided asking you about Roland. I didn’t want to make it awkward. But you better tell me now. That’s your payment for this brutal hangover I’m suffering through.”

“Aw, poor baby Brynn,” I said, patting her cheek. “Let’s see, crazy stuff I did with Roland. Where do I even begin? When we were in high school, I got us fake IDs. We’d drive over to Tilikum and party with all the college kids at the bars.”

“That sounds fun,” she said. “What else?”

“The principal caught us making out under the bleachers one day when we were supposed to be in class,” I said. “We both got detention. To get back at him, we broke into his office and had sex on his desk during school hours. But at some point, my ass hit the intercom and turned it on, so the entire school heard us.”

“Holy shit, that was you?” Brynn asked. She clutched her head. “Ow, that hurts. But oh my god, Zoe, that was you and Roland? People were still talking about that when I went to high school there. It’s a school legend.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that was us.”

“I always swore it couldn’t be true,” she said. “Did you get caught?”

“No,” I said. “The intercom thing happened right as we were finishing. Then we escaped out the window.”

“That’s insane,” she said. “I can’t believe Roland would ever do that.”

“Oh, we had sex in all kinds of messed up places,” I said. “We’d been about to go at it under the bleachers when we got caught.”

“Where else?” she asked.

“Um... I don’t know, bathrooms, dressing rooms. The boys’ locker room during a football game. We broke into the Lodge once and did it in the hot tub. Probably about half the rooms in your parents’ house. They caught us once, but we were a little older, and they just pretended like they hadn’t seen anything.”

“Oh god, that’s mortifying,” she said.

I shrugged. “I guess. It didn’t really bother me back then. I don’t think I’d feel the same if your mom walked in on me now.”

“I would die,” she said. “I don’t even want my mom to know I’ve ever had sex.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “Although your mom is so awesome, you know she’d be cool about it. My mom,

however... not so much. My poor mother had no idea what to do with me.”

Brynn laughed. “Well, if you were having sex on the principal’s desk, I can see why.”

“Yeah, my older brother was always this really mellow guy,” I said. “He never got in trouble. Then I came along. I was an oops baby, so my parents didn’t see me coming from the beginning. I’m surprised they survived my teenage years.”

“Did they like Roland?” she asked.

“Yeah, they loved him,” I said. “I think they hoped he’d calm me down. Which he kind of did, eventually. Or maybe I calmed down on my own, I don’t know. I’m surprised *your* parents still speak to me after all the trouble I got Roland into.”

“My mom loves you,” she said. “You’re just one of her kids, now.”

I looked down into my coffee and smiled. It was true. I’d always felt like Shannon had adopted me into their family. And my gratitude that it hadn’t changed in the last four years was deeper than I could properly express.

“So, since we’re sharing,” Brynn said, “where did you sleep last night?”

I groaned. “Next door.”

“You mean, next door with my brother?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“On the couch, or in bed?” she asked.

“Nosy bitch,” I said, elbowing her. “In bed. Dressed. He did it to fuck with me, but the joke’s on him because I didn’t wake up and flip out like he thought I would.”

“Wait, Roland played a joke on you?” she asked. “I don’t think that’s actually my brother. He must be someone else who looks like him.”

I laughed, but it made me sad to hear her say that. She didn’t know Roland at all. Or maybe she did, and the Roland

I'd known had been nothing but a phase.

“How's that coffee treating you?” I asked. “Ready to try food?”

“Maybe?”

I patted her leg. “Let's give it a shot. I know just the place.”

TWELVE

ROLAND

Damn it, she was gone.

I'd gone to sleep looking forward to what'd she'd do this morning when she woke up with me. But she'd crept out while I was still asleep. I'd woken to the sound of her closing the front door. She'd been quiet—obviously trying to leave without waking me up—but I'd heard her.

Where did she have to go in such a hurry? It wasn't like I was some stranger. I hadn't taken her clothes off, just her shoes. She'd fucking puked in my bathroom while I held her hair, and she couldn't even stay to thank me?

I wondered if it had anything to do with her douchebag not-boyfriend.

I glanced at the time. It was odd to have slept so late. I was always up early, even on weekends. But I'd slept better than I had in a long time. I didn't want to think about why. It must have been having a warm body next to me. These guest cottages got cold at night.

I rolled over and caught a whiff of Zoe on my sheets. Instant erection. Fuck. I hated the way she still did that to me. I was not a horny teenager with no control over his dick. Those days were long over. As were my days of being turned on by Zoe.

Ex-wife, Roland. She's your ex-wife. Emphasis on the ex part.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. A text from Cooper.

Cooper: OMG so hungover. Need sustenance. Wanna come?

Me: Where?

Cooper: Ray's Diner

Me: That place is still open?

Cooper: Ya. Best breakfast ever.

Cooper: Come with me. Chase being a dick and won't.

Cooper: I need a breakfast buddy.

I shook my head. A breakfast buddy? Was he twelve? Although Ray's Diner did have great breakfast, especially when you were hungover. Zoe and I had—

Nope. Didn't matter who I'd been there with in the past. But their breakfast did sound good, so I texted Cooper that I'd meet him there.

Coop looked rough when I got to the diner. He wore a pair of aviator sunglasses and his hair was messier than usual.

"You look awful," I said as I sat in the booth across from him.

"Shh. You don't have to yell."

"I'm not yelling," I said. "I'm talking in a normal voice."

"Oh my god, stop talking," Cooper said, touching his temples.

"Have too much fun last night?" I asked, practically whispering.

"You could say that," Cooper said. "That is the last time I play *Never Have I Ever* with hard liquor. But those assholes had it in for me. The game was rigged."

"How do you rig *Never Have I Ever*?" I asked.

"By asking questions they know I'll *have* to drink to. Every. Single. Fucking. Time."

"Who were you with?" I asked.

“Just some friends,” he said. “No, wait. Ex-friends. Fuck those guys.”

The waitress came to our table holding a glass coffee pot. She looked to be in her fifties, with smile lines around her eyes and gray roots showing in her bleached blond hair. She looked familiar, and I wondered if she was the same waitress who’d worked here ten years ago when I’d been more of a regular.

Cooper grinned up at her as she filled our coffee mugs.

“Hey, Jo,” he said, whipping off his sunglasses. “You’re looking especially beautiful this morning.”

Jo grinned at him. “Thank you, sugarplum. You look like hell, but I’d still take you home with me.”

“Of course you would,” he said. “And it would be mind-blowing. We should really take our flirtation to the next level someday.”

“As if you could handle this much woman,” she said with a wink. “What can I get you, baby?”

“Jo, I feel like death warmed over and the only cure is your Sunday special,” he said.

“It’s not Sunday,” she said.

“Isn’t it? I lost track,” he said. “But please, Jo. If I ask really nice? What if I give you a back rub? It could be a sexy back rub. I’ll grind your ass while I do it. Trust me, it will be worth it. I give amazing back rubs.”

Jo appeared to be trying very hard to keep a straight face.

“Please, Jo,” Cooper said, sliding off the bench seat and dropping to his knees in front of her. “Do you want me to beg? I’m not too proud. I need what only you can give me.”

“Get up,” she said, a laugh finally escaping her lips. “One Sunday special.”

“You are a goddess,” Cooper said, getting back into the booth. “The sun rises and sets at your command, O gorgeous one.”

Jo rolled her eyes and looked at me. “Sunday special for you too, honey?”

“Sounds great,” I said, and she left to take our orders to the kitchen.

“Where’s Chase?” I asked.

Cooper slumped and slipped his glasses back on. “Home. He didn’t want to get up. I think his exact words were, *let me die in peace, you asshole.*”

The bell jingled as the door opened behind me. Cooper sat up straight and pulled his sunglasses off again, his face lighting up with a smile.

“Brynncess!”

I glanced over my shoulder. Our little sister Brynn came in, followed closely by Zoe. I should have known. They’d been drinking last night. Of course Zoe would have brought her here for a morning-after breakfast.

Zoe met my eyes and I regretted my decision to have her sleep at my place. Now it just felt awkward and weird. I should have let Ben take her home.

“Hey, Coop,” Brynn said. She looked as bad as Cooper.

“Brynncess, my baby sister,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were in town?”

She rolled her eyes, hesitating at the booth behind us. I really hoped she and Zoe would sit there instead of with us.

“I only got here yesterday,” she said. “I was going to text you later. I’m just... not feeling great.”

Zoe slid into the booth. She was right behind me, but that was fine. Better than next to me. Or worse, across the table where I’d have to avoid looking at her.

“What’s the matter?” Cooper asked. “You sick?”

“Um, no.” Brynn sat with Zoe. “I’m fine, Coop. I just need some breakfast.”

Cooper's eyebrows drew in and he glanced at me, then back at the girls. "What are you doing way over there? Come sit."

"I love you, Coop, but you're a little much for me this morning," she said. "Let me eat first."

He slumped in his seat again and crossed his arms.

"Quit pouting," I said. "She's fine."

"My best friend won't get out of bed to have breakfast with me," he said. "And my baby sister doesn't want to sit with me. This is the most depressing day ever."

I didn't blame Brynn for wanting to sit behind us. Cooper was a lot to handle, and Brynn must have felt like shit after her night with Zo.

Jo brought our breakfasts—two huge plates piled high with eggs, hash browns, French toast, sausage links, and bacon—and Cooper gushed at her again, promising to marry her when he decided to settle down. Thankfully, the food seemed to distract Cooper from his pouting.

I ate in silence for a while. There wasn't much need for me to talk—Cooper did enough of it by himself. He babbled between bites about everything—the winery, his vineyards, a movie he'd seen last week, the game of basketball he'd played with some friends. Apparently he *still had it*. I just nodded occasionally. I wasn't used to this much Cooper-time.

Brynn's voice behind me caught my attention. She was speaking softly, but I could still hear her.

"I just feel stupid, you know?" she said.

"Don't," Zoe said. "None of this is your fault. You need to get that through your head right now. Do *not* blame yourself for Austin being a douchebag."

"I know," Brynn said. "But how am I going to face everyone back at school? They're all going to know."

"Fuck them," Zoe said. "All of them. If they judge you because of this, they're shitty people and don't deserve your time."

I wasn't trying to listen, but Cooper had miraculously quieted down, so it was impossible not to hear them. Austin must have been the guy who cheated on Brynn. God, I hated the idea of her having a boyfriend at school. And one who cheated on her? The idea of it made my blood run hot.

No one deserved to be cheated on—ever—but Brynn was so young. How old was she, now? Nineteen? Twenty? She must have turned twenty on her last birthday. Holy shit, that's how old Zoe had been when we'd gotten married. Had we really been *that* young?

"Look," Zoe said, "obviously Austin was not the love of your life. Think of him as a learning experience. We all have them."

"Yeah, I guess," Brynn said.

Was that what I was to Zoe? A learning experience?

"You're young," Zoe said. "You should be having fun right now. There's no need for serious. Go back to school and have a fling or something. Get that jackass out of your system."

Have a fling? That was the advice Zoe had for my little sister?

I shifted in my seat so I was partially turned around. "A fling?"

Brynn raised her eyebrows, and Zoe glanced back at me.

"What about a fling?" Zoe asked.

"That's what you're telling her to do?" I asked.

"Why not?" Zoe asked. "She's a twenty-year-old woman who just suffered a breakup. A fling is a great way to get over someone."

"Breakup?" Cooper asked, as if he'd suddenly realized the rest of us were still here. "Brynnness, did someone break up with you?"

"Cooper, it's fine," she said. "Don't."

Cooper got up and slid into the booth next to Brynn, but I wasn't paying attention to them.

“How is that good advice?” I asked Zoe.

She turned so she was facing me, her eyes blazing. “Excuse me?”

“It’s a fair question,” I said. “You’re telling an impressionable girl—who has always looked up to you like you’re a rock star—to go be some guy’s fuck buddy for a while?”

“Okay, first, you said *fuck buddy*, not me,” she said. “Second, she’s a woman, not a girl.”

Cooper’s voice rose. “Brynnness, I will beat the shit out of that sniveling little punk.”

“Cooper, stop,” Brynn said.

I ignored Cooper, my eyes still on Zoe. “Regardless, just because you have some guy who gets in your pants without any commitment doesn’t mean it’s a good idea for Brynn.”

“Is that what this is about?” she asked. “I’ve already told you, Van is none of your business.”

“No, who you sleep with is definitely none of my business,” I said. “We are in complete agreement there. But it is my business when you start putting shitty ideas in my sister’s head.”

“Seriously?” she asked. “You haven’t seen Brynn in a year and a half, and suddenly you think you get to worry about her?”

“She’s my fucking sister, Zoe.”

“And she’s not mine?” Zoe asked. “I’m not a Miles anymore, so I don’t get to be the one to help her through a crisis? That’s bullshit, Roland. You can’t waltz in here and act like you have all the answers when you don’t even give a shit.”

Her words stung—a lot. A hot ball of anger coiled in my gut.

“How the fuck would you know what I care about?” I asked. “This is my family. Of course I give a shit.”

“Could have fooled me,” she said.

What the hell had just happened? How did we go from my sister having a fling to Zoe throwing my relationship with my family in my face?

“This isn’t about me,” I said.

“I thought everything was about you,” she said.

“Why the fuck are we fighting about this?” I pulled out my wallet and tossed some money on the table. I needed to get out of here. “Don’t tell my sister to do stupid shit.”

“Um, the sister is right here and can probably decide for herself what is and isn’t stupid,” Brynn said.

I just grunted as I got up and slipped my wallet into my pocket. “You’re welcome for cleaning up your vomit last night.”

I didn’t wait for Zoe’s reply. Just stalked out the door, my heart pounding against my ribs.

THIRTEEN

ROLAND

Whatever. Forget it, I have to go to work.

~Text from Roland, four years ago

I SPENT the next week basically in seclusion. I went from the cottage to the office and back again. Ate when I needed to. Slept at night. And worked.

My CEO was fine with me telecommuting for a while, but I had at least three conference calls a day. I worked a full day for my real job, then turned my attention to Salishan. It kept me up late most nights, but at least I successfully avoided everyone.

Brynn went back to school. Or at least, I assumed she did. Her car wasn't outside anymore, and the guest cottage next door was once again empty. I caught glimpses of Cooper a few times, but he was busy with his own responsibilities. My mom tried to talk me into having dinner with her and Dad, but I made up an excuse. I didn't want to deal with him. Leo was even more of a recluse than I was. I tended to forget he was around, he so rarely came out.

And then there was Zoe.

She was around, all right. She had to be, because my fucking parents employed her. That had never bothered me before, but hearing her coming and going—her footsteps, her office door—left me constantly on edge. I didn't like fighting with her—I never had—but I didn't know why it mattered,

now. Why I couldn't just do what I needed to do and quit thinking about her?

Besides, were we really *fighting*? That implied something that was ongoing. As it was, we'd argued, I'd gotten pissed, and I'd left. That meant it was over. It wasn't like we had a relationship to repair. I wasn't sleeping on the couch because my wife was mad at me.

No, I was sleeping on sheets that still smelled like her.

Fuck.

Friday night, the sun had gone down before I realized how late it was. I'd eaten a quick dinner at my desk earlier, but it felt like I looked up and suddenly it was ten-thirty.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and stretched my back. This chair was shit. If I'd known I'd be here for so long, I would have ordered a better one. At this point, it probably didn't matter. I was on the verge of just walking away from the whole place, anyway. Booking a flight back to San Francisco and leaving this mess to my father. I knew that would put my mom in a bad place, but my dad pushed back against every suggestion I made. I didn't know if I'd be able to help more than I already had.

Regardless, I was done for the day. I closed things down and headed outside.

I found Cooper leaning against his truck. He looked up at me and a shit-eating grin crossed his face.

"It emerges from its den," Cooper said, adopting a terrible Australian accent. "The corporate executive is rarely seen this early in the evening, preferring instead to remain hunched over a laptop until the wee hours of the morning."

"Hilarious," I said.

He laughed. "I know, I'm fucking hysterical. What are you up to tonight? Wait, never mind. I already know the answer. You're working."

"I was," I said. "You going out tonight? Or heading home?"

“Neither, man, I have shit to do.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen before putting it back. “Just waiting to hear from Chase.”

“What shit do you have to do on a Friday night?” I asked. “Especially with Chase? Picking up girls or something?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes, yeah. But we have a more important mission tonight.”

“Mission?” I asked. “Does this have anything to do with Brynn’s boyfriend at school?”

“Nah,” he said. “Leo and I already took care of that.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing permanent,” he said, his voice casual. “Just fucked with him a little bit.”

I decided the less I knew about that, the better. “Then what are you doing tonight?”

“Why, do you want to help?”

“Help with what?”

He eyed me for a second, nodding slowly. “Yeah, you definitely want to help with this.”

“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing?”

“Nope.” He brought out his phone again and typed something.

I glanced back toward the Big House. Lights glowed in the windows and soft music drifted out from the back terrace. Zoe was probably in there somewhere, working a late event.

Cooper’s phone rang, and he put it up to his ear. “Yeah. Okay. Yep, Leo’s set. Fuck yeah, he did. I know, we should have. Oh shit, really? Oh my god, that’s perfect. Yeah, he’s coming with me. Just stay out of sight, we’ll be there in a few.”

“Was that Chase?” I asked after he hung up.

“Yep.” His eyes lit up with an intensity that made me very nervous. “Let’s go.”

“I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?” I asked.

He grinned. “Maybe. But I doubt it.”

Against my better judgment, I got in Cooper’s truck. We headed out of town on the highway. I thought about asking where we were going, but had a feeling he wouldn’t tell me. He turned up the music and drummed the steering wheel to the beat. Belted out the lyrics. Thankfully his voice wasn’t terrible.

We got to Tilikum about half an hour later, and he drove straight toward the college campus. When he pulled into the parking lot of a bar called the Rowdy Bear, I figured he’d been fucking with me. He *was* going out, probably just meeting Chase here. I had no idea why he hadn’t said so up front. Or why we’d come all the way here for a drink when there were perfectly good bars in Echo Creek.

“So, your mission is drinking at a bar?” I asked as we got out.

“Nope,” he said. “But we’re going to act like it. So go in and order something. You’re part of our cover.”

“Your cover? Cooper, what the hell are you talking about?”

“You’ll see,” he said.

There was a hint of humor in his voice—a tone I was all too familiar with. He used to sound like that when he was pulling a prank on me or Leo.

Knowing I was probably about to be the butt of one of Coop’s jokes, I followed him inside.

The place was packed. Every stool along the bar was taken, as were most of the booths and tables. The pool tables had games going, and small groups of people stood in knots around the room. Mostly a college crowd. It reminded me of late nights getting drunk on cheap well drinks with Zoe.

I tried to push that image out of my head. But it was tough to walk into a place like this on a busy Friday night and not think of her in a black tank top and jeans, her makeup a little smudged, her eyes glassy.

Chase appeared from somewhere in the crowd. “It’s about time.”

“We came right over,” Cooper said. “What’s going on in here?”

“Some girl’s twenty-first birthday party,” Chase said.

“Holy shit, are you serious?” Cooper looked wide-eyed toward the bar. “Fucking perfect.”

Sure enough, there was a group of girls in clubbing outfits—sequined tube tops and halters, showing a lot of skin. Tight skirts. Stripper heels. Most of them had matching plastic crowns. But the birthday girl stood out, with a hot pink feather boa around her neck and a large crown with a sparkling *21* on the front.

I watched Cooper and Chase as they eyed the party. *This* was their mission? If Cooper had told me he was going to crash some college chick’s birthday party, I definitely would have passed. And this seemed odd, even for them. They were twenty-six, so not *that* much older than these girls. But creeping on a bunch of drunk twenty-one-year-olds seemed kinda low. These girls were basically Brynn’s age.

“Guys, there are better ways to meet girls,” I said.

“No shit,” Cooper said. “Hey, that table is open. I’ll grab it before someone else does. Go get us beers.”

I was about to argue, but Cooper and Chase pushed their way through the crowd toward the open table.

Whoops and hollers in high-pitched female voices came from the birthday party end of the bar, so I veered toward a clearer space. One of the bartenders—a petite girl with a red pixie cut and at least seven visible piercings—got my three beers, and I took them to the table.

“Did you get any good ones yet?” Chase asked.

I set the beers down and sat in the open chair. “Good what?”

“This one is pretty good,” Cooper said, holding his phone out so Chase could look.

“Please tell me you aren’t taking pictures of those girls,” I said.

“Shit, no,” Cooper said, rolling his eyes. “Come on, we have morals. A few at least. Those girls are like Brynn’s age.”

“Then what the fuck is going on?” I asked.

“Dude, he’s gonna do a body shot off the birthday girl,” Chase said.

“Oh my god, this is perfect.” Cooper raised his phone, keeping it low toward the table like he was just texting.

The birthday girl was indeed laid out on the bar, and some guy was sprinkling salt up her stomach. She pulled her shirt over her bra, and he sprinkled salt in the valley between her tits. He placed a lime wedge in her mouth, then turned and flashed a smile at her friends.

Holy shit. Was that Van?

He got up on the bar and knelt in front of her, then pushed her legs open and leaned down to lick up her belly. Her friends cheered as he stuck his face between her tits. When he came up smiling, someone handed him a shot glass and he tossed back the tequila. The girl’s legs were around his waist and he made a show of grinding her a few times while he took the lime wedge out of her mouth with his teeth. Then he spit the wedge on the floor and kissed her.

I was so fucking angry a haze of red tinged my vision. My jaw clenched tight and I balled my hands into fists. This piece of shit was sleeping with Zoe, but here he was literally dry-humping some girl on a goddamn bar.

He got down and took a dramatic bow while the party-goers cheered. The birthday girl was clearly drunk off her ass. Van and one of her friends had to help her down. She stumbled, and her skirt was hiked up so high it was practically a belt. Van grabbed a handful of her ass with one hand, pulled her hair back with the other, and planted a raunchy kiss on her already open mouth.

“Holy shit,” Chase said.

I'd been about to say the same thing, but Chase was laughing.

“What the fuck are you laughing about?” I asked. “Isn't that the prick Zoe was with?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Chase turned to Cooper. “Did you get the whole thing?”

“Every second,” Cooper said.

“Should we stay and get more?” Chase asked. “Or do you think that's enough?”

“I want to see where this goes,” Cooper said, his eyes still on the bar.

Wait, were they taking pictures of Van? “Are you guys trying to catch him cheating on her?”

“Basically,” Cooper said. “The problem is, they're not exclusive, so what's really cheating? Zoe knows he probably sleeps with other girls. But this? She is not going to be able to ignore this.”

“We got the fucker this time,” Chase said.

“I take it you guys don't like this guy,” I said.

“No, I want to smash his fucking face in,” Cooper said.

Another one of the girls had her shirt pulled up to her chin and a plastic shot cup wedged between her tits. Van grabbed her boobs and squeezed while he took the cup between his teeth, then rocked his head backward to swallow the liquor.

“You didn't say anything about hating him when we saw them last time,” I said.

Cooper typed something on his phone. “You didn't ask.”

I took a deep breath to keep from smacking my brother upside the head. My eyes flicked to the bar. Van had one arm around the birthday girl—leaning on him was probably the only reason she was still standing—while he made out with her friend. He broke the kiss and turned to the birthday girl again. Shoved his tongue in her mouth with the second girl

still hanging on his other arm. Cooper was recording the whole thing.

Why the fuck was Zoe giving this guy the time of day? She used to like to party, but not like this. Even if she had been single at twenty-one, she wouldn't have let some guy slobber all over her while he grabbed some other girl's tits.

"Jesus, is this what Zoe does on her nights off?" The image of that prick licking salt off her skin made me want to fly across the bar and break my beer over his face.

"No, he wouldn't pull shit like this when Zoe is around," Cooper said. "He acts like he's not a total scumbag when he's with her, so she doesn't know."

"Why the hell is she with him?" I asked.

Cooper shrugged. "I told you, she's not *with him*. I guess that's why she doesn't worry about what he's really like. I've been trying to tell her for months, but she just blows it off, like it doesn't matter because she's not in a relationship with him."

"But she's sleeping with him."

"Yeah," Cooper said. "Sometimes."

That wasn't Zoe. The wrongness of it screamed at me. "That's fucked up. She deserves better than that."

Cooper narrowed his eyes at me, like he wasn't sure what to think of what I'd said. "Yeah, she does."

"So why does she do it?"

"I guess he's a good fuck," Chase said.

My eyes landed on Chase and for the second time since I'd been back, I wanted to drag him outside and beat the shit out of him.

"Dude, no." Cooper shook his head.

Chase winced. "Sorry."

"Come on, Coop," I said. "You know her as well as anyone. Zoe should not be some asshole's side piece."

"No, she shouldn't," Cooper said.

“But she’s dated, right?” I asked. “You know, since me. She’s been in an actual relationship?”

“Yeah,” Cooper said. “Twice.”

“What happened?” I asked.

He shrugged again, and that nonchalant attitude was seriously pissing me off. “I don’t know. She broke up with them.”

“Did she break it off, or did they?” I asked.

“Why does it matter?” Cooper asked.

“Because I want to know what the fuck happened to her.”

Cooper stared at me, his silence stretching out long enough to make me shift in my chair, uncomfortable.

“She got fucking divorced, man.” The usual lightness was gone from Cooper’s tone. “That’s what happened to her. And as for the details, here’s the thing: Zoe is my friend, and I love the shit out of her. So yeah, I know about the guys she dated and why they broke up. I know what she’s said about this thing with Van, and why she’s doing it. But I’m not going to tell you all her personal shit. If you want to know, go ask her.”

“Coop, he’s leaving with two of them,” Chase said.

“I don’t have a good angle,” Cooper said. “Can you get it?”

“Yeah.” Chase held up his phone and pretended to look at something on the screen while he took pictures of Van leaving the bar with two very drunk college girls. “Got it.”

“If you’re such good friends with her, why doesn’t she listen to you?” I asked. “Why is she still sleeping with that prick?”

Cooper’s brow creased, and he looked at me like I was crazy. “You were married to her. Are you telling me you don’t remember how stubborn she is? Besides, we’ve never caught him doing anything on this scale. Hitting on some girl, sure. But she wasn’t expecting him to be faithful, so that wasn’t enough.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You planned this?”

“Yeah,” Cooper said. “Took us too long to come up with the idea, though. We should have done this months ago.”

“How did you know he’d be here?” I asked.

“We didn’t,” Cooper said. “Chase followed him.”

I was finally realizing what this was all about. They hated the guy Zoe was sleeping with, and they’d tried to get her to break things off with him, but she was being stubborn. No surprise there. So they had come up with a plan to catch him being especially *douchey* so they could show her.

Cooper patted my shoulder, like he could tell what I was thinking. “Makes sense now, doesn’t it? We are pretty fucking brilliant. And I told you you’d want to help us tonight.”

“What are you doing with the pictures?” I asked.

“And video,” Chase said. “You recorded the whole body shot, right?”

“Oh hell yeah.” Cooper tapped on his phone screen. “I’m sending it all to Leo.”

“What’s Leo going to do with it?” I asked.

“Put it online,” Cooper said.

“Why?” I asked. “Why not just show her?”

Cooper gave me another *you’re an idiot* look. “You’re supposed to be the smart one in the family. If I show her, I’d have to admit we did this, and that’s not going to happen. Then she might find out about the other shit we’ve pulled on him.”

“What other shit?” I asked.

Chase and Coop grinned at each other.

“Let’s see... there was the ten-gallon bucket of lube we shipped to the bar where he works—in his name, of course,” Cooper said. “We followed that with a shipment of condoms, size extra small.”

“We started a rumor that he does gay porn,” Chase said. “The gif Leo made is really convincing, but I don’t think Zoe

ever saw it.”

“I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve put gum under his car door handle,” Cooper said.

“We recruited the barista over at the coffee place in town,” Chase said. “I’m pretty sure she spits in his coffee every day.”

“Whenever he’s at the same bar as us, we buy some random guy a drink and have the bartender say it’s from him,” Cooper said. “He’s almost gotten his ass kicked like five times.”

“And one guy wanted to take him home,” Chase said. “I think that dude might have heard the gay porn rumors.”

“You two are children,” I said. “You realize that, right?”

They just shrugged.

“Anyway, Leo said he could get this shit up on Facebook and Instagram and stuff, and make sure Van is tagged or whatever,” Cooper said.

“Leo?”

“Oh my god, keep up,” Cooper said. “Yes, Leo. Don’t ask me how he can do it, because I don’t know, and I don’t ask him questions like that. It’s not my area. I just know that he said he could, and it won’t look like we were involved. In about five minutes, a video of Van sucking salt off that girl’s tits is going to be all over the Internet. Then we sit back and let things happen naturally.”

I had to give it to them, they’d come up with a decent plan. Especially if Leo could pull that off—although I didn’t want to know how. It sounded like it might be illegal.

Cooper finally took a sip of his beer. “Well, boys, I think our work here is done.” He turned to me. “Thanks for your help.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“You bought the beer.” Cooper lifted his phone and snapped a picture of me. “And now I have proof you were here, so don’t rat us out.”

I shook my head and took a drink. Ratting them out to Zoe was the last thing I was going to do. Were they complete juveniles? Yeah. Was I proud of them? Hell yeah. I wanted them to take this guy down. And it felt good to know Zoe had them on her side.

“I didn’t see a thing,” I said. “We were just out having a couple beers.”

We finished our drinks, and it wasn’t long before Cooper and Chase had gone to sit with a table full of girls. They each had one on their lap. They motioned for me to join them, but I shook my head. I had no interest in some random hook-up.

Mostly, I thought about Zoe. Wondering how soon she’d see the damning evidence. If I’d know when she did. Regardless of what she’d said to me at breakfast last weekend, I did give a shit. About my family. About her. Just because things hadn’t worked out between us didn’t mean I couldn’t care. I just didn’t like seeing her with someone who could disrespect her like that. She deserved better.

She deserved better than either of us.

FOURTEEN

ZOE

Van opened the door just a few seconds after I knocked. He was shirtless, in just a pair of sweats, running a towel through his hair.

“Hey,” he said, looking me up and down. “You look hot.”

I glanced down at myself. I was wearing a slouchy t-shirt and a pair of skinny jeans. Casual and arguably cute, but I hadn’t been going for hot, necessarily. It felt like he was just making shit up.

“Come on in.” he said.

“Thanks.” I stepped across the threshold of his apartment and my back prickled. It was a weird sensation, almost like déjà vu. But I didn’t have the impression of repetition. More like foreboding.

I needed to calm my ass down, but I was wound up so tight, I felt like I might snap in half. I’d been on edge all week. Monday I’d been so fucking distracted, I’d almost missed an appointment with a client. Thankfully, I’d been wearing a stain-free shirt, and had been able to rush downstairs to meet them. But I hated feeling so unhinged.

The answer was simple. I’d take it out on Van.

Sexually, of course.

That was what he was good for, wasn’t it? He wasn’t a bad lay, and I usually got off. And I needed it bad. Like, *bad* bad. Like nothing I’d done to myself in the past few weeks had done nearly enough to relieve the pressure that built every day.

It was Roland, but I staunchly refused to believe it had anything to do with the way he looked in a button-down shirt, or how good he'd felt when I'd slept in his bed. It most definitely had nothing to do with the way he smelled, or the fact that sometimes if I played my cards right, I could dart out into the hallway after he walked by and get a tiny whiff of him.

Not that I'd ever done that. I had way too much self-respect.

Okay, no I didn't.

But no, it was none of those things. It was the fact that his very presence at Salishan Cellars emitted a stream of negative energy so potent, I was in a constant state of stress. I could feel him through the walls. Sense every furrow of his brow. Every heavy sigh. He was brooding and grumpy and I barely saw him, but he was basically ruining my life.

Which was why I needed to have stupid, meaningless sex with a guy named Van.

Perfectly legit.

"You want a drink?" Van asked.

"That would be great." I very, very much wanted a drink. That would make all of this so much easier.

I put my purse down and sat on the edge of the couch while he went into the kitchen. His apartment wasn't big, but it was always immaculately clean. Almost oddly clean, for a guy. It was nothing like Cooper and Chase's place, which made you wonder if you should sit or just stand and hope you didn't touch anything. Even when it was clean, the goofball boys' house smelled like them. Like guys. It wasn't a gross smell, actually. It was a bit like guys' deodorant and maybe aftershave or their shampoo, mixed with a hint of that man smell that on some guys was fucking delicious.

Van's apartment always smelled like cleaning products. At first, I'd wondered if he was a germaphobe. But he didn't seem to wash his hands all the time or worry about wiping off

tables or the bar top when we were out. At this point, I figured he just preferred to keep things clean.

I hadn't seen Van in a while. Not since we'd left the bar together in front of Roland—and I'd gone home alone. He'd texted me earlier to see if I wanted to come over—no pretense of anything but sex, he hadn't even asked me to meet him for drinks first—and I'd waffled for an hour before answering.

Why was I being so weird about his? I liked sex, and sex with Van was... well, it was fine. It didn't mean anything, and I wanted it that way. I didn't have feelings for him, and he didn't for me, and none of that was a problem. It was like I'd told Brynn. Sometimes having a fling was a great way to get over a broken heart.

Only my heart hadn't been broken last week. It had been years. What did I still have to get over?

Van came back with my drink, and I shook off that thought.

"Thanks," I said.

He nodded—more of a tip of his chin—and sat beside me. Close. Because why wouldn't he sit close? He'd texted me for a booty call, and I'd come over, so he had every reason to believe this little visit had a happy ending.

I took a generous swallow of the whiskey.

His phone dinged. He had this weird chime sound when he got messages and for no good reason, it always made my skin crawl. He picked it up off the coffee table and swiped the screen with his thumb, his drink perched on his bent knee.

I leaned back and waited. So he was just going to sit there looking at his phone? I took another drink.

His forehead creased, and he flicked his thumb up and down the screen. "What the hell?"

"What's going on?"

"Who put this shit on Facebook?" He stood and started pacing, still looking at his phone. "That crazy bitch."

“Why are you freaking out?” I dug my phone out of my purse and opened Facebook. I was friends with Van, so maybe I could see what had him so riled up.

After finding his profile, I scrolled down. There were a couple of status updates. A bathroom mirror selfie from earlier that made me cringe, even if he did have decent abs.

Noise blared from his phone and he jerked, like it surprised him. “A video? Who the fuck...”

I scrolled down more and came face to face with a photo of Van. Although he was kissing some girl, there was no doubt it was him. She was dressed in a shiny silver top and a skirt that was barely long enough to cover her ass. Hanging on his other side was another girl wearing a plastic crown and pink boa around her shoulders.

That wasn’t the only photo.

A sick feeling spread through my stomach as I scrolled through the rest. Van kissing the pink boa girl. Taking a shot glass from between some girl’s boobs with his teeth. Walking out the door with both girls, one on each arm.

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

I scrolled again, and a video started to play. Distorted crowd noise mixed with music in the background, and a guy leaned over a girl lying on the bar.

“Oh shit—Zoe, don’t,” Van said.

He lunged for me, but I stood up and moved a few steps away, my eyes glued to my phone screen. Even in the video’s low light, I could tell the guy on the bar was Van. He leaned down and licked his way up the girl’s stomach, then buried his face in her boobs. The taste of bile hit the back of my tongue as he took something out of her mouth and dry-humped her a few times.

“Are you fucking kidding me with this?” I asked. The car-wreck of a video wasn’t over, but I tapped pause. I didn’t want to see any more.

“It was just a party,” he said.

“Did you or did you not do the world’s raunchiest body shot off a drunk girl, and then leave with her and someone else?” I asked.

“It’s not a big deal,” he said. “We were all a little happy last night. Things got carried away.”

“This was last night?” I asked, holding up my phone. “Where did you take those girls?”

“What does it matter?” he asked.

“You brought them here, didn’t you?” I asked. “Both of them. Less than twenty-four hours ago, you had two drunk girls here, in your apartment. And you called me to come over?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I don’t need more recovery time or anything. I’ve got plenty to go around.”

“You think I’m worried your dick won’t work?” I asked.

“It’s not like you and I are a thing,” he said. “I thought we both understood that.”

“I know we’re not, but that doesn’t mean I’m cool with this,” I said. “These girls barely look old enough to drink.”

“It was her twenty-first birthday,” he said.

I stared at Van, the taste of bile returning with a vengeance. “Twenty-one? You’re thirty.”

“So?”

“Oh my god.” I put a hand to my forehead. “You honestly think this is okay?”

“Zoe, I had some fun last night. They had fun, too. That’s all it was. And that’s all this is,” he said, gesturing between us. “Is there a time limit I’m supposed to wait before we can hang out again if I’ve had someone else over? Do we really need a set of rules, here? Besides, it’s not like you’ve been available lately.”

“I have work,” I said. “And a life.”

“Right,” he said. “I’m sure it has nothing to do with your ex-husband being in town.”

“What?”

“Your ex shows up and suddenly you’re always busy,” he said. “I don’t know what you expected me to do. Wait for you?”

“Roland doesn’t have anything to do with... with anything,” I said.

“Sure.”

“Let me get this straight. My ex being in town somehow justifies all this.” I held up my phone again. The image was frozen on him on top of the girl.

“Look, you’re cool to hang out with, and the sex is great,” he said. “And I have never given a shit about who else is fucking you. You want to bang your ex, go ahead. But don’t expect me to suddenly become a fucking priest while you’re getting boned by someone else. I’m in this for a good time, and if I don’t have it with you, I’ll have it with someone else. No big deal.”

“I’m not banging my ex,” I said. “God, Van. No one else is fucking me.”

“I’m just saying, I don’t care. And I don’t get why you do.”

Swallowing hard, I looked away. What had I expected? We’d established in the beginning that this was just sex. We hooked up when we both felt like it. Used a condom every time. That was it. What I’d agreed to. What I’d wanted.

But it had been easier to ignore the reality of him sleeping with other women when it wasn’t being thrown in my face.

“You know what, this isn’t working for me anymore,” I said.

“Zoe.” His tone was soothing, like he was talking to an angry child. “Don’t be like that. Sit down, have another drink. I’ll rub your back, and then...”

“Seriously? You fucked not one, but two girls in here last night, and you’re trying to coax me into staying?”

“I cleaned up,” he said.

“Oh god,” I said. “That’s why it always smells like bleach in here, isn’t it? You don’t want the women you bring home to smell each other.”

“No, I just have good fucking manners,” he said. “Of course I wash the sheets in between.”

The danger of me vomiting was growing by the second. Although maybe vomiting all over Van’s bleach-soaked apartment wasn’t a bad idea.

“I’m done,” I said. How exactly was I supposed to break up with someone I wasn’t really dating? “This thing with us is over. Got that? Don’t call me. Don’t text. Take me off your hook-up list.”

“Zoe—”

“Don’t.” I grabbed my purse and went for the door. “This was a mistake, and I’m done.”

I left before he could argue. My stomach roiled with nausea and my heart beat uncomfortably hard. I hurried to my car and left, needing to put distance between me and Van’s apartment.

What the fuck had I been thinking? That randomly having sex with some guy who didn’t care about me was a good way to spend my life? That wasn’t me. A few years ago, I wouldn’t have even considered something like that. Sure, I loved sex, and one of the bummers of being single was not having any. But even when I was young, and my idea of an ideal Friday night was having sex where the danger of being caught was high, it still *meant* something to me. I’d never slept with just anyone.

Why had I compromised myself like that?

Because compromising myself was exactly what I’d done. I’d ignored what I really wanted. Settled for something so much less.

I stopped at a stop sign and sent Cooper a quick text, asking if he was home and I could come over. Some girls had their BFF to go to when they felt like shit. I had Coop and Chase. I just hoped they weren't out. I really needed them tonight.

FIFTEEN

ZOE

Cooper texted back to say they were home, so I went straight there. They lived across town from Van, closer to the winery. I parked and went up to the door.

Cooper answered. “Hey, there you are. What’s up?”

“Can I come in?” I asked. “I’ve had a shitty night.”

“Sure.” He held the door open and I went inside.

I tossed my stuff down on their table and flopped onto the couch.

“What’s going on?” Cooper asked. “No, wait, let me guess. How many tries do I get? How about five. Okay, first guess: You ran into Roland and he did something to piss you off.”

“No, nothing about Roland,” I said.

“Damn,” he said. “Are you sure? Because Roland is pretty good at pissing you off.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “I told Van I was done. I’d say I broke up with him, but it’s kind of hard to break up with a guy I was stupid enough to be sleeping with but not dating.”

“Zoe, you didn’t let me finish guessing. Wait.” His eyes widened. “Did you just say what I think you said?”

“I broke things off with Van?”

Cooper raised his arms overhead, like he was mimicking a ref calling a touchdown. “Yes. Oh my god, finally. Zoe-bowie, I have been waiting for this day. Fuck yes.”

“You’re very excited,” I said.

“I know,” he said, his eyes huge and wild. He turned to shout over his shoulder. “Chase, Zoe’s here and it’s go time. Where’s the box?”

“Hang on.” Chase’s voice came from his room. A few seconds later he stumbled out, pulling on a pair of sweats. “I think it’s in the closet by the door.”

“There’s a closet by the door?” Cooper asked, turning around. “Holy shit, there is. How did I not know that? This is an awesome place for a closet. I could have been putting my coat in here all this time and I didn’t even notice the door.”

Chase shrugged and pulled a dark blue shoebox out of the closet. He brought it over and handed it to me. “Here.”

“What’s this?” I was a little afraid to open it.

“It’s your break-up box,” Cooper said, sporting a big grin. “We put it together for when you broke up with Van.”

“What’s a break-up box?”

Cooper sat on the arm of the couch and tapped his leg. “Just some things we thought might help. Last time you broke up with a guy, you were sad. And I hate it when you’re sad. But let’s face it, Chase and I suck at this stuff. We figured we should be better prepared the next time. Obviously, there was a next time coming with Van. I won’t get into all the *I told you so* stuff, at least not tonight because your wounds are fresh and I’m way too nice of a guy to do that to you.”

“Wow, this is... really sweet. I think.” I slowly lifted the lid, slightly less afraid it contained a live spider, and took out the first thing. “Tissues. Makes sense, but I’m not going to cry over him.”

“Good, that douche doesn’t deserve it,” Cooper said. He took the little package of tissues and tossed them over his shoulder. “Fuck that. And if you did cry over him, I’d take these from you anyway because you’d be stupid to shed tears over someone so fucking unworthy.”

“Uh, Coop, tissues are good for other things, though,” Chase said.

“Which is why they aren’t in the garbage,” Cooper said. “They are quite handy to have around. If we ever went through a dry spell, I’d be buying this shit in bulk. Not that we ever go through dry spells. But shit, a dude can only go so long without blowing his load before he’s basically a danger to society. Whacking it is a public service, if you think about it.”

I ignored Cooper’s babble about masturbation and pulled out a small, flat package wrapped in plastic. “Microwave popcorn?”

“Movie theater butter,” Chase said, puffing his chest out a little bit like he was proud of himself. “When you’ve had a shitty day, it’s always good to have an easy snack.”

“Okay,” I said, putting it aside, and took out a torn wrapper. “Um, this is an empty bag of M&Ms.”

“Damn it, Chase, did you eat her chocolate?” Cooper asked.

“Oh, yeah, I think I did,” Chase said, eying the box. “I meant to replace it, but I guess I forgot.”

“God, you’re the worst,” Cooper said. “You owe her chocolate now. Seriously, I can’t take you anywhere.”

I almost said that it was just M&Ms and they barely qualified as chocolate, but I decided against it. This was one of the sweetest things anyone had ever done for me. I didn’t want to make them feel bad for their candy choice. “Okay, what else do we have? What’s the lighter for?”

“That’s to burn anything you have that’s his,” Cooper said. “That’s a thing girls do, right? Just, you know, practice fire safety and stuff.”

“I don’t have any of his stuff. Thanks for the option, though.” I took out two DVDs and held up the first one. “*Beauty and the Beast*? This is a Disney cartoon.”

“Yep,” Chase said. “Everyone knows Belle is the best princess. She’s bangin’ and she loves to read. And Beast is a

badass, plus he gives her a library. He's the man."

I laughed and shook my head, holding up the second movie. "Stepbrothers?"

"That movie is hilarious," Cooper said. "There's no way you'll feel bad if you watch it."

"And those go with the popcorn," Chase said.

"Hey, good one," Cooper said. "That almost makes up for the chocolate."

"Thanks, man," Chase said, grinning.

"What is this?" I asked, picking up a handwritten note on a scrap of paper. "Coupon good for one free orgasm, no strings attached. Love, Chase?"

"What?" Cooper snatched the paper out of my hand. "What the hell is this?"

"It's a free orgasm coupon," Chase said. "If she's single, she might need one. Obviously, you can't do that for her. And I'm amazing at it, so..."

Cooper closed his eyes and shook his head. "Chase, no."

"What's the big deal?" Chase asked. "I'd need like five minutes, and she doesn't even need to get all the way naked."

"Five minutes?" I asked. "I don't know, Chase. That doesn't sound like it would get the job done."

Chase winked at me. "Trust me. I have that shit on lockdown."

"Zoe is pretty much my sister," Cooper said. "Hell, she's like your sister too. You can't offer her a free orgasm. You can't offer her any kind of orgasm. To give her an orgasm, you'd have to touch her *there*. What's wrong with you?"

"Like my sister is not the same as *being* my sister," Chase said. "My dick doesn't recognize your social restrictions."

"Your dick will recognize my fucking fist," Cooper said, balling up his hand and drawing his arm back.

“Okay, boys, no one is punching anyone in the dick,” I said. “Chase, thank you, but I’ll take a rain check on that free orgasm.”

“A rain check for never,” Cooper said.

Chase’s shoulders slumped, and he scowled. “I was just trying to help.”

I laughed. Oh my god, I loved these two. “Don’t worry about the orgasm situation. If I need to get off, I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself.”

Cooper rolled his eyes. “For fuck’s sake, Zoe, don’t talk like that. You know I hate it when you give me a boner.”

Chase looked down at his crotch, then scowled at Cooper. “You ass, every time you announce that you have a boner, I lose mine.”

“What the fuck do you need a boner for right now anyway?” Cooper asked.

“Well, if you both have boners, maybe the two of you can service me together,” I said, although it was hard to get the words out because I was laughing so hard.

Cooper and Chase went silent and looked away from each other.

“What?” I asked. “Obviously I was kidding.”

Chase crossed his arms and his jaw hitched. Cooper kept his eyes on the wall.

“You guys, don’t be mad,” I said. “I was making a joke.”

“It’s not you,” Cooper said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Chase cleared his throat. “It’s just that one time we tried—”

“Chase,” Cooper snapped. “We do not speak of it. Ever.”

I glanced between the two of them. “Wait, do you mean you tried a threesome?”

Cooper stood and walked into the kitchen. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Some things are not all they’re cracked up to be,” Chase said. “It was a disaster.”

I opened my mouth to ask a question—because oh my god, I wanted to hear this story—but Cooper poked his head around the wall.

“We do not speak of it,” he said, enunciating each word. “Not even to you, Zoe-bowie. So don’t ask. And don’t think you can get Chase to talk. It won’t work, because he knows what will happen if he does.”

“What will happen?” Chase asked.

Cooper’s eyes narrowed, and he made a slow cutting motion across his throat. “I know where you sleep.”

Chase chuckled, but I wasn’t so sure Cooper was kidding.

He came back with three beers, one for each of us. “You ready to talk about this? Or should we just get drunk?”

“Talk about what?” I asked. “I told you what happened.”

Cooper took a deep breath and jumped onto the couch, landing with his legs stretched out. I scooted to the corner to give him room.

“Chase, have a seat, buddy. Shit’s about to get real,” Cooper said. Chase sat in a tattered armchair, and Cooper’s eyes moved back to me. “I don’t mean what happened tonight. I mean the rest of it. You need to get this stuff out, or it’s going to eat you up inside. And I’m a really good listener because I’m an awesome friend. So talk.”

I stared at the beer bottle in my hand. He was right, I did need to talk. I just wasn’t sure I wanted to say out loud what was going through my mind.

“I was settling,” I said. “I didn’t want to think of it that way, but that’s what it was. I was settling for something less than I really want.”

“Why?” Cooper asked.

I hesitated for a second, thinking Cooper would keep talking. A one-word sentence wasn’t really his style. But he

just kept his eyes intent on me.

“Because it was easy,” I said. “I didn’t have to worry about whether Van and I had a future because I already knew the answer was no. And with none of the uncertainty of a relationship, there was no risk either. If I didn’t give him anything, I couldn’t get hurt.”

“But?” Cooper asked.

“But if I’m sleeping with some guy, I’m not really available either,” I said. “So I was giving up the possibility of meeting the right person in favor of something short-term and pointless.”

“Good girl,” Cooper said. “This is awesome. I feel like the wise teacher on a TV show who just helped a kid learn a valuable lesson.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Miles,” I said.

He pointed his beer bottle at me. “You’re welcome. You know you’re my favorite, so anytime. But maybe quit being stupid and fucking dumbass pieces of shit. Seriously, Zoe, that pussy of yours is worth so much more. It’s a disgrace, if you think about it. I’m kind of grossed out that his dick ever touched you. Have some self-respect.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes.

“And don’t call me Mr. Miles,” Cooper said. “It makes me think you’re talking to my dad.”

I took a long pull from my beer, feeling better than I had in a while. Cooper and Chase might be goofballs, but they were *my* goofballs. And I loved knowing they had my back.

SIXTEEN

ROLAND

Cooper's text was vague—all it said was *bro it worked*—but I knew exactly what he meant. Zoe had seen the footage of that jackass piece of shit being a douche at the bar the other night. And she'd revoked her status as his booty call.

Monday morning, I saw her downstairs in the lobby, talking with a client. Her hair was up, and she was dressed in a blouse tucked into pants that made her legs look a mile long. And those heels—fuck. She smiled and laughed with the woman like they were old friends.

It was irritating that she was so damn beautiful.

She had that perfect mix of classy with an edge. Like she could throw down in the boardroom and drink you under the table afterward. Her look was a far cry from the metal and alt-rock t-shirts and ripped jeans she used to wear. But this grown-up version of Zoe suited her. Made me wonder when she'd gone from the fearless girl with a propensity for crazy stunts to the professional woman running the very lucrative events department of my parents' winery.

I'd begun to realize that Zoe was a large part of why Salishan Cellars was still in business. My mom was an incredible winemaker, and our products sold well. But the winery depended heavily on the income from events. Despite the other problems, the event spaces were booked year-round. Without that, they would have gone under a long time ago.

She glanced up at me as I stood watching her from the landing at the top of the stairs. Shit. I turned and walked down

to my office, feeling like an idiot.

But also a little lighter, knowing that dumbass wasn't ever going to touch her again.

Not long after I got back to my office, Leo answered my text. I'd asked him if I could come talk to him about a few things I'd found while going through Salishan's records. I had a bad feeling about something, and I wanted to go to him first. Cooper would overreact, and I didn't want to say anything to my mom before I was sure.

I hadn't talked to Leo much since I'd been here. That wasn't unusual. Leo kept to himself. He worked for the winery, handling all the tech aspects of the business, as well as being in charge of security. He had a lot of tech training and experience, so as long as it was something he could do from his place, he took care of it. In-person stuff wasn't Leo's style. Not anymore, at least.

I was worried about Leo. My brother had never been the life of the party—that was Cooper's job—but he'd been a typical guy. Had friends. Dated girls. I didn't know much about what had happened to him in the Army. His injuries were impossible to miss, but he had more than physical scars to contend with. Cooper had said Leo never left the winery grounds. It was hard to fathom. But not only did he never leave the winery, he didn't come out of his house often, either.

He lived in what had once been the largest guest cottage. People had stopped calling it the Evergreen Cottage and now referred to it as Leo's place. He paid rent to live there, which didn't surprise me. The last thing Leo would become was a freeloader.

I walked out to his place and knocked. His muffled reply through the door sounded like *come in*, so I went inside.

The blinds were all down, keeping the light dim. Instead of typical living room furniture, he had an office setup with a large desk and at least half a dozen monitors. He had a TV mounted on the wall, and the other side of the room was filled with gym equipment.

Leo was in a high-backed office chair playing a computer game. He glanced back at me—over his right shoulder, like always.

“Hey.”

“What is this?” I asked, gesturing to his desk. “Your command center?”

He shrugged, and his cat jumped up and walked across his keyboard.

“Damn it, Gigz. Get down.” Despite shooing her away, he pulled the cat into his lap and started absently petting her. “What’s going on?”

“How much do you know about Dad’s business trips?” I asked.

He rotated his chair partway around, still keeping the left side of his face in shadow. “Some. Why?”

“He’s leaving again,” I said. “He was just gone for a few days, and now he’s headed somewhere else. It seems like a lot of these trips he takes are last minute.”

“Yeah,” Leo said.

“And he’ll be gone longer than he says. Last time he said overnight, but he was gone for three days. Mom never says anything about it, though. I’d assume he calls to tell her when he’ll be back when plans change, but she told me the other day she doesn’t talk to him when he’s on the road. He claims he’s too busy.”

“Honestly, I’ve always assumed Mom and Dad aren’t happy and he just likes to be away,” he said.

I nodded. That much was obvious. “That’s probably true. But there’s something else going on. It’s like money is disappearing into thin air. And he’s gone all the time. No one is really running this place. A good portion of the problem is Dad not being here to manage things.”

“You get why I called you,” Leo said. “It’s been this way for years. The foreclosure letter was just the final straw.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said. “I just can’t get over the feeling that I’m missing something.”

“Do you want me to find out where he goes?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I mean, I can find out where he is.”

“Do I want to know how?” I asked.

“Probably not.”

I nodded. “Okay. Yeah, find out where he goes this week. I want to know what’s going on, and if it has anything to do with the way the bank accounts are bleeding out.”

“You got it,” he said, swiveling his chair back around to face his monitors.

“Thanks, Leo.”

I MORE OR less forgot about putting Leo on my dad’s trail over the next few days. A disaster at work almost had me on a last-minute flight to San Francisco, but I was able to delay it a few days. I booked a flight home for Friday, which would give me time to wrap up more loose ends here.

With my dad gone so much, I was practically running the winery. He’d told me to stay out of things, but I’d started ignoring him and doing it anyway. I was streamlining the ordering and distribution channels. Working with Cooper to formulate output estimates based on the varieties of grapes he was currently growing. We had outdated contracts to revise, vendors we were still paying for services we didn’t need, and a long list of other issues Dad had been neglecting.

I still had moments when I wondered why I stayed. I could go home and get back to my life. Arguably, I’d done enough. But I still worried about their ability to keep things in the black, and I didn’t want to know what it would do to my mom to lose her family’s land.

And there was a challenge here. I was in my element when I was dealing with the winery. I understood the business inside and out. And my experience and education meant I understood how to make this business better. A lot better. I was making headway with things, and I had to admit, it was satisfying.

I told myself it was all about Salishan and my family. It had nothing to do with Zoe. Nothing to do with us both being single—completely single. Nothing to do with how I felt when I was around her.

Because, to be honest, I didn't know how to feel.

I was drawn to her, and yet frustrated that she was so deep under my skin. She was like a drug I couldn't quit. And I didn't know whether it was an addiction that would ultimately be my salvation, or my downfall.

Leo texted me partway through the day. I was on a call with my office in San Francisco, but a strange sense of dread hit me when I read his text afterward.

Leo: You're going to want to see this.

As I walked over to his place, I had a feeling I already knew what he was going to tell me. The folder filled with pictures and marked-up maps confirmed it.

Dad had a mistress.

The first few pictures I thumbed through could have been of Dad with a business contact or colleague. They were having a meal in a restaurant—a nice one. But the rest told a different story. There were photos of him walking with her, holding her hand. Kissing her. Ushering her into a car. Leading her into a four-star hotel.

Despite the fact that I wasn't surprised, it still made my stomach turn and my blood run hot with anger.

I tossed the pictures aside. "Do you think Mom knows?"

Leo pushed some of the paperwork around on the table. "If she does, she's been hiding it well."

"Why would she do that?" I asked. "Why would she let him get away with this shit?"

“To protect us,” Leo said. “And the winery. She’s always been like that. Even though we’re all adults, she still does it.”

“Fuck,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. “This is an absolute cluster.”

“What are you going to do?” Leo asked.

I almost snapped at him, asking why the hell this was my problem. I was supposed to be on a plane tomorrow, back to San Francisco. Why did I have to be the one to deal with this?

But if not me, who?

If I hugged my mom goodbye and told her I was sorry she’d just found out her husband was cheating, but I really had to get back to work... then what? She could kick him out. File for divorce. Cooper would be there to comfort her—he was better at it than I was. Leo would be here to quietly support her. She’d have Zoe. Brynn could stay with her for a while.

But who would make sure Salishan didn’t run itself into the ground?

Mom stood to lose more than her marriage. It was obvious that was already dead and gone. But without someone to run the winery—to oversee all the complexities of the business—they’d never survive. Salishan would die, and my mom would lose the place she loved.

Or worse, she’d take my dad back because she wanted him here for the business.

I took a deep breath. “I’m going to cancel my flight. Then I’m going to show all this to Mom. Cooper, too. And we’ll need to call Brynn. I’m not sweeping this under the rug. This has to come out and he has to be held accountable.”

I grabbed all the damning evidence and went in search of my mom.

She was over at the Big House, training the tasting room staff on the new wine selections. They all sat at the bar while she stood behind it, her face lit up as she described her new seasonal red blend. She poured them each a small glass so everyone could sample it for themselves. I took a seat at the

long table on the other side of the room and waited, the knot in my gut growing.

After she finished, the staff gradually filed out, leaving the two of us alone.

She smiled and brought out two fresh glasses, then poured. “Want to try it?”

“Of course.” I walked over to the bar and took a seat, putting the file folder on the bar top next to me.

My wine tasting habits were deeply ingrained. I inspected the color, noting the deep burgundy. Swirled it a little to see its viscosity. Then I brought it close to my nose and inhaled the rich aroma while Mom did the same.

“It’s called Poetic,” Mom said. “It’s a blend of Syrah, Malbec, and Petit Verdot.”

I took a sip. It began with a bright berry flavor, leading to a smooth mid-palate with hints of coffee. The finish had a pleasant spicy quality.

“This is excellent,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s a limited release, but if customers enjoy it, I want to put it into the regular production schedule.”

“I think you should.” I took another sip, then put my glass down. “Mom, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“I know you have to go home,” she said. “When do you leave?”

“No, that’s not it.” I slid the folder closer. God, how was I going to say this? “I think Dad’s having an affair.”

The color drained from her face, but otherwise, she kept perfectly still. Her eyes were on her glass. I hesitated, wondering if I should say more. Wishing I didn’t have to break this to her.

Angry at my fucking father.

“What do you know?” she asked, finally, her voice soft.

“He was with her in Tacoma this week,” I said. “There are photos.”

“How long?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I suspected something was going on and asked Leo to help.”

She nodded, slowly, but remained silent for a long moment. I waited.

“I should have known,” she said, finally.

The sick feeling in my stomach spread. “This isn’t your fault, Mom.”

“No, it isn’t,” she said, meeting my eyes. “But I’ve been ignoring the signs for years. We had you kids, and the business. I let him take over everything, and I’ve regretted it more times than I can count.”

She poured herself more wine, but instead of tossing it back, like she needed the rush of alcohol, she moved slowly with it. Brought it to her nose and inhaled. Took a careful sip. Closed her eyes as she swallowed. Like the flavors of her hard work helped calm her more than the alcohol itself.

“I don’t know what to do, Mom,” I said. “I don’t know what to say to you, or what to suggest.”

She met my eyes again. “This is too big for you to fix. You should go back to San Francisco. You’ve been away too long as it is.”

“I’m not leaving,” I said. “There’s no way I’m going home in the middle of this.”

“I can’t ask you to stay,” she said.

“You’re not. You didn’t ask me to come in the first place. It’s my decision. You have enough to cope with. Don’t start making yourself feel guilty over me.”

She laid her hand over mine and squeezed. “Thank you.”

“What are you going to do?”

She took another slow sip of wine, then set her glass gently on the bar. “I’m going to kick his sorry ass out.”

SEVENTEEN

ZOE

This is stupid. Why are we so stupid? I'm drunk. Should delete.

~Text from Zoe, unsent

IT HAD BEEN A LONG DAY. My bridezilla's wedding was fast approaching, and her insanity kept growing. I'd fielded at least ten emails and text messages today alone. They were either questions I'd already answered—often more than once—or requests that made me want to tell her to go fuck herself and have her wedding somewhere else.

But I hadn't. I'd replied with courtesy and professionalism, all while calling her cock-themed names in my head. It hadn't helped very much.

I'd also overheard Roland telling Cooper that he had a flight home tomorrow. The wave of disappointment that had hit me was nothing short of ridiculous. Just because I was getting used to seeing Roland around all the time didn't mean I should *want* him to stay. It shouldn't matter to me if he came or went. It wasn't like it was a surprise. The only surprising thing in this entire situation was the fact that he'd been here as long as he had.

Actually, that wasn't true. The surprising thing was how much my stupid body wanted to get naked with him.

I blamed the tequila. If I hadn't spent the night sleeping in his bed, I wouldn't have been subjected to his stupidly delicious smell.

Every time I saw him, I had visions of him fucking me. Not memories. I had plenty of those to draw from, but this was different. This was *now*. And I did not know how to deal with it. My stupid hormones were driving me up the wall. It wasn't just the fact that it had been a while since I'd had anything between my legs that wasn't battery-operated. I'd been insanely attracted to Roland since we'd met so long ago, and somehow our history—and all those goddamn feelings—weren't enough to keep me from *still* being insanely attracted to him.

I was an idiot, and it was good he was leaving. That's what I kept telling myself, anyway.

I closed my laptop and grabbed my things, ready to get out of here for the day. I just needed to leave a note for the front desk before I headed home.

Downstairs, all was quiet in the lobby. I went behind the front desk to leave my note, pasting the sticky note to the monitor.

The front door whooshed open and I glanced up. Lawrence stalked through the lobby without looking in my direction. He seemed angry, but it was hard to tell with him. He always looked like someone had spit in his food.

A few seconds later, Cooper pushed the front door open with his usual bravado. He paused to stomp his boots on the mat outside. I wondered how long it had taken Shannon to get him to do that. Probably twenty years—minimum.

His face broke into a wide smile when he saw me.

“Hey, Zoe-bowie,” he said. “You working late tonight? It's quiet in here if you are.”

“No, I'm on my way out.”

“Is my mom over here?” he asked.

“She was,” I said. “She was doing staff training earlier in the small tasting room. Your dad came in a second ago, so she's probably still back there.”

“Perfect. So how are you? Are your needs being met?” He started down the hall, still talking, so I followed. “We both know you did the right thing. But I recognize the situation you’re now in, and believe me, I sympathize. If I ever had to go too long without getting laid, I’m sure it would send me down a spiral of incessant dick-wanking. Because, let’s be honest, cranking the love pump gets the job done, but it’s not an equivalent. I think it’s about a two to one ratio, don’t you?”

Before I could answer—sometimes it took a second to process everything Cooper said at any given time—he opened the door to the tasting room.

“Lawrence, I know you’re having an affair.”

Shannon’s voice hit me, and it felt like someone had kicked the air out of my lungs. Cooper froze next to me, and the room went horribly silent.

Shannon stood behind the counter, her face alarmingly calm, given what she’d just said. Roland stood nearby, his arms crossed, his eyes on his dad. Lawrence looked like he’d just walked into an ambush. His face was still, but a red flush crept across his skin and his eyes were wide.

I was not supposed to be here.

“Shannon, let’s go home and talk,” Lawrence said.

“No,” she said. “You’re going to tell me the truth, and you’re going to do it now.”

Lawrence glanced around the room. “We need to talk in private.”

“They’re our children,” Shannon said. “You did this to them, too.”

“But Zoe is—”

“Stop deflecting,” Shannon said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so uncomfortable. I swallowed hard and risked a glance at Roland. His eyes flicked to me, his face unreadable. He couldn’t want me here to witness this. I wanted to shrink down

and slink out of the room, hoping no one would notice. But Cooper slipped his hand in mine and squeezed. God, this was really happening.

“All right, fine,” Lawrence said. He widened his stance and crossed his arms—didn’t get much more defensive than that. “Yes, I was seeing someone.”

The anger that flashed in Shannon’s eyes sent a zing of fear through me. I’d never seen her look so angry, yet so disturbingly calm at the same time.

“Who is she?” Shannon asked. “And how long has this been going on?”

“Do we really have to do this here?” Lawrence asked.

“Yes, we do,” Shannon said. “Who is she and how long have you been seeing her?”

Lawrence sighed, but kept his defensive posture. “Her name is Kristen, and I met her six or seven months ago.”

“Is she the only one?” Shannon asked.

“Yes,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. His put-out attitude made me want to punch him in the face. I couldn’t imagine how Shannon was feeling. “Just her.”

“Have there been others?” Shannon asked.

Lawrence worked his jaw, and for a second, I thought he was going to refuse to answer. “Yes, there have. But, honey, I’m ending things with Kristen. It was a mistake on my part, but it’s over now. I know, I shouldn’t have. But I’m under a lot of pressure, and things here are so tense. I got carried away and let things go too far.”

“Was that supposed to be an apology?” Shannon asked.

“I’m just saying, I know I was wrong,” Lawrence said. “Let’s go home and talk privately so we can work this out. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. You can track my phone, read my emails. Whatever you need.”

Shannon’s brow knitted together, and she looked at Lawrence like he was either crazy, or very stupid. Maybe she

was trying to decide which.

“Is that a joke?” she asked. “Because you cannot look at me after more than thirty years of marriage and four children and say you’re under pressure and things are tense, therefore you had a goddamn affair. That does not make it okay.”

“I realize that,” he said.

“No, I don’t think you do,” she said. “Those children and this business are the reason I’ve stood by you all these years. I didn’t want to break up our family, and I didn’t know who would run things if you left. And that was the stupidest mistake I’ve ever made. I still don’t know how I’m going to avoid losing Salishan. But I’m not letting this continue another second.”

“Shannon—”

“No,” she said, her voice cracking like a whip. “I don’t want to hear your excuses. You betrayed me in the worst way imaginable. You betrayed your family—your children. And I’m not having it. You have thirty minutes to clear your things out of my house. I want you gone.”

“I’ve been running this place for years,” Lawrence said. “You can’t just throw me out.”

“Yes, she can,” Roland said. His voice was low and dangerous, sending a chill up my spine.

“We need to talk about this,” Lawrence said.

“Get out,” Shannon said. “Now.”

Cooper drew me closer and put an arm around my shoulders. I slipped mine around his waist and gave him a squeeze, hoping to offer what little comfort I could. I wondered how drunk I’d have to get him later to deal with this insanity. Roland’s gaze was fixed on Lawrence, his face all hard lines. I had no doubt he’d drag his father out of here physically if he had to.

Lawrence’s eyes swept around the room again, his jaw clenched. We all stayed silent. I could hardly breathe. Finally,

Lawrence stomped out and down the hall. A second later, I heard the front door open and close.

Cooper let me go and rushed around the bar, scooping his mom into his arms. She rested her head against chest and hugged him. Roland let out a long breath and rubbed the back of his neck.

I almost wanted to cry. Or maybe follow Lawrence outside and kick the shit out of him. Shannon was a better person than me. If I'd have been in her shoes, I wouldn't have given him a chance to get his stuff. I'd have piled it in front of the house and had a big fucking bonfire.

Roland walked around the bar to join Cooper with his mom. They both spoke softly to her, murmuring that everything was going to be all right. Shannon's calm finally broke, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

I was once again overcome with the feeling that I shouldn't be here. I'd witnessed something horribly personal—the destruction of a family. It had hurt when I'd left Roland, but at least there hadn't been children involved. Even though they were adults, I knew this was going to be hard on the Miles kids. Shannon was right; their father had betrayed them all. Hell, even I felt betrayed, and he wasn't my dad. But I'd worked for him for years, and I loved this family like they were my own.

My heart ached for all of them.

Roland looked over at me, and I desperately wished I knew what he was thinking. Wished I knew what to do. Did he want me to leave? Stay and help? I wondered whether I should call Brynn. But they probably wanted to. She was their sister.

His eyes held mine for a long moment. I gave a subtle nod toward the door, indicating I was going to go. They needed to have their moment. Help their mom. Roland nodded in return, whether in acknowledgment that I should leave, or in thanks, I couldn't tell.

I slipped out the door, feeling sick to my stomach. Instead of leaving, I went upstairs to my office. I figured I'd stick

around for a while in case any of them needed me. For what, I didn't know. There wasn't anything I could do. But it felt wrong to go home.

Plus, I knew I couldn't be trusted to see Lawrence and not cut off his balls. Best wait until I was sure he was gone before venturing outside.

I sank down into my chair and stared at my desk, not really seeing anything. Shannon was undoubtedly heading for a divorce, and it was going to change everything. Salishan could get along for a while without someone at the helm. Roland had already done a lot to get things on track again. But he was leaving tomorrow. And what was going to happen long term? This place was Shannon's life. It was Leo and Cooper's life, too.

And mine, for that matter. But at the end of the day, I wasn't a Miles.

I lost track of time as I sat in my office, contemplating what had just happened. My phone buzzed, startling me. I had a text from Cooper.

Cooper: You okay?

Me: Yeah, but are YOU?

Cooper: No. But I will be. Gonna head home in a few and blow off some steam.

Me: Where's your mom?

Cooper: Roland got her a room at the Lodge for tonight.

Me: Does Leo know?

Cooper: Yeah. He was monitoring the security feeds to make sure Dad left.

Cooper: I offered to come over so we could drink our faces off, but he said no.

Cooper: Told me to fuck off and go home.

Cooper: He's really very rude.

Cooper: But I don't think he means to be.

Cooper: We all have our own ways of coping.

Me: That's true. Did someone call Brynn?

Cooper: Mom did. She's on her way. Going to stay with Mom at the hotel.

Me: Good. Sounds like everyone is squared away.

Cooper: Mostly.

Cooper: See u tomorrow.

Me: What do you mean mostly?

I waited, but Cooper didn't answer. I was glad he was going home to his best friend. I knew Chase would have his back. It probably meant they'd get shit-faced tonight, but I couldn't blame them. That was probably what I was going to do when I got home.

But why had Cooper said *mostly*? Had he been talking about Roland?

I wasn't exactly the best person to offer Roland comfort. He was my ex-husband, after all. That had to be weird. We'd gotten divorced, and now his mom was facing the same thing. Albeit for very different reasons. Roland and I had always been faithful to each other. I hadn't even gone on a date until the divorce was final. I wasn't going to judge anyone else for dating while they were separated, or while a divorce was going through. But it hadn't felt right to me, so I'd waited.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that he was downstairs—alone. How I knew, I couldn't be sure. He could have left. It was that sense of him I always had, like his presence had an aura I could feel. He was down there, stewing. Probably with a headache.

I opened a drawer and fished out a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. Yeah, I kept a bottle of whiskey in my desk at work. Walk a mile, then judge. I grabbed a couple of plastic cups out of a cabinet and went downstairs to find Roland.

EIGHTEEN

ROLAND

I sat on a stool in the empty tasting room and pinched the bridge of my nose. All was quiet—I was pretty sure everyone else had gone home. Cooper had taken Mom over to the Lodge for the night. He'd been cracking jokes to make her smile, and of course it had worked. It had been a relief to see her relax, although I knew the worst had only just begun.

My head hurt, making it hard to think. Although considering my entire family had just imploded, the headache was the least of my problems.

I couldn't believe my fucking father. I'd known something wasn't right, and I couldn't help but wonder—if I'd been here, would this have come out sooner? How long had Mom ignored what she must have known to be true because she didn't think she had a choice?

That was no way to live.

“Hey, Roland.”

I looked up at Zoe's voice. She stood in the doorway, her head tilted. Her dark hair was down, falling in waves around her shoulders. One side of her white t-shirt was caught in the waistband of her jeans, like she'd started to tuck it in, but forgot what she was doing. When she wasn't managing an event, she always looked so damn careless.

I hated that I still loved that about her.

Seeing her stirred up a potent mix of feelings I didn't want to have right now. Hurt. Regret. Desire. I still craved her. It

pissed me off, but tonight I was weak. The temptation of a few minutes alone with her was too much to resist.

“Hey.” I scooted the stool next to me away from the counter. “Come on in.”

“I know there’s not much to say.” She had two plastic cups pinched between her fingers, and a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels dangled from her other hand. “Do you wanna drink about it instead?”

“Yeah, I could use a drink.”

“Figured.” She came in and set everything on the counter, then poured us each a generous measure of the amber liquid.

I slid my drink closer as she took a seat on the stool, facing me.

“Plastic cups?” I asked.

“I like to keep it classy,” she said with a smile. “Besides, do you want to wash dishes?”

“Fair point. Where’d you get the whiskey?”

She put the cap back on the bottle. “My office.”

“You keep whiskey in your office?”

She raised her eyebrows, like I’d asked a stupid question. “You know I work for your father, right?”

I raised the cup. “True.”

She raised hers in a toast, and we both took a swallow.

“So your flight back to San Francisco is tomorrow?” she asked.

“No,” I said and took another sip. “I canceled it.”

“You mean you’re staying?” she asked.

“Yeah. I can’t leave in the middle of this.”

She nodded slowly, and silence stretched out between us. I stared at my cup—had to keep my eyes on something other than her. Sitting this close, I could smell the lavender scent of her hair.

She was unraveling me, slowly but surely. I could feel it happening. Like she was gently unbuttoning the collar of a shirt that fit too tight. I could breathe when she was near, yet she still took my breath away.

I wanted to stay mad. Hide behind anger and pretend I didn't care about her. Keep that emotionless mask where it belonged so no one could get in. Especially Zoe. But my anger was crumbling, exposing the rawness on the inside. I didn't think I could stop it. And at this point, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

It would feel good to let go. So fucking good.

"I guess I should get home," she said.

She stood, and before I could stop myself, I stood and grabbed her hips. Her eyes met mine, deep pools of midnight blue, making my heart beat harder. I knew her eyes, just like I knew her voice. Her scent. The curves of her body. How to make her scream my name. I knew it all, and those eyes mirrored the lust that must have been shining in mine.

"You know this is a bad idea, right?" she asked, her voice quiet. But she shifted closer, so our bodies touched.

"Is it?" I asked. "Maybe we need this."

A hint of pink crept across her cheeks. "Just to get it out of our systems?"

"Exactly." I slid my hands around to her lower back and pressed her against me. Maybe this would work. Maybe I could fuck her out of my system, once and for all.

"Damn it, Roland," she said. "I hate you for being so fucking sexy."

Our mouths crashed together, and I tasted the whiskey on her tongue. She was achingly familiar. The way she leaned to the right as I kissed her. The way she held the back of my neck. Slid her hands through my hair. It took me back to a time when I could do this every day. When Zoe had been mine.

Fuck, I'd missed her so much.

The reality of that swept through me as I kissed her deeply. I had missed her. God, what the fuck was I going to do with that? Just being around her was opening me up—laying me bare. I couldn't hide from anything when I was with her.

Maybe she wasn't mine anymore, but for a little while, she would be.

I pulled her shirt up and she lifted her arms so I could take it off. I let it drop to the floor while she attacked the buttons on mine, our mouths still tangled—wet and messy. Her hands slid across my chest and shoulders, pushing my shirt open. Her thumb brushed my nipple ring and she gasped.

“Oh my god, you still have this?” She traced her finger along the dark silver piercing. Meeting my eyes, she grabbed it and tugged.

I grunted at the jolt of electricity that shot straight to my groin. She bit her lip, the corners of her mouth turning up in a wicked smile, and pulled again. Harder. A groan rumbled deep in my throat and I slid my thumb over the lacy fabric of her bra, feeling her nipple harden. I pinched it through the lace and gave it a light pull.

Her hand left my chest and went straight for my cock, squeezing me through my pants.

“Are we doing this here?” She squeezed again.

“Yeah.” My mind was clouded over with desire, but I was pretty sure we were alone. And this wouldn't have been the riskiest place we'd ever fucked.

“Good,” she said.

We ripped the rest of our clothes off between hard kisses, full of aggression. Lips, tongues, teeth. She bit my lip and held it, but I fucking loved it when she did shit like that. When she let go, I grabbed her hair and pulled her head backwards, exposing her neck. Grazed my teeth up the skin of her throat.

She reached for my cock, but I grabbed her wrist, my other hand still fisted in her hair.

“Not yet,” I said low into her ear. “I want your taste in my mouth while I fuck you.”

She moaned and relaxed her arm against my grip, ceding control to me. I led her to the upholstered bench on the opposite wall and laid her down on the supple leather. Running my hands up her thighs, I pushed her legs open. “God, Zoe, your pussy is beautiful.”

I slid my tongue up each side of her slit, caressing the silky skin. She sighed my name as I teased her—as I licked and sucked with just enough pressure to make her tremble.

I groaned and lapped my tongue against her clit. Flicked it. Swirled my tongue around the soft nub while she writhed. Her back arched and she moaned. Clamping down on her, I sucked on her clit. She ran her fingers through my hair and her heels dug into my shoulders.

“Holy fuck, Roland.”

Hearing my name on her lips, in that low breathy voice, made my dick throb. I licked and sucked, and her grip on my hair tightened. Her hips rolled, and her breath came in short gasps—soft whimpers in time with my rhythm.

I reached up and pinched her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. She cried out and her whole body shuddered as I pulled on her hard peak.

The need to be inside her was almost more than I could bear. Her taste on my tongue and the sound of her cries were driving me insane. But I had to make her come like this.

I tugged on her nipple while my mouth worked her clit, knowing it would send her over the edge. She rewarded me with a loud moan and bucked her hips against my mouth while she came.

“Oh my god,” she said between breaths. She brushed her hair back from her face. “Now that was a fucking orgasm.”

I smiled and licked my lips. God, I loved the way she tasted. “You like that?”

“Yeah, but I’m still pissed at you.”

“For what?” I asked.

“For everything,” she said.

The challenge in her eyes was such a turn on. If I didn’t have her now, I was going to lose my mind.

“Fine, be mad,” I said. “But get on your fucking knees.”

She gave me that wicked smile again and turned over, getting on her hands and knees. I grabbed her hips and slid the tip of my cock up and down her slit.

“You better fuck me now,” she said.

I smacked her ass cheek with the palm of my hand, just hard enough to make it sting. She sucked in a quick breath and looked over her shoulder.

“Did you just spank me?”

In answer, I smacked her ass again.

She groaned, arching her back harder. “Again.”

Smack.

“Oh fuck, Roland. Again.”

I spanked her one more time before thrusting my cock inside her—hard.

Holding her hips tight, I stayed buried deep inside her. I closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of her pussy wrapped around my dick. God, she felt good. She always had. No one had ever felt better. Goddammit, that was true. No one had ever compared to Zoe. I didn’t know what I was going to do with that either.

Instead of dwelling on the growing ache in my chest, I tried to fuck the demons out of both of us.

I dug my fingers into her hips and drove into her. My cock slid in and out of her wetness, and our bodies slammed together with each thrust. I grunted, losing myself in the feel of her. In the taut muscles in her core, tightening around me. In the sound of her voice, rhythmic and sensual. In the swell of

her hips and the lines of her back, her hair cascading around her bare shoulders.

God, this woman was sexy as fuck.

I thrust faster, pounding her with reckless abandon. Her cries grew frenzied. Desperate. So I gave her more, feeling her heat build. Her pussy clench. She started to come again...

And I came undone.

The force of my climax sucked the air from my lungs. My body stiffened and every nerve ending seemed to fire at once. The pressure in my groin unloaded in a hot rush of intensity. I thrust again and again as my cock pulsed inside her, my vision going dark. I held tight to her hips as she rocked her ass into me, pulling out the last spurts of come.

My chest rose and fell fast with my breath and a bead of sweat trickled down my temple, past my ear. Zoe shifted forward, letting my cock slide out of her. She stood and smoothed down her hair, her beautiful body glistening in the low light.

I wanted to pull her against me and hold her. Curl up on the bench and tuck her body next to mine. Stroke her hair. Come down off this high with her wrapped in my arms.

But she gave me a little smile and walked back to the counter to pick up her clothes. I watched her dress, the ache in my chest returning with a vengeance.

I felt like a dumbass for just staring at her, so I picked up my clothes and put them back on. I didn't understand the pain in the pit of my stomach. The emptiness that kept spreading through me. I'd had her. What the fuck else did I want?

Everything. I wanted everything.

She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and came to stand in front of me. Lifted up on her tip-toes to brush her lips against mine.

"Thanks," she said, her voice soft. "Have a good night."

Then she turned and walked away.

I watched her go, knowing I was screwed. Maybe that had gotten me out of *her* system, but she was deep in mine. Deeper than I'd let myself admit until now. Because beneath everything, I wasn't angry. I was hurt. Wounded and raw, and one ill-advised fuck had ripped me open again.

NINETEEN

ZOE

“Ms. Sutton?”

I blinked, coming back to reality with a start. Oh my god, I was a mess this morning. My client sat across the little table from me, her eyebrows raised.

“Sorry,” I said. “What was that?”

She repeated her question and we discussed the options for her parents’ anniversary party. I wrote down everything she said, knowing nothing would stick in my brain. Usually my mind was on overdrive during a consultation. I’d already have the event half-planned by the time I got back to my office. Today I was just trying to survive.

Fortunately, this particular party was six months away, so I had time to make up for my lack of vision. I thanked her for coming and told her I’d be in touch soon.

Grateful my one and only client meeting was finished for the day, I trudged back up to my office. Still no Roland. He had plenty of reasons to be away from his office today. His parents had just split up. I hadn’t seen any of the Miles family this morning. They were probably together, working out the details of what they were going to do now that Lawrence was gone. It couldn’t be that Roland was avoiding me after last night.

God, last night. What the hell had I done?

I tossed my notebook on my desk and sank into my chair. Sleeping with Roland had not been my plan when I’d gone downstairs with a bottle of Jack. I’d just wanted to see if he

needed to talk. Be a friend, maybe. But I was terrible at being *friends* with Roland. My behavior last night was proof of that.

It hadn't been my idea—or at least, I hadn't made the first move—but I certainly hadn't stopped it, either.

Had it been a mistake? It hadn't felt like a mistake at the time. But who thinks they're making a terrible choice when they're in the midst of mind-blowing sex? Obviously not me.

My god, he'd felt good. It was like waking up and realizing I'd spent the last four years eating nothing but plain white bread, and here was a freaking gourmet meal. How had I forgotten how fucking amazing he was?

I remembered now. Oh my god, did I remember.

Thinking about him was not helping me get any work done. I blew out a long breath and smoothed down my hair. This was fine. Roland and I had always been good at sex. That had never been the issue. We'd obviously been dancing around our physical attraction to each other, and we'd indulged in it last night. After everything with his dad, Roland had probably needed to get it out of his system. Hopefully he'd gone home feeling better, and when we saw each other it wouldn't be awkward.

Because it certainly wasn't happening again.

Another deep breath. *Get your head together, Zoe. You have a job to do.*

A job that was more difficult to do without my phone, and I didn't see it anywhere. My desk was messy—as usual—so I rifled through things, looking for it. Where the hell had I put it?

Leo appeared in the doorway and I paused, surprised to see him.

“Hey,” I said. “How is everyone this morning?”

“Mom's okay,” he said. “Brynn's with her. They're going to the spa and Roland paid for a couple more nights in the hotel.”

“Good,” I said. “She needs a break.”

“Yeah.”

“What about you?” I asked. “How are you holding up?”

He shut the door behind him. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ll manage. This will be better in the long run, even for Mom.”

“Especially for your mom,” I said.

He nodded and sank into the chair across my desk. “I actually didn’t come up here to talk to you about my parents.”

“Oh?” I asked, lifting a notebook to see if my phone was beneath it. “Then what’s up?”

“The Big House wasn’t empty last night,” he said.

I froze and kept my eyes on the desk. *Oh shit.* “Okay...”

“Yeah, so we need to talk.”

Oh god. Leo handled winery security, and I knew there were cameras on the property. Were there any inside the Big House? I couldn’t remember—almost didn’t want to know.

Squaring my shoulders, I sat up in my chair. It wasn’t like Roland and I had never been caught having sex. We both had an exhibitionist streak, and it had been worse when we were younger. A couple of horny teenagers who couldn’t keep their hands off each other, and who both got off on fucking in dangerous places, was a recipe for quite a few... interruptions.

“All right,” I said, brushing my hair back over my shoulder. “Were we on camera?”

“No,” he said. “The security cameras are outside. Ben was still here, and he heard something, so he called me.”

That was a relief. Although I felt bad about making things awkward for Ben.

“Okay, so what’s the issue?”

“First of all, gross,” he said. “I hope one of you cleaned up.”

I chewed on my lower lip. I certainly hadn't. I'd walked out before I lost my mind and asked him to come home with me so we could do it again. And then maybe a third time. And then tied him to my bed and forced him to spend the night so I could fuck him again in the morning.

God, what was wrong with me?

Roland's dick, that's what was wrong with me. His great big magical fucking dick.

"I don't... Leo... Why are you making this weird?"

He sighed. "Because you need to be careful."

He had that right. I did need to be careful. Because no matter how hard I tried to pretend last night had just been sex—that I was so distracted today I could barely function simply because I'd had a good fuck—I was kidding myself. I'd felt something with him. An intimacy I didn't think existed anymore. That shit was dangerous.

But I didn't want Leo to know.

"It wasn't a big deal," I said. "We got carried away. Yesterday was rough, and sometimes a nice fuck is just the thing. We've done it before, so..."

Leo grunted.

"You don't need to worry about me," I said. "I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

"I'm not worried about you," he said. "I'm worried about my brother."

"Why? Trust me, he had no complaints last night."

"I could tell," he said with a roll of his eyes. "That's not what I mean. Do you really not see it?"

"Not see what?"

"The way he looks at you," he said.

Leo was freaking me out. He was looking at me straight on—not hiding his face at all. He didn't do that very often. It wasn't that seeing his scars bothered me—not in the least.

They were a part of who he was now. But I wasn't used to this kind of scrutiny from him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Zoe, it's Roland," he said. "He's not some dude you can just call when you feel like getting laid."

"Excuse me?" I asked. "Last I checked, Roland and I are both adults. If we want to randomly have sex, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Not my point."

"Then what is your point?" I asked. "Because I think you're insinuating that I talked Roland into sleeping with me last night. Newsflash, Leo, it wasn't me. That was all Roland."

"Okay, and why do you think he did that?" he asked.

I shrugged, keeping my face calm, but inside it was like a storm breaking. Why *had* Roland done that? It wasn't the first time we'd been alone together since he'd been home. There had been other opportunities for us to fuck around. He'd had me drunk in his bed. I hadn't given his reasons a lot of thought last night. I'd been too busy letting my lady parts think for me.

"Because he had a shitty day," I said. "Because he knew it would feel good, and after everything that went down, he wanted to take out some aggression. Fuck if I know."

Leo nodded slowly, but I couldn't tell if he was agreeing with me. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"No."

"Too bad," he said. "I think you have no idea how much you hurt him when you left."

My mouth dropped open. "What? How much I hurt *him*? That's rich. He wasn't hurt, Leo. He was pissed at me, but that's not the same thing."

"You honestly think that's true?" he asked. "He didn't get hurt?"

I slumped back in my chair. "Nobody wants to get divorced. It sucked for both of us."

“If you think he walked away from your marriage without a single scar, you don’t know him very well,” he said. “He’s good at hiding them, but they’re there. Don’t pick at them when he’s weak.”

“God, Leo, what do you think I am? I’m not some heartless bitch.”

His expression softened. “I know you’re not. I think there’s just a lot about him you don’t see. Especially now. And I don’t want him getting hit from all sides. This thing with my dad is... I don’t think anyone’s surprised, but it’s brutal. Roland has a lot on his plate. So I’m just saying, be careful with him. Don’t assume he’s bulletproof. He’s not.”

Coming from anyone else, this conversation might have made me angry. But I knew Leo sometimes saw things no one else could see. And he wouldn’t have come to talk to me if he hadn’t thought it was important. Leo wasn’t like Cooper, who said whatever came to mind the second he thought it. Leo was cautious. He’d probably thought about it for a while before deciding to bring it up with me.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be careful. It was a one-time thing, anyway. Stress relief, you know? I don’t have it in for Roland. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“I know, that’s why I came over.” He stood and put his hand on the doorknob.

“Do you guys need anything today?” I asked. “Your mom, or Cooper, or anyone?”

He shook his head. “Not so far. But someone will let you know if we do.”

“Please do,” I said. “Really. I don’t know what I can do, but... something.”

“Thanks, Zoe.”

He left, and I leaned back in my chair. It was weird to think of Roland being *hurt*. He’d never acted like I’d wounded him by leaving. The only thing I’d ever seen was anger, followed by detached indifference. He hadn’t cared very much. Or at least, that’s how it had seemed to me.

His apparent callousness over the end of our marriage had been the most painful part for me. We'd argued a few times, but after that, he'd been emotionless. Unconcerned. Like the years we'd spent together hadn't meant very much, and he was fine with moving on. He'd made it look easy.

Had his air of disinterest been a way to hide his pain? That was a very uncomfortable thought.

It made me question some of the things that had happened between us. And it made me wonder, what did he see when he looked at me now? I'd always figured I was just a girl from his past. A mistake he'd made. If it weren't for the fact that I worked for his family, would he ever think of me at all?

But if I'd actually hurt him...

Maybe things hadn't been as one-sided as I'd thought. I hadn't just been hurt. I'd been devastated. Leaving Roland had been the hardest thing I'd ever done. But if he'd been hurt more deeply than I'd realized, things weren't so black and white.

And what had happened last night took on an entirely new meaning.

TWENTY

ROLAND

The day was already warm as I rode out with Cooper in the utility vehicle, heading to the south vineyard. A few puffy white clouds hung in the bright blue sky, almost as if they were resting against the peaks of the mountains. The hills around us were a rugged patchwork of brown and deep green, and the air was fresh. Almost sweet.

I hadn't been out here in years. We'd spent our childhoods in these fields, running through the rows of grape vines. Playing games, scraping our elbows and knees. Back then, I'd believed our vineyards were endless. That it wouldn't matter how far I walked, I'd never reach the end.

Cooper stopped and turned off the engine. He hadn't said much since we'd left the lower grounds. Silence with Cooper wasn't comfortable. It was unnatural. I was used to a constant stream of thoughts coming out of his mouth. I'd sought him out this morning because I was tired of being alone in my own head. I'd been up most of the night stewing over everything. My dad's affair. My mom. What was going to happen to my family.

And Zoe. God, everything with Zoe was an absolute mindfuck.

I'd been hoping Cooper could help distract me from the chaos of my thoughts, but so far, he seemed lost in his.

"What are we doing out here?" I asked.

He climbed out and put his hands on his hips, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Need to check on some

things. The drone photos showed we might have some minor nutrient deficiencies. But I need to see it for myself to be sure.”

“Drone photos?” I asked.

“Yeah, Leo has a drone license. He got one with a camera, so he flies it over the vineyards to take aerial photos. It’s pretty cool. I can see a lot from above. Growth patterns, signs of mildew or water stress. But there’s no substitute for visiting my babies in person.”

I got out and followed him as he walked down the rows of grape vines. He lifted leaves and checked on the bunches of grapes that were ripening. I watched him pinch and sniff. Tug on the vines. I wasn’t sure what he was looking for. The agriculture side had never been my area, but Cooper had always loved these fields. He’d been glued to our grandfather’s hip as a kid, making the rounds with him. Helping with plantings. Sneaking out during night harvests to help pick the grapes. Mom had often joked that Cooper had spent his childhood covered in so much dirt, he was destined to be a grower.

He took soil samples at various places, labeling his bags with a sharpie and putting them in his backpack. And although he wasn’t saying much to me, he did talk to the grapevines. I’d forgotten he did that. It was oddly comforting to hear his low murmurs, speaking to the grapes like they were pets or small children. Our world had turned upside down, but if Cooper still talked to his grapes, maybe some things wouldn’t ever change.

“You didn’t make your flight,” Cooper said out of the blue.

We were deep in the vineyard, the utility vehicle hidden behind several rows of vines.

“No, I canceled it,” I said.

“Canceled?” he asked. “Or rescheduled? Because those are different things.”

“Just canceled,” I said. “Are you making conversation, or are you trying to figure out if I’m leaving?”

“The second one,” he said. He knelt down and scooped another soil sample, then sealed the bag. “Because if you’re leaving, we have to figure out what the fuck we’re going to do.”

“I’m not leaving yet.”

He stood and looked me in the eyes, his face unusually serious. “I’m going to die here, you know.”

“What?”

“I don’t mean soon,” he said. “I plan to be an old man telling inappropriate stories of my sexual conquests at family reunions. Except I’ll still be smooth as fuck because I’ll get distinguished as I age. I’ll have a really cool hat and cane. It’ll be my signature look, and the hot MILFs in town will come sit on my lap and giggle when I whisper dirty shit in their ears.”

“That’s... weird and very specific.”

He shrugged. “I’m just saying, this is where I belong. I’m not leaving this land.”

“I know, Coop. The thing between Mom and Dad doesn’t mean we’re going to lose the land. In fact, Dad being gone could make it easier for me to ensure we keep it.”

One side of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” He turned and kept walking.

I followed as he moved down the row. “What was that look?”

“It’s not a big deal,” he said. “You just said *we*.”

“We?”

“Yeah, *we*. You said the thing between Mom and Dad doesn’t mean *we’re* going to lose the land. You’ll make sure *we* keep it. *We* means you too, brother.”

I had said that, hadn’t I? “Yeah, well, it’s our family, right?”

“Yep,” he said, grinning again.

“Did you talk to Mom today?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I’ll go see her later. Did you?”

“I called her,” I said. “She seems like she’s doing okay, considering. She’s known something wasn’t right for a long time, she just hadn’t faced it.”

“Yeah. But I don’t want to talk about Dad.” He cleared his throat and turned over a leaf to inspect the other side. “Everything looks really good out here. But the soil still needs to talk to me. What about you? Do you want to?”

“Do I want to what?” I asked. “Seriously, Coop, do people ever understand you on the first try?”

“Do you want to talk to me?” he asked. “I wasn’t going to bring it up, because I figured by now you would have. Do you know how hard it’s been to keep my mouth shut all morning? Jesus, I’m being as patient as I can, but you’re going to have to give a little, here. You need to put in the work, bro.”

“I understood less than half of that.”

“What’s going on with Zoe?” he asked. “And just so we’re clear, I know you guys banged in the tasting room last night.”

Ah, fuck. I groaned. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, Ben walked by and heard something, so he called Leo. Come on, man, you thought you could get away with that? I have to give it to you, I’ve never fucked a girl in the Big House. Although believe me, I’ve thought about it. If I had a sex bucket list, that would have to be on it. Hey, sex bucket list, that’s not a bad idea. Maybe I should write it down. Nah, I’ll remember. Anyway, what’s up with you two?”

I let out a breath. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Good answer,” he said. “I figured you’d say *nothing* and I’d have to pry it out of you. At least *I don’t know* means you can admit it’s something.”

Was it, though? It had certainly been something to me. I wasn’t so sure about her. She’d walked out like it hadn’t been a big deal. Like I was just another hook-up.

“I don’t know what it is,” I said. “Other than me being an idiot.”

“You *are* an idiot, but that’s not why.”

“Thanks, asshole,” I said.

Cooper grinned. “Just keeping it real, bro.”

“Is this the part where you remind me that Zoe is your friend and I better not hurt her?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said. “I mean, she is, and I don’t want her to get hurt. But Zoe’s a big girl.”

I laughed. “Interesting, coming from the guy responsible for recording what’s-his-name’s body shot video.”

“That was different,” Cooper said, his expression serious. “You’re kind of a dick sometimes, and you did fuck up your marriage to her pretty bad. But I know you care about her. Which is kind of fucking crazy, because I used to be convinced that you didn’t. I would have gone toe-to-toe with anyone who claimed you gave a shit. I did not see it.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You’ve surprised me,” he said. “I know you didn’t want to come home and bail us out. But you did. And I admit, I don’t know fuck-all about relationships. But anyone can see the way you look at her. Hell, we all see it. I think she’s the only one who doesn’t.”

He pulled a pair of shears from a loop on his tool belt and cut a few leaves, then gently slipped them into another bag.

“That’s enough of that shit, though,” he said. “Jesus, Roland, I knew you needed to get some stuff off your chest, but you don’t have to be a girl about it.”

“I’m pretty sure all I said was *I don’t know*, and *I’m an idiot*.”

“At least we agree,” he said. “And don’t forget, Zoe is my friend, and you better not hurt her. I don’t care if you are my brother, I’ll still punch you in the dick.”

“You just said—”

“Dick punch,” Cooper said, pointing at me. “Watch yourself.”

I shook my head. Trying to make sense out of Cooper was a lesson in futility.

We walked up a shallow slope, and Cooper stopped now and then to talk to his grapes. I followed along, still thinking about Zoe. About what I wanted.

The thing was, I knew exactly what I wanted. It was just so fucking crazy, I was having trouble facing it. How could I admit that what I really wanted was *her*? I didn't just want to sleep with her. This was so much more than that. Zoe was smart, fun, and beautiful. She was passionate and fiercely loyal.

I wondered how the fuck I ever let her go.

We'd crashed and burned pretty hard once. I didn't know if she'd ever give me another chance. But I'd realized something last night, and there was no point in trying to talk myself out of it. I still loved her.

I loved Zoe like crazy. I always had.

I didn't deserve a second chance, and I knew it. But if I didn't try, I'd spend the rest of my life miserable and alone. I'd never love anyone like I loved her. I knew that now. Zoe was it for me. If she didn't feel the same, I'd have to figure out how to live with it. But I knew one thing for sure: I wasn't going to let her walk out of my life again. Not without a fight.

TWENTY-ONE

ZOE

It would be nice if you would answer. Simple question. Did you get the paperwork or not? I need you to sign. I just want this to be fucking over with.

~Text from Zoe, four years ago

I STOOD outside the Hummingbird Cottage, my tummy twisted with nerves. My limbs were jittery, and I'd almost talked myself out of this twice. But I really needed to talk to Roland. The more time that went by, the more awkward things were going to get. I didn't know if he'd been out all day to avoid me, or because he'd been with his family. But I knew he was here now, and the sooner I got this over with, the better.

I knocked and heard a muffled *coming* from inside. The door opened, and I almost choked. Roland's hair was wet, his chest bare and glistening, and he was wearing nothing but a white towel wrapped around his waist.

"Oh, hey," he said. "Sorry, I assumed it was Cooper again."

I blinked a few times, my mouth partially open. "Coop... Cooper?"

"He keeps trying to talk me into going out with him and Chase tonight."

Talk, Zoe. Stop staring. "Oh, right. Yeah, Cooper can be a pain in the ass when he wants something."

“Yeah.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and adjusted his grip on the towel. It hung low across his hips, revealing the trail of hair that went down below his belly-button. “Do you want to come in?”

God, did I ever. I wanted to lick the water off his abs. But I had to stop thinking like that. “Um, yeah, please.”

I went inside, and he shut the door softly behind me. The deep breath I took to calm my raging hormones had the opposite effect. I got a lungful of Roland, and he smelled like man heaven.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Yes, clothes are good,” I said.

He paused, and the corners of his mouth turned up in the hint of a smile. A drop of water trailed down his broad chest and slid over the surface of his nipple ring.

I swallowed and tore my eyes away. Thankfully, he went into the bedroom, but I didn’t hear the door latch. I told myself, quite firmly, that I wasn’t going to look. It didn’t matter if he’d left the door open a crack on purpose or not. I wasn’t taking the bait.

Who was I kidding? Of course I peeked.

I caught a glimpse of him from behind as the towel dropped to the floor. He had dimples on his lower back, right above his ass. I wanted to run in there and smack those sexy ass cheeks. Maybe get him a little riled up so he’d spank me again.

Did I have no control over myself? I looked away and moved so the gap wasn’t in my line of sight. I was here to have a calm, rational, adult conversation with my ex-husband. I needed to remember that.

He came out in a black t-shirt and sweats. The way his clothes hugged his body was only slightly less distracting than seeing him half-naked. I’d told him last night that I hated him for being so sexy, and there was some truth to that. He was making it very hard to stay focused on what I’d come here to do.

“What’s up?” He sat on the couch and motioned for me to sit.

I sat next to him, careful to keep space between us. “I thought we should talk.”

“Yeah, we should.” He shifted so he was partially facing me and put his arm over the back of the couch.

I waited to see if he’d start talking first—he’d certainly started things last night—but he just looked at me, his blue eyes intense.

“Yesterday was pretty crazy,” I said. “I didn’t mean to be there when your mom and dad had it out.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s okay.”

“How’s your mom today?”

“She’s hanging in there,” he said.

“Good.” I glanced down at my hands. Why couldn’t I bring up last night? I’d never been shy about sex before. Why the hell was I acting like a blushing recently-deflowered virgin? “So, last night—”

“Was amazing,” he said.

“Yeah, it was, but...” *No, forget the part where it was amazing.* “I said it was a bad idea, and it—”

“Wasn’t a bad idea, and I’m glad it happened.” His eyes held mine captive, and he shifted closer.

I opened my mouth to reply, but paused, staring at him. “Wait, did you just say you’re glad it happened?”

“Absolutely.” He brushed a lock of hair off my shoulder, my neck tingling where his fingers touched me.

The way he was looking at me made my heart race. He wanted me. I could see the desire burning in his eyes. I wanted him, too. I wanted his body against mine. His mouth on my skin. I wanted to feel what I’d felt last night, even if it would only be fleeting. Because for the first time in a long time, I’d felt whole.

I leaned in and my eyes closed as his lips came to mine. He grabbed me with rough hands and pulled me into his lap, kissing me deeply. I was an addict, getting a long-awaited hit of my drug of choice. Intoxicated by the heady mix of familiarity and surprise.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. He kissed me like I was oxygen. Like he needed me to survive. It was too much. This kiss was breaking me open, ruining me with its power. I couldn't let that happen. This was just sex. Just two people indulging their desires. Giving in.

He held my thighs, straddled across his lap. I could feel his solid erection and I rubbed against him, smiling as he groaned into my mouth. This, I could handle. I needed to push this farther—get us naked. Stay in control. Raw lust would drown out all the other feelings I didn't want to have.

“Clothes off,” I said. “Now.”

He tore my shirt off and kissed me again, running his hands up my back to unfasten my bra. I let it fall down my arms, and he tossed it to the side. Then his mouth was on my nipple, his hands grabbing my ass. I started grinding against him, desperate for friction. He sucked my nipple while he palmed my other breast, sending jolts of sensation straight to my core.

I was dry-humping him like a cracked-out monkey in heat, but oh my god he knew how to play my body like an instrument. Laps of his tongue and pinches of his teeth on my nipples left me panting, my pussy hot. I needed him to fuck me, and I needed it now.

“Sex, Roland.” I couldn't focus enough to form full sentences. “Sex, now.”

His mouth moved higher, and he sucked on the skin at the base of my neck while he pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “Mm. Bedroom.”

“Fine.”

He took his time, playing with my nipple and lavishing kisses up my neck. It felt too good. I wanted hard and rough,

not slow and deliberate.

I found the hem of his shirt and slipped my hand underneath. I knew what would get him going. Pinching the smooth metal of his nipple ring, I gave it a quick tug.

He grunted and bit down where my shoulder met my neck. That was more like it. His teeth pinched, but the twinge of pain was electric. I massaged his nipple with my thumb, then pulled again. His savage grunt reverberated through me and he nipped at my neck with his teeth.

He stood, lifting me easily with his hands gripping my ass. I held on, my arms around his neck, while he walked me the short distance to the bedroom. He kicked the door shut with a bang and dumped me unceremoniously onto the bed.

I bit my lip as I watched him undress. He pulled off his shirt, revealing his muscular frame. I'd been with him when he got that nipple ring, and the tattoos on his shoulder and upper arm. I liked that he didn't have any new ones. It made me feel like all his ink still belonged to me.

He shoved his pants and underwear down, unleashing that goddamn magical dick. It was gorgeous. Some women didn't appreciate the visual beauty of a fabulous cock, but I sure did. And Roland's was a masterpiece. Thick and long, with a perfectly shaped head. A deep wine color, darker than the rest of his skin, especially when he was hard. Roland's dick was an absolute pussy destroyer, and I couldn't wait for him to ravage mine.

I slid the rest of my clothes off and scooted up the bed. He got on his knees in front of me and opened my legs, running his hands up and down my thighs.

“Condom?” he asked.

Since Roland, I'd always used a condom, even though I was on the pill. But we hadn't last night, and Roland had been in me bare plenty of times.

“I'm on the pill,” I said. “Are you still safe?”

“I'm safe.”

“Me too,” I said. “We’re good, then.”

His hands caressed my thighs, his movements slow and deliberate. He licked his lips as his eyes swept over me, taking me in.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he said.

The emotion in his voice cut through me. I didn’t want to dredge up old feelings. I just wanted him to fuck me senseless. Maybe the second time would be enough.

I curled my finger, beckoning him closer. “Come here.”

His mouth hooked in a half-smile. “Not yet.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“I need something from you first,” he said.

“What?” I asked. “Because if this is how you ask for oral sex now, you don’t have to be so dramatic about it. Just tell me you want to see your cock in my mouth and let’s do this.”

He shook his head. “That does sound amazing, but that’s not what I mean. I want you to agree to go out with me.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I want you to go out with me,” he said. “On a date.”

“A date?” I asked, and a tremor of fear tickled my spine, settling in the pit of my stomach. This was exactly what I didn’t want. I couldn’t *date* my ex-husband. Sleep with him a couple of times? Sure. Date him? That was crazy. “No.”

He narrowed his eyes. “No sex, then.”

“You’re serious?” I lifted onto my elbows. “You have me naked with my legs spread open in front of you. You’re telling me you’ll walk away from this?”

“It’s gonna hurt like a son of a bitch, but yes,” he said. “Or tell me you’ll go out with me, and I’ll fuck you any way you want me to.”

Hearing those words come out of his mouth made my pussy contract. God, I was wet and practically throbbing for him. “You are such an asshole.”

“I’m an asshole for wanting to take you out?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “We can’t date each other.”

“Why not?”

I flopped back down, my head hitting the pillow. His pillow. I was surrounded by his scent, staring at the hard lines of his gorgeous body. He moved his hands up and down my thighs again, his eyes intent on me. He wasn’t going to let this go.

“Do you really want to have this conversation, or do you want to get laid?”

“I told you what I want,” he said.

Fine. That’s how he wanted it to be? I’d play his game, but I’d play dirty.

I slid my fingers lightly over my right nipple, indulging in a little smirk as Roland’s eyes snapped to my chest. “No sex? Maybe I’ll just have to do this myself, then.”

“That’s not going to work, Zo.”

“Are you sure?” I traced my fingers down my stomach, reaching the soft skin between my legs. Roland watched as I rubbed along my slit and dipped my fingertips inside. “Mm, so wet. This would feel good.”

The challenge in his eyes was such a turn-on. He grabbed his dick at the base and held it.

“You know you want this,” I said, slipping my fingers inside again.

“I do,” he said, his voice rough. “But I’ll be fine without it.”

“No you won’t.” I bit my lip as I swirled my fingers around my clit a few times. “But I will. I’ll make myself come while you watch.”

“You’d rather do that than let me buy you dinner?” he asked, his eyes glued to my stroking fingers.

“Maybe,” I said.

He gave his cock a tug, but I knew him. He wasn't serious yet. I rubbed myself harder to show him I meant business.

"Come on, Zo." He squeezed his shaft and tugged again. I had to bite the inside of my lip. Damn it, that was his warm-up. He wasn't bluffing.

His hand slid up his thick length, and he had me mesmerized. My fingers went still as I watched him begin with rough jerks. He twisted his wrist with each stroke. God, I loved watching him touch himself. And the asshole fucking knew it.

"There's no way that's as good as this would be." I slid my fingers inside again.

He grunted and stroked faster. "It's not. But I'm watching you and it's pretty fucking good."

I needed pressure and I needed it now. I rubbed myself harder, but I wanted his cock. I wanted him inside me, stretching me open. Filling me.

"Dinner?" I asked.

He jerked his hand over his cock a few more times. "Dinner."

"Oh my god, fine," I said, pulling my fingers out. "Get over here and fuck me."

He grinned, the smug bastard, and settled on top of me. Wasting no time, he captured my mouth in a deep kiss and thrust his cock inside.

I moaned with relief as his thickness filled me. Yes, this was what I needed. Just once more. The kissing was pushing it, but he was really fucking good at that too, so I didn't stop him. I moved with his thrusts and held his muscular back, enjoying the way his body felt, melded with mine.

Hooking an arm around my waist, he flipped us over. I settled on top of him and shook my hair so it fell down my back. This was perfect. Being on top put me in control. I was going to ride his dick until he lost his fucking mind.

But he grabbed my hips, holding them tight, and kept me from moving too fast. His eyes held mine, deep and spellbinding. I squeezed my thighs to lift up, and slid down his cock, the friction pulsating through me. His brow furrowed and he groaned, but he wouldn't break eye contact.

Placing my hands on his chest, I rode him as hard and fast as he'd let me—which wasn't as hard and fast as I wanted. His eyes bored through me, penetrating my defenses.

My heart raced, and I felt a flush pass over my cheeks. He moved me faster, his control slipping. The groove between his eyebrows deepened and his grunts were low and primal. But still his eyes stayed locked with mine, refusing to let go.

His cock throbbed, and his jaw tightened. “You ready for this?”

I knew what he meant. He wasn't just talking about his impending release. This was more than sex, and every bit of me knew it.

And I was fucking terrified.

His grip on my hips softened, and before I could answer, he pressed his thumb against my clit. Rubbed me with quick strokes.

The orgasm swept through me like a rogue wave breaking over the sand—sudden and powerful. I leaned my head back and rode his dick hard while he thrust up into me, his hands back on my hips. He slammed upward, shoving his cock deep inside. The feel of his cock pulsing with the walls of my pussy clenching around him was insane. I dug my fingernails into his chest and he groaned, his voice deep. We came together, our timing perfect, both losing ourselves in the hot rush of passion.

Oh my god, there was nothing like a simultaneous orgasm. A lover who made sure you came was one thing. But one who could set you off at their whim was a fucking treasure.

My heart slowed down, and I started to come back to myself. Roland caressed my thighs, his large hands moving slowly across my hot skin. He had red marks on his chest

where I'd clawed him. But those eyes were still fixed on my face, full of feeling and depth.

He used to look at me like that, before everything had gone to shit.

I felt intensely raw and vulnerable, and I didn't like it. Brushing my hair back, I moved off him and over to the edge of the bed.

He rolled to his side and reached out to touch my back. His voice was quiet and soothing. "Will you stay?"

I answered without looking at him. "I can't."

"Okay," he said, still caressing me with a light touch. "I understand."

A surge of emotion stormed inside me. This was not what I'd come here to do. Face the fact that we'd slept together and get things out in the open, yes. And deep down, I knew I'd planned to fuck him again. Once had not been enough.

But this? This was more than I could bear.

"I should go," I said.

"Okay," he said again, still in that soft voice. "Dinner tomorrow?"

"Sure." I stood and gathered my clothes, keeping my back to him. If I saw his face, I'd break. I'd melt into a puddle of stupid feelings and climb in bed with him. Curl myself around him and drift in his warmth.

This was crazy. This man had hurt me. Deeply. I couldn't risk letting him in again.

I dressed as quickly as I could and murmured something that sounded like goodbye, then got my ass out of there before I lost my mind.

But it wasn't my mind I was at risk of losing. Not really. It was my heart. And I was afraid he already had it in his hands again.

TWENTY-TWO

ROLAND

It was funny to get a hit of nervousness as I walked up to Zoe's door. After all, it was Zo. I'd taken her out hundreds of times. We'd been to high school dances, out on dinner dates or out for drinks. Parties and bar crawls. Midnight picnics. Road trips.

But tonight was different.

Tonight was more important than any of those nights had been. I had to show her I was serious, but I needed to tread carefully. She didn't trust me, and I certainly didn't blame her. I had a long way to go before I could ask for her trust, let alone anything deeper. Like love.

I hadn't been surprised when she'd left last night. Disappointed, sure. But when I'd asked her to stay, I'd known she wouldn't. I'd seen the confusion and hurt in her eyes. I hated that I was responsible for that, and I was realizing that Zoe carried a lot more hurt than I'd ever known. Pain that I'd caused. It made me feel fucking awful, but I had no one to blame but myself.

I would have loved it if she'd have climbed back into bed with me. It might have given me a chance to heal some of the wounds we shared. But I needed to do this on Zoe's terms. Let her be in control. It meant risking a lot—risking everything, really. I had to open myself up to being hurt again so I could show her it was safe for her to do the same.

This wasn't natural for me. I was used to being in the position of strength. Dominance. It was why I was good at my

job.

But Zoe wasn't a business deal.

I understood her. Sometimes I thought I knew her better than I knew myself. And I recognized that right now, she needed me to take it slow. As much as I wanted to tell her everything—how I couldn't stop thinking about her, how much I loved her and wanted her back in my life—I couldn't yet. I had to show her, first.

She answered after I knocked, dressed in a black wrap shirt, tight dark jeans, and knee-high black boots. Her hair was down in waves, and I noticed the color was darker at the top, fading to almost blond at the tips.

“Hey, you look beautiful,” I said, resisting the urge to step in and kiss her. I couldn't get away with that yet. “Did you change your hair?”

“Oh, yeah, today,” she said, fingering a lock of hair. “I made the appointment a while ago.”

“It looks great.”

She touched her hair again, almost like she was self-conscious about it. “Thanks.”

I led her to my car and we drove out to the Rockhouse Grill. It was newer, and I'd chosen it specifically because it wasn't a place we'd used to frequent. I didn't want old memories interfering.

The host seated us, and we sat in silence, perusing the menus. I could tell Zoe was jittery. Truthfully, I was, too. Whatever was happening between us was on the edge of a blade. If we tipped too far to either side, we'd fall.

“How's your mom?” she asked.

“She's okay. I told her she could stay at the Lodge as long as she wants. I think she's worried about coming back to the house.” I was more than happy to pay for her room. She could stay there for the next year for all I cared. I knew all too well what it was like to come home to an empty house, the echoes of your spouse still there long after they'd left.

“Yeah, I’m sure she is,” she said. “So many memories. There must be good ones, too. Especially of all her kids. But still. Do you know where your dad went?”

“To his mistress,” I said, spitting out the word. I was so fucking angry with my father, I could barely talk about him without feeling my blood run hot with rage.

“Well, she’s an idiot,” Zoe said. “Especially if she knew he was married.”

“I think she did.”

“I’m so pissed for your mom,” she said. “She doesn’t deserve any of this shit.”

“Me too.” And I was. I was livid over what my dad had done to her.

The waitress came to take our orders. When she left, our conversation turned to Salishan. I told her about the things I’d been working on. I had a new ten-year financial plan that would reduce our debt faster and keep cash flow positive, even if we had a down year. Leo had ideas for expanding distribution to a wider area, as well as partnering with more local restaurants. Cooper and my mom were working closely together to plan for future crops and grape varieties, which would allow Mom to expand the wine selection.

Zoe talked about her ideas for recruiting events in the off-season. Winter-themed weddings, special deals for corporate retreats and other events that weren’t weather-dependent. Marketing campaigns that targeted the post-holiday slump in January and February, emphasizing the cozy atmosphere of the winery.

She visibly relaxed as we talked and ate. I loved hearing the passion in her voice when she talked about her work, and I found myself feeling grateful she’d come back here. I didn’t know what my family would have done without her.

“It sounds like you’re getting things turned around,” she said.

“We’re not on the brink of foreclosure, so that’s good,” I said. “But there’s a lot of capital investment that needs to

happen, and I'm still not sure how to handle that. I'm thinking of bringing in an investor. I know a guy who might be interested. It could take Salishan to the next level. But I'm not sure how everyone else is going to feel about it."

"That would be different," she said. "But if it would be good in the long run, it might be the right thing. It would just have to be someone you trust."

"Exactly."

We finished our meals and sipped our wine—a Salishan Cellars chardonnay. Zoe put down her glass and her hand strayed to her hair. She did that when she was nervous, or not sure what to say.

"When do you have to go back to San Francisco?" she asked.

And there it was. My life in San Francisco was an enormous barrier between us. I wasn't such an idiot that I thought I could ask her to come back with me. We'd been down that road, and it hadn't ended well.

"I'll have to take a trip down there soon," I said. "But there's too much to do here. I won't stay long."

She nodded slowly. "Okay."

"I've been thinking about how to make things work long-term," I said. "I'll be honest, I'm not sure what the solution is yet. Maybe I'll split my time between San Francisco and here, I don't know."

"So you're not going to just leave," she said.

"No."

She met my eyes and her subtle smile lit me up inside. "That's good to know."

After dinner, I took her home. She looked at me with curiosity when I pulled up at her place. I knew this wasn't what she'd expected. She was waiting for me to suggest she come home with me. But that wasn't going to happen tonight.

I walked her up to her door, and she turned toward me.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said. “It was nice.”

“Thanks for coming,” I said.

“Well, you did coerce me,” she said. “But I’m glad.”

I moved closer and slid my hand around her waist, pulling her against me. Her mouth parted, and she started to say something, but I ran my thumb along her lower lip. It was soft, pliant against the pad of my thumb.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Getting ready to kiss you.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to,” I said. “And because we’re not having sex tonight.”

She tried to step back, but I held fast, keeping her pressed against me while my thumb traced her lip again.

“If you don’t want sex, why did you take me out?” she asked.

I loved the way her voice sounded breathy and halting, like she was having trouble concentrating on her words.

“I want more than sex.” I kissed the tip of her nose. “Don’t get me wrong, fucking you is amazing. But I need you to know that isn’t all I want.”

“Then what do you want?”

“You,” I said.

“Roland...”

I leaned in and pressed my mouth to hers. Slid my tongue along her lips. All softness. No teeth. No aggression. Just silky-smooth lips and sensitive skin. Tongues that tasted of wine. I kissed her deeply, drawing her close, letting my tongue caress hers. Her body relented, softening against me. I kissed her with everything I had, because I knew from now on, every time I kissed her could be the last.

Her eyes were hooded when I pulled away. I touched her cheek and brushed my lips against hers again.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You don’t have to decide anything right now. All I want is another date. Will you go out with me again?”

“That’s all?” she asked. “Just another date?”

“For now, yeah,” I said.

She took a deep breath and I touched her lips with my thumb again. I wanted to keep kissing those lips, but I couldn’t overwhelm her. I had to be careful.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll go out with you again.”

“I lied, I need one more thing.”

“Roland.”

I smiled and kissed her again, just a soft kiss on her lips. I couldn’t help it. “Just one more thing, I promise. I need to know there won’t be anyone else.”

“Are you tricking me into dating you?” she asked.

“I’m not tricking you,” I said. “I made you a compelling offer, which you accepted. Now I’m extending the offer further.”

“Always the businessman,” she said, her mouth twitching in a smile. “That goes for you too? No one else?”

“Never,” I said. There would never again be anyone but her.

She slid her hand around the back of my neck and drew me to her lips. Kissed me, soft and sweet. “Of course not. I would never do that to you.”

I pulled her to me and held her close, my chest suddenly tight. The way she’d initiated that kiss felt so good. It gave me hope.

“Do you want to come in?” she asked, softly into my ear.

I squeezed her and pulled back. “I really do, but I’m not going to tonight. I think it’s best if I go.”

She smiled and took my hand. Our fingers twined together, and she gave me that little smile again. “Okay. Goodnight,

Roland.”

“Goodnight, Zoe.”

I let go and stepped away, the words *I love you* lying unspoken on my lips.

TWENTY-THREE

ZOE

Two more days. In forty-eight hours, Victoria Jones would be Victoria Cockburn, and my bridezilla client no longer. Assuming I survived. At this point, that was debatable.

She'd arrived this morning, appearing at the Big House even though we didn't have an appointment until tomorrow for her rehearsal. But she'd wanted to go over every detail, plus tour the grounds again. While we walked through the back gardens, she'd picked apart the decor choices and layout—all things she'd chosen weeks, if not months ago. By the time she left two hours later, the inside of my lip was raw from biting it and my palms had fingernail marks from clenching my fists.

Two days. I could handle Cocksmaash for two more days.

The bulk of the setup would be done tomorrow, but we didn't have anything scheduled in the main garden between now and then. I decided to get some of the twinkle lights up. I didn't always do the decorating myself, but today I wanted to be outside—and alone for a while. Hanging strings of lights in the trees sounded like a great way to kill a couple of hours. It would give me time to think.

Considering I was dating my ex-husband, I certainly had a lot on my mind.

We'd been dating for weeks now. We saw each other at work. Kissed a lot. Went out to dinner, or for drinks. He'd even taken me to a musical at a local theater. We'd had a blast. Some days we spent hours simply talking. Catching up on work. On life. Everything.

And the sex. Oh god, the sex. It was better than it had ever been.

But despite how much fun we were having together, a current of uncertainty ran beneath everything. Where was this going? Technically, Roland still lived in San Francisco. He seemed to be managing to do his job from here, although I knew it was a strain. But that couldn't last forever. He'd been here for two months. His boss had to insist he come back eventually. And there was no way I was moving to San Francisco to be with him. I liked the city fine, but there was a reason I'd left. I wasn't interested in a repeat of four years ago. Fuck that.

Why was now any different?

I was struggling to answer that question with something more concrete than *he seems different now*. But he did. He was. The Roland I'd left wouldn't have stayed in Echo Creek this long, no matter what had been happening. He wouldn't have discovered his dad's affair. He wouldn't have been here long enough to notice something was wrong. The Roland of four years ago would have shown up, thrown some money around, and left.

But he hadn't. He'd stayed.

He'd been coming out of his office earlier and having dinners with his mom. Hanging out with his brothers in the evenings or on weekends. Last week he'd gone to Tilikum to help Brynn pick up a bed for her new apartment.

All this from the guy who, four years ago, couldn't have been in the same room as his brothers for more than five minutes without fighting. Who'd barely remembered his little sister existed.

I was seeing the Roland I remembered from before San Francisco. From before he'd gotten so wrapped up in his work—in career advancement, promotions, moving up, making money, impressing the bosses. He'd measured his happiness and worth based on his job title and salary. Nothing had mattered more. Not even me.

The Roland I saw now cared about more than money. He was concerned for his family, and their business. Spending time with the people he loved instead of working fourteen-hour days. I'd seen him smile, and even laugh. His father had dropped one of the biggest bombshells of his life, and even that hadn't driven him to bury himself in his work.

But would it last? Was this the real Roland, and the workaholic I'd been married to had been a phase? A product of poor judgment and misplaced priorities? Or was he simply reverting to remembered behaviors since he was here, and the moment he set foot in San Francisco, he'd go right back to being the guy who'd do anything to further his career, even at the expense of his marriage?

I didn't know.

We'd reconnected in a way I couldn't deny. On a level that went so much deeper than physical. He'd told me more than once now that he wanted me. At first that had been easy to brush aside—assume he meant he wanted to sleep with me. But that wasn't what he'd been saying.

He wanted to give us another chance. And despite how great the last few weeks had been, I was pretty fucking scared.

I was risking a lot by letting him in again. I'd given my heart to him once, and he'd tossed it aside. Was I crazy? Could a relationship like ours really have a second chance? We hadn't just dated and broken up. We'd gotten *married*, and then *divorced*. That was serious shit.

Times like this, I wished I had a better relationship with my mom. It would have been nice to be able to call her and tell her what was going on. Ask for her advice. I loved my mom, but we weren't close. We never had been. She'd always looked at me like she wasn't quite sure where I'd come from. And her advice about Roland would probably consist of *You have a good head on your shoulders, you'll figure it out*. She meant well, but I think she was perpetually confused when it came to me.

I stood on a ladder, propped up against a plum tree, and finished hanging a third strand of twinkle lights. I figured one

more on this tree would do the trick.

“Hey, up there.”

I looked down to find Ben standing near the base of the ladder. He was dressed in his usual Salishan Cellars t-shirt, worn jeans, and work boots. He was a good-looking guy, especially for his age, with a warm smile I’d always appreciated.

“Hey, Ben.” I climbed down the ladder and brushed my hands together. “What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you a minute?” he asked.

“Yeah, of course.”

“What do you know about... the things that have been going on?” he asked, his voice halting, like he wasn’t quite sure if we should talk about it.

The winery employees knew that Lawrence was gone, but the details had been kept vague. I think most people suspected the truth, but respected Shannon’s privacy. They knew Lawrence had moved out and was no longer in charge.

If anyone else had asked, I would have hedged the question. But Ben wasn’t just an employee. He’d been around since Roland and his siblings were kids.

“Roland found out his dad was having an affair,” I said.

Ben’s face went very still, but I could see the flash of anger in his eyes. “I see.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s awful,” I said. “Shannon kicked him out.”

“So Lawrence really is gone?” Ben asked.

I nodded. “He went to his mistress, apparently. If he had any hope of fixing this, I’m pretty sure that killed it. There’s no way Shannon will take him back.”

“I should beat the shit out of that sniveling little punk,” he said under his breath.

I laughed. He'd reminded me of Cooper just then. "That I would love to see."

"Sorry," he said, scowling. "Didn't mean to say that out loud."

"It's fine. I don't blame you."

He blinked a few times, his eyes focusing on something in the distance.

"I wouldn't worry about Salishan, though," I said. "I'm not sure how things will shake out legally, but Roland isn't worried. They've already talked to a lawyer."

"Right." Ben's phone rang, and he jerked, like it had startled him. He brought it to his ear. "Yeah? Uh-oh. Do you need me to call Chase? Okay, good. Yeah, I'll be right there." He ended the call and slipped his phone in his back pocket.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Bottling machine is down," he said. "Chase is over there, but we were already a week behind on the bottling schedule. This isn't good."

Bottling had to be done on a precise schedule, based largely on the age of the wine. If they were already behind, this delay could be costly—something Salishan did not need right now.

Ben started for the work houses, and I followed. There probably wasn't much I could do, but I figured I should see if I could help.

The work houses were a short walk from the Big House. While the Big House was Salishan's public face, the work houses were where the real work of winemaking was done. This was where the grapes came in at harvest to be destemmed and crushed. The cellars housed enormous fermentation tanks, as well as the barrel cellars where wine was stored for aging. Another building was the bottling facility, with a complex series of machines that bottled, corked, labeled, and boxed the wines.

Inside the bottling room, Shannon was busy giving orders, directing people where to go and what to do. It looked like half the winery employees were here. I saw Chase on a ladder, hard at work on the machinery. Everyone else was busy diverting the flow of work to hand-bottle the wine.

It was good to see Shannon in her element. She looked good. Tough. I wasn't sure how she was doing underneath it all, but I was proud of her for being here and taking charge.

Ben paused next to me. He seemed to be watching Shannon. She looked over at us and her mouth turned up in a smile. Ben gave her a brief nod, then went over to help Chase.

I saw Roland talking to one of the employees.

"This doesn't look good," I said.

"It's a nightmare," he said. "This could not have come at a worse time."

"Ben said we're already behind schedule," I said.

Roland nodded. "Apparently my dad was too busy with his mistress to make sure things were on time. This bottling should have happened last week."

"Chase will get things up and running," I said.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "In the meantime, we're going to hand-bottle as much as we can. There's a shipment that needs to go out today, so we can't wait."

"Do you need me to help?" I asked.

"I definitely need you," he said, then cleared his throat. "Need the help."

"Get a room," Cooper said, appearing out of nowhere. He draped an arm around my shoulders. "We have a shit-ton of work to do, so if you two could stop making goo-goo eyes at each other, that would be awesome."

Roland scowled at him.

"Nice face," Cooper said. "That's a good look on you. But enough about me. This wine is not going to bottle itself. At least, not until Chase gets his ass in gear and fixes this mess."

What do you think he's doing up there?" He turned and cupped his hand over his mouth, pitching his voice to be heard across the building. "Chase! Dude, don't fuck this up. The entire winery is counting on you, bro. But no pressure or anything."

Chase flipped him off without looking over.

"Cooper, watch your mouth," Shannon said.

He winced. "Oops, forgot Mom was in here." He pointed at Chase. "Hey, he flipped me off. Aren't you going to scold him, too?"

Shannon shook her head, rolling her eyes.

"So unfair," Cooper said. He squeezed my shoulders, then pointed at Roland. "Remember what I said. Dick punch."

"Aren't you supposed to be bottling?" Roland asked.

"Probably." Cooper started toward the still conveyor belt where a group of people were busy siphoning wine into bottles. "Hey, you guys be careful with that. That's the blood of my children. You better not spill a drop."

I laughed, and Roland shook his head.

"He is so creepy when he talks like that," he said.

"That's Cooper for you," I said. "So, how can I help?"

"I think everything is covered except labeling and boxing."

Roland and I went to the end of the line where the full, corked bottles were being collected. Normally the bottling machine affixed the labels before placing the wine bottles in boxes. Hand-labeling was going to be tedious as hell, especially getting them on straight. But it needed to be done.

At first the task seemed impossible. I ripped four labels trying to peel them off their backing, and Roland couldn't get his on the bottles straight. Once we got smart and got a system going, things moved faster. He peeled the labels and I stuck them on. Brynn came over and started boxing the finished bottles.

We worked for hours. After we finished the backlog, we washed up, donned gloves, and helped fill and cork more bottles. Then more labeling and boxing. Despite the challenging situation, the mood in the bottling room was upbeat. The entire Miles family was here—even Leo came out of hiding to help. The rest of the winery staff pitched in, too. There was a sense of camaraderie in coming together to face a crisis.

“Stand clear,” Chase called from somewhere deep in the machinery.

We all stood back. I held my breath. Suddenly, the conveyor belts started moving, the bottling machine roaring to life. A cheer rose up as we all clapped and celebrated.

Roland’s eyes met mine, and he smiled. It was a smile I remembered so well. One I’d seen a thousand times. And it had never looked as beautiful as it did today.

TWENTY-FOUR

ZOE

My feet ached after the long hours spent in the bottling room. Most of the staff had filtered out after Chase and Ben got the bottling machine operating again. Shannon was still here with Cooper and Leo, making sure things were working as they should, and finishing up the bottling run.

Shannon walked over and pulled me in for a hug. “Thanks for your help today.”

“Of course,” I said, hugging her back.

Roland walked over with Leo and Brynn. It was good to see Leo out here. He still tilted his face slightly—always trying to hide his scars—but I hadn’t seen him out and about this long in months.

Brynn pulled her hair down and started re-doing her ponytail. “I don’t know about you guys, but I want to go eat my weight in fried food and collapse into a coma.”

“I can help with the first part,” Shannon said. “How about The Lodge? I’m buying.”

“Yes,” Brynn said. “That sounds so good.”

Leo shook his head and mumbled something.

Shannon gave him a sympathetic smile. “I can send something over.”

“That’s okay,” Leo said. He stepped in and hugged his mom. “I’m fine. I’ll talk to you later.”

Shannon watched him go with concern in her eyes until Cooper tackle-hugged her from behind.

“Mother! Goddess of Salishan and giver of life. We have emerged victorious. I suggest we celebrate and indulge in the fruits of our labors.”

“Mom already said she’d buy dinner at the Lodge,” Brynn said.

Cooper stood behind Shannon, his arms still wrapped around her shoulders, and kissed her cheek. “That’s what I like to hear. I’m starving. Like I’m pretty sure if I don’t eat soon, I’m going to either fall over, or go into a hunger-induced rage and start tearing through the kitchen over in the Big House. If you want any cheese left for tastings tomorrow, you better feed me.”

Shannon patted his arm. “Okay, Cooper. Why don’t you go see if Chase wants to come.”

“Good plan.” He let go of her and whirled around. “Chase! Grub, man, let’s go!”

Ben came over, wiping his hands on a rag. “I think we’re all set for today. Need anything else?”

“I don’t think so,” Shannon said. “But why don’t you come to dinner with us?”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Ben said, looking down at the rag in his hands.

“You wouldn’t be intruding,” Shannon said. “Come on, Benjamin, I insist.”

Ben smiled, and I noticed a slight flush to his cheeks. It was warm in here, but I had a feeling that wasn’t why Ben looked a little red. “All right, when you say it like that.”

“Good,” Shannon said with a smile. She looked at Roland. “You coming?”

Roland hesitated, his eyes flicking to me. “You know, I’ll take a rain check.”

“You sure?” Shannon asked.

“Yeah,” he said, his eyes darting to me again. “I’m ready to call it a day.”

“Zoe?” Shannon asked, turning to me.

“Oh, um...” I blinked, trying not to look at Roland. I knew what he wanted, but we hadn’t exactly made our new relationship public, even to his family. “Thank you, but not tonight.”

Shannon’s mouth twitched, like she was hiding a smile. Her eyes moved to Roland, then back to me—so quick, I almost didn’t catch her doing it. “Okay. Well, come on, kids, let’s go before Cooper turns into a hunger tornado.”

I hung back with Roland and watched them go.

“Is that Greek restaurant still around?” Roland asked.

“Sure is,” I said. “Same owners and everything.”

“Gyros?” he asked.

“Are you asking me to dinner?”

He turned toward me and laid his hand against my cheek. “Yes. I want to get dinner to go and bring it back to my place. Share a bottle of wine. Then I want to spend the rest of the night fucking you until we both collapse.”

A rush of heat hit me between the legs and my spine tingled. “That’s very straightforward.”

“I’m just being honest,” he said. “And I want you to stay. Spend the night with me.”

I took a deep breath, like I was about to jump into water and I wasn’t sure how deep it went. Staying the night with him was a boundary I’d kept in place until now. But I was ready to take the plunge. “Okay.”

We picked up dinner and brought it back to the guest cottage. Roland opened a bottle of cabernet—Salishan Cellars, of course. We stretched out on the couch, resting our tired feet while we ate. The food was good, and the wine was better. We talked and laughed, and before I knew it, the food was gone and the bottle almost empty.

“My feet are still killing me,” I said. “I think this is a sign that I’m too sedentary. If there was a zombie apocalypse, I’d die on the first day.”

“If the world goes to shit like that, head for Leo,” Roland said. “Every time I go over there, I half expect to find him coming out of a secret underground lair.”

I laughed. “That wouldn’t surprise me. Do you think Leo is okay?”

“Not really,” he said. “But I think he could be worse.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true,” I said. “I’m glad he had his family to come home to.”

“So am I.” He rubbed his toes along the side of my foot. “You know what might feel good on those poor feet of yours?”

“What?”

“A bath,” he said. “This cottage has a two-person jetted tub.”

I set my wineglass down. “A hot bath? Yes, please.”

“I thought you might like that.”

Roland got up and went into the bathroom. The sound of water filling the tub drifted in. I was tired, but in a good way. Happy and satisfied. Relaxed from the meal, and the wine. Roland appeared again in the doorway and pulled his shirt over his head.

“Coming?”

I finished the last of my wine, then joined him in the bathroom. He was leaning over the tub, feeling the temperature of the water. Steam rose from the bath, already clouding the mirror.

He glanced back at me and grinned. “Better take those clothes off, Zo.”

I smiled and proceeded to undress. Took my time while Roland watched. My clothes dropped to the floor and I nibbled on my bottom lip as Roland’s eyes swept over me.

He took off the rest of his clothes and we climbed in the bath. The tub was large, giving us both plenty of space. I settled down in the hot water, facing him, and closed my eyes.

“Why have I never used this bathtub before?” I asked. “It’s been here this whole time, and I’ve never taken advantage.”

He picked up my foot and rubbed his thumbs across the bottom of my heel and across the arch. “I’m surprised. You love baths.”

“I do.”

Roland rubbed my foot for a while, then switched to the other one. Between the foot massage and the hot water, I was in danger of falling asleep.

“That feels amazing,” I said.

“I love making you feel good.”

My eyes were still closed, my head resting against the edge of the tub, but I heard Roland shift. The water lapped up my chest as he moved closer and pushed my legs apart so he could sit between them.

His fingers reached my center and I let my eyes flutter open. I watched as he touched me under the water, sliding his fingers along my soft skin. Brushing my clit with light strokes. My breath quickened at his touch, sparks of pleasure racing through me.

He slid two fingers inside me, and I moaned at the added pressure. I rocked my hips as he moved in and out, his fingers curling against my g-spot. He had me racing toward climax already, and we’d barely started.

Shifting again, he kept working my pussy hard and leaned in to clamp his mouth around my nipple. His teeth pinched my hard peak, and I cried out. Fuck, that felt good.

“Other side,” I breathed, barely able to get the words out.

He took my other breast in his mouth and sucked. I pinched my nipple between my thumb and forefinger and rocked my hips against his hand. He bit me gently, the twinge of pain shooting straight to my core. My pussy clenched

around his fingers and I came hard, leaning my head back and gasping.

Leaning over me, he brought his mouth to mine, his kiss hungry. I grabbed his cock and tugged, earning a deep grunt.

“Hand or mouth?” I asked, stroking his hard length.

“Fuck, Zoe,” he said. “Mouth.”

We switched places, ignoring the water that sloshed everywhere. He sat on the edge of the tub and I knelt between his legs, licking my lips at the sight of his wet dick.

I took the base in my hand and held him with a firm grip. Lavished the tip with wet kisses and laps of my tongue. He was hard as steel as I plunged down on him. His strong thighs contracted, and his abs flexed. I worked his cock in and out of my mouth, stroking the base as I went. He grabbed my hair, guiding me, and I picked up the pace. His hips thrust, and the intensity built. I nudged his legs farther apart so I could cup his balls with my free hand, and he leaned his head back, groaning loudly.

With his hand fisted tight in my hair, he moved me up and down his cock. I stroked his shaft and tugged his balls. The sound of his growls and moans was making my pussy wet all over again. I fucking loved doing this to him. There was nothing like the sound of a man losing his mind with his dick in your mouth. Especially when it was Roland.

He'd said he loved making me feel good. It was intoxicating to do it to him.

“You good if I come?” he asked. His grip on my hair relaxed, giving me a chance to stop.

I didn't. I moaned around his cock, tugged his balls harder, and let his tip slide as far toward my throat as I could manage.

“Fuck,” he said, his voice rough, almost strangled. He grabbed my hair again and thrust into my mouth, his cock pulsing. I took his come as it hit the back of my throat, feeling triumphant. He finished, and I quickly swallowed while he caught his breath.

“God, Zo,” he said between breaths. “I’m fucking undone.”

He slid back down into the water and pulled me on top of him. I straddled his lap and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. His arms settled around me, holding me close, and he kissed my neck. Nuzzled the hollow below my ear.

“You know I still need to fuck you,” he said.

“Can you still do that?” I shifted my hips, rubbing my pussy against his cock.

“Give me a minute.”

It didn’t take long for his cock to stiffen again. He reached between us and held the base, lifting it so I could slide down onto him.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the exquisite pleasure of his erection filling me. “You feel so good.”

He held my ass, his fingers kneading. “Baby, nothing feels as good as you.”

More water splashed out onto the floor as I slid up and down his thick cock. This angle was perfection, the ridge around his tip dragging through me, stimulating me in all the right places. I rubbed my clit against him every time I lowered down, and he thrust his hips, driving himself deeper.

We lost ourselves in the rhythm, our bodies in sync. Moaning, thrusting, grinding. He licked my nipples as they moved past his mouth. Gripped my ass with rough hands. Heat and tension built in my core, the pressure almost painful.

“Oh my god, Roland, I need to come again,” I said. “Please baby, make me come.”

He held me tighter and thrust hard. His cock throbbed inside me, the way it always did right before he came.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Just like that. Yes.”

Roland’s brow furrowed, and he whimpered—a strangled sound in his throat, like if he didn’t unleash on me now, he might not survive.

My pussy contracted, all my core muscles releasing at once. I threw my head back and moaned, letting the orgasm sweep me away. I rode him hard, feeling him burst inside me. We came apart at the seams, exploding into a thousand points of light.

Slowly, I came back to myself. I was draped over him, my head on his shoulder. He rubbed my back with soft strokes, his strong hands caressing my wet skin. The water level was significantly lower than it had been, but we'd worry about that later.

I moved so I could look at him. He cupped my cheek and drew me in for a kiss, his mouth soft and warm. I climbed off him and he turned the water on, refilling the tub. When the water was high enough, he shut it off and slipped back into place.

I sat between his legs and leaned back, settling against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and leaned his cheek against my head.

“Are we crazy?” I asked, my voice quiet.

Roland took a deep breath, his chest expanding against me. “Probably. But crazy was kind of always our thing.”

“That’s true.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, just breathing. Holding each other.

“Actually, I don’t think we are,” he said. “I think we were crazy before. And we’d be crazy to let this go now.”

My throat felt thick and my eyes stung with tears—and I was *not* a crier. I took a trembling breath. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right,” he said. “I love you, Zoe.”

I gripped his arms and squeezed, closing my eyes for a moment so the tears wouldn’t fall. “I love you, too.”

He held me tight, cradled in the warm water. We didn’t say anything else. Tonight, we didn’t need to.

TWENTY-FIVE

ROLAND

I threw away the fucking sheets because no matter how many times I wash them, they still smell like you. And I just fucking can't.

~Text from Roland, unsent

COOPER, Leo, and Brynn were already at the house when I arrived. My great-grandparents had built the original farmhouse on this land. It was no longer standing, long ago replaced by a newer one. But the echoes of them were everywhere. In faded photographs on the wall. Great-grandma's teacups in the cupboard. An old quilt that hung on the wall.

My mom had been born in this house. My grandparents had raised her here, their only child. They'd built it to be a guest house, intending to expand the winery's hospitality side. As a result, it was huge. It had seven bedrooms, all with their own bathrooms, an enormous commercial-grade kitchen, and a dining room that could seat an army.

By the time my mom and dad were married, my grandparents had already abandoned their plans to expand the overnight accommodations at Salishan, and were living here. Although they didn't take paying customers, the numerous bedrooms were often filled with guests. And when my parents had gotten married, they'd moved in, taking over one side of the house for their own.

They'd raised the four of us here. We'd grown up among the grapevines, our lives revolving around planting and harvests, the way most kids' lives revolved around Christmas and the first day of summer break.

Our grandparents had died when we were all still kids, leaving the winery and all the land to my mom. By that time, my dad had been handling the business side for years, while my grandparents took care of the vineyards and mentored my mom in the art of winemaking.

The winery had been a lot smaller back then. Ben had been around, but he had been one of only a handful of employees. My dad hadn't started all the expansions until about ten years ago, around the time Zoe and I got married. He'd built new cellars for increased production, started sourcing grapes from other wineries, and built the Big House to expand our guest offerings.

And of course, he'd expected me to work for him and eventually take over.

For a long time, I'd convinced myself I hated this place. This house where I'd grown up. Where my mom had spent her childhood before us. The land, the vineyards. All of it. I'd resented the pressure to conform. The expectations that had been foisted on me for my entire life.

That resentment was at the heart of every decision I'd made in the last ten years. The degree I chose. The jobs I took. Going to grad school to get my MBA. Moving to San Francisco. All of it had been designed to take me as far from Salishan as I could possibly get. I'd felt, with utter certainty and conviction, that I needed to make my own way. Carve my own path. That I'd been made for something greater.

As I stood looking up at the house my grandparents had built, with its thick wooden beams and smooth river rock, I realized how much I'd let that resentment poison me.

Which was exactly what my father had done.

He hadn't asked to become the head of a winery. He'd married my mom and fell into the role by default. As my

grandparents had aged and needed more help, he'd taken on the additional responsibility.

I didn't know what my dad had wanted to do before he'd started working for the winery. What his hopes and dreams had been when he was a young man. But I could see, so clearly now, how much he'd let resentment rule his life. It had tainted everything he'd ever done. It had destroyed his marriage. It could have ripped his entire family apart. The only thing saving us now was Mom. She'd always been our rock. Our stability. While Dad had come and gone, his temper leading the way, Mom had always been here. Safe, comforting.

We'd decided to do something for her. We couldn't erase our father from this house, but we could give her a fresh start.

I found my siblings inside, covering furniture with drop-cloths and taking pictures off the walls. The downstairs was getting fresh paint—colors Brynn had chosen. And we were moving my mom from the room she'd shared with my dad to a bedroom on the other side of the house. We'd paint that room as well, and I'd bought all new bedroom furniture. Mom didn't know yet, and I hoped she'd be happy with the surprise.

“Hey, sorry I'm late,” I said. “I had to take a call.”

“That's okay, we just got started,” Brynn said. She was dressed in a pair of paint splattered overalls and a t-shirt, her hair up in a ponytail. “Can you help Cooper move bookshelves?”

“On it.” I yanked Brynn's ponytail as I walked past, and she punched me in the arm.

“Hey, Brynncess,” Cooper called from the other room. “Where am I supposed to put this stuff? If you're going to be in charge, you need to work on your leadership skills.”

Brynn rolled her eyes. “Just move everything away from the wall so we can paint behind it. And don't forget later that you admitted I'm in charge.”

“Whatever you say, baby sister,” he said.

Cooper and I moved furniture while Leo and Brynn got started painting. Ben showed up to lend a hand, and Chase

came over not long after. The new bedroom set arrived, and we hauled the old stuff out. Cooper convinced us to drag Mom's old bed frame and mattress out to the east field so we could make a bonfire out of it later. I tried to protest, but apparently I remained the only adult among my siblings. Even Leo voted bonfire. Zoe showed up after work, and she wasn't on my side either. But I should have guessed Zoe would be on Team Cooper, especially if a bonfire was involved.

The walls were too wet to move everything back in place before Mom got home, so it wasn't going to be a home-improvement-show-style reveal. We heard her car outside just as we got the last of the paint cans put away and the drop cloths moved.

"Come on, everyone line up," Brynn said, ushering us into the living room so we could greet Mom when she came in.

"We should hide behind the furniture and jump out at her," Cooper said.

"No, Cooper, quit it," Brynn said. "Just stand over here."

"You're no fun," Cooper said.

"Quit pouting," Brynn said. "You said I was in charge, remember?"

Cooper groaned and joined us. I stood in between Zoe and Ben, with Cooper and Chase on the other side of Zoe, and Brynn next to Ben.

Mom opened the door and paused, her mouth open in surprise. "Hey, kids. What's going on in here?"

"We have a surprise for you," Brynn said. "Look around. At the walls, I mean. Sorry about the furniture and stuff. We'll put it back when the walls dry."

Mom came in, shutting the door behind her, and looked around. "You painted?"

"Yeah," Brynn said. "It was Roland's idea."

"Really?" she asked, looking at me.

“Kind of,” I said. “I just figured we could make this easier for you.”

“This is amazing,” she said, still taking slow steps through the room.

“Mom, you’re killing my soul,” Cooper said. “There’s more to see, let’s pick up the pace.”

Cooper took her hand and dragged her through the house, pointing out the different colors in each room. Then he hauled her upstairs to show her the redesigned bedroom, and we all followed. She stood in the doorway, her hand covering her mouth, and tears glistened in her eyes.

“I can’t believe you all did this.” She took a deep breath and swiped beneath her eyes. “It’s beautiful.”

“This was fun,” Cooper said. He clapped his hands once. “I’m going to go get that fire going.”

“I’ll get the gasoline,” Chase said.

Mom opened her mouth and lifted a hand, but they were down the stairs and out the door so fast, she didn’t get a chance to say anything.

“Did they say fire and gasoline?” Mom asked.

“Just pretend you didn’t hear,” Brynn said. “It’s easier that way.”

“I’ll go make sure they don’t light themselves on fire,” Ben said, and followed Cooper and Chase outside.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, they had indeed lit Mom’s old bed on fire—and a badass bonfire it turned out to be. Ben had helped them haul more old debris to build it up, and we’d dragged camping chairs out so we had places to sit. Zoe had a wedding at the winery tomorrow with a difficult client, so she’d gone home to get some sleep. The rest of us had wine in plastic wine cups while we sat in a circle around the tall blaze.

Mom sat next to me, sipping her chardonnay. “Thank you for all this.”

“It wasn’t just me,” I said.

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t have happened without you,” she said. “Well, I’m sure Cooper and Chase could have found a reason to start a large, dangerous, and probably illegal fire without you. But the rest of it.”

“Sure.”

“Are you ready to talk about it yet?” she asked.

I glanced at her. The firelight glinted off the lines of her face. “Talk about what?”

“Zoe.”

I turned back to the fire. The truth was, I wasn’t ready to talk to her about Zoe. Everything still felt so tenuous and uncertain. I knew I loved her. I knew I wanted her back in my life—for good this time. But I had a lot of logistics to figure out before I’d know how I was going to make that happen.

“For now, can I just tell you that I still love her, and leave it at that?” I asked.

“Wow,” she said, her voice filled with surprise. “Yes, you can. I didn’t expect you to admit to that.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Denial is a pretty powerful thing.”

“I understand if you don’t want to talk about everything,” she said. “But are you still going back to San Francisco?”

“Just for a week,” I said. I had a flight out tomorrow. Again. Maybe I’d actually go this time. “I was supposed to go back before, but... well, you know. Dad. I can’t keep putting it off or I’m going to get fired.”

“And then what?” she asked.

“I’m going to propose to my boss that I split my time between here and San Francisco,” I said. “I’ve been working remotely this long, obviously I can make it work. I can’t take on everything Dad was doing. I won’t have time. But I was thinking, if we hired someone to do some of it, I could steer the ship. Make sure the big picture stuff is on track. That way

you can keep doing what you love, but someone you trust is taking care of the business side of things.”

“It sounds like you’ve really thought this through,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s not perfect, but I think we can make it work.”

“I’m sure we can,” she said. “The question is, do you want to make it work?”

I watched the flames licking up the sides of the mattress. “I want to make it work with Zoe. And I know going back to San Francisco full-time isn’t an option. This is the best of both worlds. I’ll be gone sometimes, but it shouldn’t be too bad.”

“Does this mean you’re asking me for a permanent job?”

“Yes, I guess that’s what I’m doing,” I said with a smile. “Mom, will you hire me?”

She reached over and squeezed my arm. “It’s about time.”

I laughed and took a sip of wine. Because what could I say? She was right.

TWENTY-SIX

ROLAND

It felt weird to pack my stuff, knowing tonight I'd be home in San Francisco. I wasn't in a great mood about it. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was too soon for me to be gone. I'd thought about asking Zoe to come with me, just for the week. But I knew she couldn't up and leave work with no notice. And bringing her to San Francisco might not be a good idea, anyway. Too many bad memories.

Even aside from Zoe, I had a lot on my mind. How to convince my boss to let me split my time. The logistics of living in two cities. Whether to pull the trigger on bringing in an investor for Salishan.

There was a knock at the door, so I dropped the shirt I'd been folding to go answer it.

"Hey, you," Zoe said when I opened the door. "I'm glad I caught you."

"You're up early." I held the door open so she could come in, then shut it behind her.

"Yeah, I figured I'd swing by before you left," she said. "Is that okay?"

"Of course." I drew her close and kissed her. "I'm glad I get to see you."

"Are you all packed?"

"Not really," I said, nodding toward the pile of clothes on the bed.

She laughed. "You're such a guy. I'll help."

We went into the bedroom and stood on opposite sides of the bed to fold clothes. She picked up a pair of slacks and smoothed them out while I went back to the shirt I'd dropped.

"So, you'll be gone a week?" she asked.

"I might have to stay a little longer," I said. "I'm going to try to be back in a week, though."

"Okay." She set the pants down and sat on the edge of the bed. "You know, we haven't really talked about what's going on with us. Not much, at least. Or how it's going to work. Are we going to do that?"

"Of course we are," I said. "I'm sorry, Zoe, I'm just trying to figure everything out."

"Sure, I get that," she said. "But there's a lot we still haven't said. And now here you are, packing for San Francisco. You think you'll be gone a week. But what if that turns into two? And then a month from now, you're still saying you'll be back, but you can't yet."

"That's not going to happen," I said. "A week. Ten days, tops."

"And then what?"

"That's part of what I have to deal with when I'm there," I said. "But my plan is to split my time between here and San Francisco. I'm pretty sure my CEO will go for it. He works remotely about half the time, so there's precedent for it."

"What would that look like?" she asked. "You're here for a week, and there for a week?"

"Something like that," I said. "It might not be quite that regular. Maybe a week there. Two weeks here. A longer trip down there. Then a month here. That kind of thing."

"And you'll do both jobs?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She took a shirt off the pile. "That seems like a lot."

"I've been doing it since I got here," I said.

“Sure, but it was never meant to be permanent,” she said. “You didn’t come here planning to stay.”

“I think I have a handle on what’s involved with both jobs. And I’m talking to my mom about hiring someone here to take on some of the things my dad was handling. It’ll be fine.”

“But what if it’s not?”

“What are you worried about?” I asked.

“I’m worried that you’re going to trade one life that’s too busy for me for another life that’s just as bad.”

“I wasn’t too busy for you,” I said.

Her lips parted, and she stared at me for a few seconds. “Yes, you were. You were always too busy for me.”

A flare of anger scorched through me. This was an argument we’d had more times than I could count. I took a deep breath before answering. “I wasn’t too busy for you. Yes, I was busy. I worked long hours. I’ve always worked a lot. I did even when we were first married. It wasn’t until we moved to San Francisco that it started bothering you.”

“I’m sorry, are you talking about me, or the other Zoe you were married to?” she asked. “It bothered me way before we moved.”

“Sure, you complained about it when I was in grad school, too,” I said. “But I was working full time and getting my MBA. Of course I was fucking busy.”

“I didn’t *complain*,” she said. “God, you make it sound like I was a nagging shrew. It was hard, but when you were in grad school it wasn’t a big deal. I figured it was temporary. Once you finished your degree, things would settle down. But that’s the problem. They didn’t. You went from spending all your time and energy on work and school, to spending all your time and energy on just work. You never had anything left for me.”

“Who do you think I was doing it for?” I asked.

“Um, yourself,” she said. “It certainly wasn’t for me.”

“I was doing it for us,” I said. Holy shit, what the fuck was she talking about? “I was building a life for us.”

“You were building a bank account,” she said. “That’s not the same thing.”

I dropped the shirt that I still hadn’t managed to fold. “What the fuck are we doing? Why are we fighting about this?”

“We have to do it some time,” she said. “We can’t keep pretending the past didn’t happen. We’ve been avoiding it since the first time you fucked me in the tasting room. We need to do this at some point.”

“I’m not avoiding anything,” I said. “I told you, I’m just trying to figure out how to make it all work.”

“So am I,” she said. “Look, it’s all well and good for us to get naked and go at each other like crazed rabbits, and then start spouting *I love yous*. Pretty easy to say in the aftermath of multiple orgasms. But we both know great sex isn’t enough. We were always good at that part. It was the rest of the whole marriage thing that got all fucked.”

“I’m well aware of our history,” I said. “But I don’t see how rehashing all that bullshit right before I have to leave to catch a flight is going to help.”

“I didn’t come over here to fight with you,” she said. “But it’s like there’s this huge *thing* we’re not acknowledging. That thing being the fact that we did this once, and it ended in a fucking divorce.”

“Who’s not acknowledging our divorce?” I asked. “Believe me, it’s not something I can forget.”

She stood, her face clouded with anger. “Really? Because if that’s true, you’ve had me fooled for the last four years.”

“Fooled about what?” I asked.

“That you gave a shit.”

I stared at her, my brow furrowed, the muscles in my back tightening with strain. “What?”

“You didn’t care,” she said. “Everything fell apart, and you just went to work.”

“What the fuck was I supposed to do?” I asked. “Quit my job? Chase you back here? You know what, I wish I would have come after you. But I didn’t. There’s nothing I can do about that now.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because you fucking gutted me,” I said. “My world collapsed, and I didn’t know how to handle it.”

“Your world didn’t change,” she said. “You just kept doing what you’d been doing. The only difference was you had to sleep alone. It’s not like you noticed me otherwise.”

“Do you really think all the shit between us is my fault?” I asked. “Because last time I checked, I didn’t do the leaving, sweetheart. You left me. I came home from work and all your shit was gone. That was it. No discussion. Just an empty fucking apartment and your goddamn wedding ring sitting on the counter.”

“I didn’t leave you, Roland,” she said. “You left me well before that happened. I was just the one who moved out.”

She walked out, slamming the front door behind her.

“Fuck.” I grabbed a pair of socks and threw them at the wall. They hit with a soft—and enormously unsatisfying—thud. But I stopped myself before I threw something harder—and breakable.

Couldn’t she see how hard I was trying? I was upending my life for her. I hadn’t even suggested we try living in San Francisco together. I didn’t want to go back to a relationship that had been broken any more than she did. I wanted her, and I wanted us to be whole.

I didn’t know what else she wanted from me.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I pulled it out, hoping it was her. But it was Leo.

Leo: Hey man. Have a second before you fly out?

Me: Gotta go in 10.

Leo: Swing by. Just need 2.

Me: Sure.

I tossed the rest of my shit into my bag, not bothering to fold it, and brought it outside to my car. My *rental* car, to be precise. That reminded me—a car. I'd need to buy a second one to keep here. I mentally added it to my list, wondering if it was even going to be necessary. Or if Zoe had just told me this wasn't worth it to her.

I got in the car and sent her a text.

I have to go, but I'll call you when I land.

She still hadn't answered by the time I got over to Leo's place. But I hadn't really expected her to.

Leo answered his door, his hair looking more unkempt than usual.

"You look like you've been up all night," I said.

He scowled and turned away. "I was."

I noticed a collection of soda cans and wrappers strewn around his desk. He usually kept his place meticulously clean. Gigz jumped up on the desk and an empty can clattered to the floor.

"Damn it, Gigz," he said.

"Why were you up all night?" I asked. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just... a game thing," he said. "Never mind."

"All right, whatever," I said. "Did you need something? I have a flight."

"Yeah." He went over to his desk and picked up a plain white envelope. "Here."

"What's this?" I slipped my finger beneath the flap and ripped open the seal. There was no paper or letter inside. I opened it wider and dumped the contents into my palm.

A gold wedding band.

“I found it a while ago,” he said. “It was out on the far side of the work houses.”

I stared at the ring. It couldn't be.

“It's yours, isn't it?” he asked.

“I don't know,” I said, although I knew full well that it was. “I didn't think I'd lost it out there. I thought it fell off in front of Mom's house.”

“I don't think I was here when you lost it,” he said.

“No, you weren't,” I said. “It was Christmas, and it snowed. We threw a few snowballs, but we weren't dressed for the cold. I didn't have gloves on. I noticed it was gone after we went inside. But I must have lost it earlier than I'd thought.”

“Like I said, I found it out there,” he said.

I looked over at him. “And you kept it?”

He shrugged. “I thought about giving it back to you before, but I wasn't sure if you'd want it.”

“But why did you keep it?”

“I just... had a feeling you might need it back someday.”

The ring wasn't large, or thick. Like Zoe's, it had simply been what we could afford when we were twenty. It had seemed prophetic when I'd lost it. I'd been in grad school, working crazy hours at my job and going to classes at night for my MBA. It had certainly heralded the downturn in our marriage.

Leo finding it, and giving it back now, left me with that same sense—that it meant something.

“Thanks,” I said, curling my hand around the ring. I slipped it in my pocket.

“Sure,” he said. “Now get out of here or you'll miss your flight. And I'm going to fucking bed.”

I laughed. “Sounds good, man. Get some rest.”

Back in the car, I pulled the ring out again. It was the craziest thing. I'd never in a million years thought I'd see it

again. I put it in my wallet, where it wouldn't slip out. It wasn't like I could wear it. Last I checked, I was still very much divorced. And as much as I wanted to repair the damage between me and Zoe, I wasn't sure if I knew how.

I checked my phone. Still no answer from Zoe. I'd have to call her from San Francisco, and hope she answered. In the meantime, I had a flight to catch.

TWENTY-SEVEN

ZOE

I went on a date tonight. It was fucking weird. I know it's over and I didn't do anything wrong. But it still felt like it should have been you.

~Text from Zoe, unsent

IT WAS NOT the first time I had a puking groom. But Victor Cockburn was going for a record.

I stood outside the bathroom while his best man slumped in a chair wearing a pair of sunglasses and rubbing his temples. At least I knew the reason for the groom's tender stomach wasn't viral. If I had to guess, I'd have said tequila. A good tequila was a beautiful thing, but I was pretty sure these guys had not been drinking *good* tequila last night. Probably cheap tequila, and a lot of it.

Kind of made me wonder if Cooper had been involved.

"You should have a cup of coffee," I said to the best man, Dirk. Victor Cockburn's best man was named *Dirk*. Despite the raging bridezilla that was Victoria, this wedding was turning out to be rather entertaining.

"I don't drink coffee," he said.

"You do now." I poured him a cup and added two packets of sugar and extra cream. "Here."

He took the cup and sipped.

I'd already given both Victor and Dirk a tall glass of water and a dose of ibuprofen. I pitied the tongue-lashing these guys were going to get when Victoria found out how hungover they were. Why guys didn't do the partying a few nights before the wedding, I had no idea. But it was amazing how often I had sick bridal parties after a night of heavy drinking.

"How are you doing in there, big guy?" I asked through the bathroom door.

Victor answered with a groan.

I glanced at the time. We had just under an hour. It would be tight, but as long as Victor's stomach decided to stop emptying for long enough to hold down some water, I'd be able to get him presentable by the time he had to stand up in front of his family and friends to get married.

Poor bastard.

My phone buzzed with a message from Jamie. She was working this wedding with me.

Jamie: Bride wants an update on the groom's readiness

Me: Tell bride his tux looks great

Jamie: Puking?

Me: Yep. Bride status?

Jamie: Destroying Tokyo

I sighed. I wasn't sure which of us had the harder job. Me, trying to get two overgrown frat boys ready in time for a very expensive wedding. Or Jamie, who had to field Cockring's last-second demands.

Heh. Cockring.

But at least I was busy. After fighting with Roland before he'd left, I wanted to be busy.

I felt bad for walking away like I had, especially since he had to leave. Now he'd be gone for a week—or two, or three, or who knew how long—and the last thing we'd done is fight. That was not how I'd wanted to leave things. I'd just been so frustrated, and I'd let that get the better of me.

I'd replied to his text that he'd call—just said *okay*. I didn't want to be an ass about it and not answer. But I didn't want to text or talk to him on the phone. I was hurt, and angry, and I wanted to yell at him. Or maybe have a good angry-fuck and then yell at him.

Things were always easier when Roland and I were naked.

I blew out a breath and tapped on the door again. "Ready to come out yet?"

Victor opened the door and I kept my face still. But the dude looked like shit. I had my work cut out for me.

"Okay, Vic—can I call you Vic?—you did a number on yourself," I said. "But I've had worse. I'm not going to lie, this is probably going to be both the best, and worst, day of your life. I'll do what I can, but you're going to have to pull yourself together."

He nodded and ran his hands through his hair.

"All right, Dirk over there is sipping coffee, and I think that should perk him up well enough to get through the wedding. But I can see you're going to make me work for it. Luckily, this isn't my first rodeo." I straightened his tie, then handed him a glass of fizzing Alka-Seltzer. "Drink this and let me know when you're ready for step two."

We waited a few minutes to make sure he wasn't going to puke up the Alka-Seltzer. Then I gave both men a glass of my emergency hangover smoothie. They looked at me like I was nuts. I couldn't blame them, it was bright green.

"Kale, lemon, ginger, cucumber, and pineapple," I said. "Trust me. This works. Finish this, have some more coffee, and then another glass of water. And I'll remind you to pee before the ceremony starts, because you'll definitely need to."

I left Victor and Dirk to check on a few other details and when I came back, they both looked a little better. They had color in their cheeks, at least.

I took my bag of man supplies out of a cupboard and started pulling things out. Deodorant, shaving cream, razors, clippers for stray neck hairs. I also had bandages, breath mints,

a sewing kit, a Tide stick, several extra ties—bow and regular in assorted colors—beef jerky and a few mini bottles of Jack Daniels for my grooms who needed a quick shot of liquid courage to calm their nerves. I found what I was looking for and tossed them each a packet of pretzels. “If you think you can keep them down, eat these too. The salt helps.”

“You keep all this stuff on hand?” Victor asked.

“I like to be prepared,” I said. “Trust me, you’re not the first groom I’ve had to revive from the dead.”

“You’re not going to tell Victoria, are you?” he asked.

I gave him a reassuring smile. “Not a word.”

“Thanks,” he said. “By the way, are you single? Dirk has a huge crush on you.”

“Hey,” Dirk said, shooting a glare at Victor.

I grinned at them. “That’s sweet, but I’m divorced and dating my ex-husband. You don’t want any of this drama.”

Victor laughed—he probably thought I was kidding—and I was relieved to see his smile looked fairly natural. He’d do okay in the wedding photos.

The wedding went off without a hitch. Or at least, without any hitches that I could have prevented. Dirk swayed on his feet during the ceremony, but thankfully he didn’t fall over. Victor held his shit together pretty well, although he did start to look a little green while he said his vows. Tequila or no tequila, I didn’t really blame him.

Victoria cried so much her mascara ran everywhere. Apparently she hadn’t taken my advice to wear waterproof. I passed her maid of honor a small packet of tissues as they walked to the reception area so she could get her cleaned up.

With the reception in full swing, my job was done. Jamie and a few other winery employees, as well as the caterer, would be here for the duration, but thankfully, I was free to go.

Instead of leaving for home, I wandered into the small tasting room and sat down at the bar. It was impossible not to think about the night I’d had a drink—and done other things—

with Roland in here. That hadn't been very long ago, all things considered, but so much had changed.

I thought about returning Roland's call, but I wasn't sure what to say. I needed time to let everything settle. Time to figure out what the hell I was doing. Hearing myself say it out loud—*I'm divorced and dating my ex-husband*—had been a little surreal.

It was probably good that he'd gone back to San Francisco for a while. It gave us some space. Things had been happening so fast. Just a month or so ago, I'd been wondering how much longer he'd be around—trying to suppress my physical attraction to him. Now I'd plunged head first into a relationship with a man I thought I'd left behind for good.

His words from earlier echoed in my memory. They'd been running through my head all day. *Because you fucking gutted me. My world collapsed, and I didn't know how to handle it.*

Leo'd told me Roland had been hurt when our marriage ended, but until I'd heard it from Roland, I hadn't really believed it. And now that I knew, I wasn't sure what to think. It called all my assumptions into question. And it made me wonder what role I'd played in the demise of our marriage.

It was easy to lay all the blame at Roland's feet. He'd been the one who'd worked too much. Who'd been so consumed with upping his pay grade that he'd completely lost touch with his wife.

But things like this weren't completely one-sided—not always, at least. Maybe *most* of the fault had been his, but I'd played a part. He'd seemed surprised to hear me say I'd felt like he didn't have time for me. It seemed so obvious, how could he not have known? But had I ever told him? We'd fought about his work schedule, plenty of times. But had I ever told him *why* it bothered me? Why I hadn't liked how much he was working, or how it had made me feel? Or had I assumed he should know better, and kept silent?

It was mostly the latter. Our arguments hadn't been productive discussions where either of us were being heard.

More like yelling matches that had never solved anything. We'd fought about *things*, not the real issues behind them. Canceled dinner plans. Late nights at the office. But we'd never dealt with the real problems running beneath the surface.

I'd spent the last four years believing that our divorce hadn't affected Roland. And it had led me to the conclusion that I hadn't mattered to him. He'd chosen his career over his wife, and from what I'd seen, he'd been perfectly content with his choice.

Now I knew that wasn't the case. He *had* been hurt, and I *had* meant something to him. I still did, and he wanted to give us another shot.

I did too. I really did. I wanted it more than anything. But I was afraid I was setting myself up for heartbreak. Leaving Roland had nearly broken me the first time. I didn't know how I'd survive something like that again.

"Hey, kiddo," Shannon said from the doorway.

"Hi."

She came in and sat next to me. "The wedding seems to be going well."

"I think so," I said. "The bride was difficult, and the groom and best man were so hungover, I wondered if they'd be able to stay upright for the ceremony. But it all seemed to work out."

"I'm sure you had something to do with that," she said.

"Just doing my job."

"And you're very good at it," she said. "We're lucky to have you."

"Thanks," I said. "Honestly, I feel like I'm the lucky one. All things considered."

Shannon smiled and reached out to squeeze my hand. "Zoe, can I be straightforward with you?"

The way she said that made me nervous, but I nodded. "Yeah, of course."

“You’re going to wonder why I’m telling you this, but hang in there with me. I have a point.” She shifted on her stool. “I stayed with Lawrence for as long as I did because I thought I had to. At first, it was because of the kids. Roland was born less than a year after we were married. Ten years later, I had four. And I wasn’t just tied to him by our children. There was Salishan, too. I overlooked things I shouldn’t have because I was afraid of what would happen if I had to make it on my own.”

“That’s understandable,” I said.

“I suppose,” she said. “The problem is, I wasted a lot of time. And I was never really happy.”

“You’re right, I do wonder why you’re telling me this.”

She smiled. “I don’t want you and Roland to make the same mistake.”

Involuntarily, I shrunk back. Was she saying she didn’t want me to be with her son? She’d never seemed to harbor hard feelings against me over the divorce. But maybe she didn’t want Roland and me to reconnect.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You bring out the best in my son,” she said. “I’ve been seeing glimmers of him again—of the man I tried to raise him to be. And I know it’s because of you. I don’t know what’s happening between the two of you, and you don’t have to tell me. But my son loves you. And honey, if you love him back, don’t give up on that. I was unhappy for years. I don’t want any of my children to live the way I did. So, if you love him, find a way. Take the chance, and don’t let go.”

I took a deep breath. “Wow, thank you.”

She slid off her stool and held out her arms for me. I got down and stepped into her hug.

“No matter what happens, you’re still one of mine,” she said quietly. “You always will be.”

Tears stung my eyes, but I bit my lip to hold them back. I hated crying in front of people. “Thanks. But shut up.”

She pulled away and laughed. “I hope you don’t think I’m trying to meddle in your life. But I’ve been realizing lately that not speaking up has a way of becoming a very bad habit. I’m working on breaking it.”

“Good for you.” I took another deep breath and tucked my hair behind my ear. “Since we’re speaking up, thank you for keeping me around even though I divorced your son.”

She smiled again, tears shining in her eyes. “Of course, honey. Besides, I always knew you’d bring him back to me.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

ROLAND

It was late by the time I got to my condo in San Francisco. It was a clear night, and the lights of the city shone through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The view really was amazing. The city. The water. It was gorgeous.

My house cleaner had kept her regular schedule, so the place was clean. She'd even emptied out the refrigerator before the food started going bad. Everything was as it should be.

I wandered into the bedroom and put my bag down. Usually coming home after being away felt good. Relaxing. But this didn't feel like home anymore. Nice as it was, there was no familiarity to it. I'd lived here for almost four years, but it was like the place wasn't mine.

Or maybe I was no longer the man who'd lived here.

I'd tried to call Zoe, but it had gone to voicemail. She'd replied with a text, saying she was working. I wished I knew how she was feeling tonight. Mad at me, sure. I could handle her being mad if I knew I'd be going back with a chance to make things right. But I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about anything, except that I fucking loved her, and I didn't want to let her go.

I was tired, but too keyed up to sleep, so I went into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of wine. It looked like something I'd probably picked up for a night when Farrah would be here. God, I hadn't thought about her even once since I'd broken things off with her. Had I really been dating

her the last time I was here? It was only a couple of months ago. But it was hard to fathom, now. What had I seen in her? I didn't know, but it didn't matter anymore.

I poured a glass of wine and took it to the couch. Turned on the TV. The wine was expensive, but disappointing. My mom's wines were rich and full-bodied, with hints of flavor that reminded me of home. This one was mediocre at best.

Which basically described everything about my life in San Francisco.

It hadn't seemed that way before. I'd thought everything was perfect. I had a great job, lots of money. Condo with a view. Nice car. What else did a man need?

But none of it had made me happy. I'd been smugly self-satisfied with my position in life. My resume looked great. But I'd been alone. There had been a void inside that I'd kept trying to fill with things. With power and money. With prestige and respect. But it had never worked. It was never enough.

I set my wine down and went back to the bedroom. In the closet, I found the box with Zoe's wedding ring. I pulled mine out of my wallet and added it to the box with hers. I stared at them for a long moment. The city lights shone through the windows of the dim bedroom, glinting off the gold.

Zoe was the only thing that had ever made me feel whole. When I was with her, the void inside me went away. She filled my empty spaces. With her, everything felt right. It didn't matter what kind of day I'd had. How many hours I'd worked, or what I'd left unfinished on my desk.

When we'd been married, I'd lost sight of that. Focused on the wrong things. I'd been so consumed with achieving and earning more, I'd forgotten what it was to be content. To be truly happy.

And I hadn't been happy since she'd left me. At least, not until I'd gone home.

As I stood in my two-million-dollar condo, staring at wedding rings that had probably cost two hundred, I realized something: This wasn't home. Neither was Salishan Cellars, or

Echo Creek. Home wasn't my family's land, or my mom's house, or the town where I'd been raised.

Zoe was home.

She was home in every sense of the word. It wouldn't matter where we lived, or where I worked. I belonged with her.

I did want to step in and run Salishan. I was good at it—great, even—and despite years of telling myself otherwise, I enjoyed it. Being home had allowed me to reconnect with my family. Help my mom through a crisis. I'd realized how much I'd missed by being away. By letting resentment rule my life.

But I didn't resent Salishan. Not anymore. The only thing I resented was myself, for letting Zoe walk out of my life. I should have fought for her. I'd let her go, thinking there wasn't anything I could do. I'd been hurt, and masked it with anger. Let anger lead. Just like my father.

I was done with that. Done with letting resentment and anger permeate everything I did. Steal my chance at happiness. Zoe was my life, and she always had been. Regardless of everything else—my career, the winery, my family—I was going to find a way to make things work with Zoe. I couldn't let her go again.

So what the fuck was I doing here?

There wasn't anything for me in San Francisco. And if I stayed—if I kept my job here and split my time—I'd be just as busy as I'd ever been. Maybe more so. Zoe had been right to call me out on it. Just because I'd been juggling things for a while, didn't mean it would work long-term.

What would that life be like for her? She'd see me when I was in Echo Creek. But then I'd constantly have to leave her. The pressure to be here at least half the time would be huge. I wanted to believe I could find a way to make it work, but I kept coming back to the same question—why?

Why did I want to make this work? Because I was afraid to commit to one path or the other? I really wasn't. I knew I wanted Zoe, and if I had to go home swinging and fight to get

her back, that was what I'd do. So why split my time at all? Why keep my life here? I didn't want it. I wanted her.

I felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner. Maybe I had needed to be here again for it to sink in. See my old life in all its stark emptiness. Because I could see now how hollow it had been.

I grabbed my laptop and went back to the couch. Took a sip of the mediocre wine. I needed to spend a few days here—go into the office and take care of things. Work with my boss on a transition plan. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't up and walk away. I had responsibilities to see to. But I wasn't going to stay—not any longer than necessary.

If I was going to make things work with Zoe—and I was fucking determined to do just that—I knew what I had to do. I had to commit to a life with her. Make her my priority. That's where I'd screwed up the first time.

And I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

TWENTY-NINE

ZOE

With the Cockburn wedding out of the way—I hoped the Cocksuckers would be blissfully happy together and never book Salishan for an event again—I took a few much-needed days off. I hung out at home—sans pants—binging Netflix and drinking wine. And it was mostly pretty great.

But god, I missed Roland.

We texted back and forth some, but didn't talk about our argument. I hated leaving things unresolved, but it wasn't the kind of thing we could deal with by thumb typing on our phones. He told me he was taking care of business there, whatever that meant. I imagined him back in his element. Dressed for work, meeting with all the other important people at his company.

Uncertainty ate at me. I tried not to dwell on it, but unanswered questions hovered in the back of my mind. Was his plan going to work? Would his company let him split his time? What if they said no? What would he choose? I kept wondering if he was going to call and tell me he had to stay a few more weeks. And if that would turn into months. And if six months from now, I'd realize I'd been a fool to trust him again.

It made me retreat into myself. My answers to his texts were short. I felt like I needed to protect myself, guard what little of my heart I had left. He'd taken most of it with him and I wasn't sure if I was ever getting it back.

I went to work on Wednesday with a burst of motivation to clean my desk. It felt like it was time to start fresh. Get rid of all the stacks of crap I'd been holding onto, put things in their proper place, and enjoy a nice, clean workspace.

I spent my morning going through all the stuff I'd been telling myself I'd put away later. Later had to come eventually, and for this girl, it was today. I scanned and filed invoices and contracts. Tossed old notebooks I didn't need anymore. Threw away the numerous to-do lists I'd completed and left strewn about my desk.

In the process, I found a coffee mug, a t-shirt that I'd somehow shoved in a drawer, two nail files, my favorite blue pen, and the phone case I'd thought I lost a few months ago.

It took a while to get through everything, but when I finished, I stood back and looked at my lovely, pristine, organized desk. I felt lighter, like I'd tossed out baggage I no longer needed to carry.

Cooper stopped by, and after a snarky remark about not realizing there had been a desk in this office, he took me to lunch. It was oddly relaxing to listen to his endless stream of chatter about the upcoming harvest. How he was routinely checking on his babies to see if they were ready. He was also taking a trip south soon to visit another large vineyard. We were sourcing a new variety of grapes this season, and he was like a little kid at Christmas over it.

After lunch, I went back to the Big House. The hum of voices came from the tasting rooms, but otherwise it was quiet. I started up the stairs and Roland came barreling down so fast, he almost crashed into me.

"Zoe," he said, grabbing my upper arms to keep me from falling. "Sorry. I was looking for you."

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "You're supposed to be in San Francisco."

"I know." He grabbed my hand and pulled me up the stairs after him. "Let's go upstairs."

I stumbled along behind as he led me into my office.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he said, shutting the door.

“When did you get back?”

“About five minutes ago,” he said. “It’s been killing me to be away. I had to take care of some things down there, but I caught an early flight and drove straight here.”

I stepped away and looked at him, my head spinning. “Why?”

“Because we need to talk,” he said.

“Now?”

“Yes, now. We need to talk about what happened when we broke up. And what’s happening now. All of it.”

“Um...” I knew we needed to talk. There was so much to say. But now? “Here? Right this second? Maybe we should wait. Grab dinner later or something.”

“Do you have appointments this afternoon?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then we’re doing this now,” he said. “You were right, we need to get everything out in the open. Otherwise, all that shit from the past is going to fester and poison us both. I’m not going to let that happen, even if it means I have to take a beating now. I deserve it anyway. So I want you to tell me everything. Why you left me. What you’re feeling now. I want to hear it all.”

I crossed my arms. “You just want me to unload on you?”

“Yes,” he said, surprising me with the vehemence in his voice. “Hit me with everything you’ve got. We got fucking divorced, Zoe. And we never talked about it.”

“Okay,” I said and took a deep breath. God, where did I even begin? “I knew we were young when we fell in love the first time, and we were both going to change as we grew up. But you turned into someone I didn’t recognize. I felt like all you cared about was your job title and your salary. It wasn’t just that you worked a lot. You gave everything you had to

your career. There wasn't anything left. When you were home, which wasn't all that often, you were tired and distant. You didn't talk to me, or tell me what was going on with you. It was like watching you slowly turn to stone."

He held eye contact while I spoke, never looking away. "What else?"

"I didn't want money," I said. "I didn't care about the fancy apartment, or the car you bought me, or the credit card you gave me to use. And I'm still insulted that you thought I did. I was happier when we had nothing. When we were in college and we'd go through the couch cushions looking for enough change to go get a cheap beer. I don't understand why you thought I ever wanted a life where I traded you for a bunch of stuff."

"Okay," he said, nodding. "Is it all right if I say something now?"

"Yes."

"I didn't see it that way," he said. "And honestly, it wasn't ever about you. Although that was my first mistake. It should have been, because I would have realized how meaningless it all was. I told myself I was doing everything for us, but that was a lie. I was doing it for me. I thought I had something to prove—to my family, and my father. Mostly my father. Nothing I ever did was good enough for him. I thought if I could just achieve more, he'd have to admit he was proud of me. And money was how I measured that. But in the process, I completely lost sight of what actually mattered."

"You were willing to throw our marriage out the window to prove something to your dad?" I asked.

"Like I said, I didn't see it that way at the time," he said. "And I'm telling you right now, I was wrong. Every choice I made, from going to grad school, to moving us to San Francisco, was based on resentment. I kept thinking I could get rid of all the bitterness I was carrying around if I just made it to the next level. Someday I'd achieve enough, and I wouldn't have to feel that way anymore."

“But what I didn’t see was that I had everything I’d ever need right in front of me,” he continued. “I had you. What the fuck else mattered if I had you? You’re a fucking badass who can stand on your own no matter what life throws at you. I was angry with you back then because I thought you didn’t support me. But how the hell was I supporting you? I wasn’t. I wanted you to be around when I had time for you, but I wasn’t giving you anything in return. And that’s fucked up, Zo.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Do you want to know the worst part?” he asked. “I was turning into my goddamn father. And I was completely blind to it. The things he did were different—he took on running Salishan instead of trying to get away from it. And maybe that’s why I didn’t see it. I thought he was an asshole because he resented the winery. But he was an asshole because he expected my mom to be around for him when he needed her, and to stay out of his way when he didn’t. What did he ever give her? He spent their whole fucking marriage acting like he was constantly sacrificing for her, but it was bullshit. She didn’t need a husband who worked his ass off to keep her family’s winery open. She needed a husband who stood by her side. And he never did. And there I was, working like a dog, thinking I had it all figured out, and I was doing the same fucking thing.”

“You should have talked to me,” I said. “You never told me how you felt about your dad. I’ve known you since we were seventeen, and this is the first time you’ve ever said that to me.”

“I know,” he said. “I should have. And I’m sorry. God, Zoe, I’m so sorry for those years when I left you alone. I hate that I did that to you.”

I nodded and touched his hand, acknowledging his apology. “It wasn’t all your fault. I didn’t talk to you about how I was feeling, either. I got mad and picked fights with you. But arguing over things like you coming home late never addressed the real issues. I had all these doubts about whether you really cared about me, but I never told you. I should have.”

“I want to believe it would have helped, but I don’t know,” he said. “I was a pretty big asshole.”

I cracked a smile, although the emotion welling up from my chest made it hard to breathe. “The day I left you was the worst day of my life. I knew I was going to, but I was so mad. Being angry is easier sometimes, you know? But that day, I loaded up my car and suddenly it was so real. It took me two days to drive back here from California, and I think I cried the whole time.”

“Oh fuck, Zoe.” He pulled me close and held me, running his hand over my hair. “Baby, I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t leave expecting you to chase after me,” I said. “I wasn’t trying to make a statement so you’d change. But it still hurt when you didn’t even try. I felt like you didn’t care. I walked away, and I thought it meant nothing to you.”

His arms tightened around me and he kissed the top of my head.

“But then, before you left the other day, you told me I’d gutted you.” I was having a hard time getting the words out. “Roland, I didn’t know. If you were hurt, you never acted like it. You never told me.”

“I was hurt,” he said, his voice quiet. “Nothing has ever hurt more than the moment I came home and saw you were gone.”

I couldn’t stop the tears, so I let them come. “I didn’t want to hurt you. That wasn’t why.”

“I know,” he said. “You had to make a choice, and you chose to take care of yourself. Honestly, Zoe, you made the right call.”

“Why did you just let me go?” I asked.

“Because I was angry. Like you said, anger is easier. If I’d let my guard down and stopped being mad, I’d have had to admit I was hurt. Being hurt meant being vulnerable. I couldn’t face that. So I acted like I didn’t give a fuck, and I focused on work to keep you off my mind.”

I slid my arms around his waist and held him, wetting his shirt with my tears. “Where does this leave us now?”

He pulled back to look at me. “I’m not going back to San Francisco. I already gave my notice. It doesn’t matter what happens with my career, or the winery, or any of it. I just want you. No, it’s more than that. I *need* you. And I know you don’t really need me. You were doing fine without me. But I wasn’t. I was miserable. I love you and I’m never going to love anyone else. You’re it for me, Zoe, and you always were. I just hope you’ll decide you want to keep me around.”

I touched his face. “You’re staying?”

“I’m staying,” he said. “That back-and-forth shit was never going to work. We’d end up where we were four years ago, and I’m not doing that to you again. You deserve better.”

“You’re wrong about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I do need you,” I said.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. Slid his fingers through my hair. He kissed me tenderly, his mouth soft and warm.

“So this is it?” I asked. “You’re staying and we’re... we’re what? Going to date each other? Give this another shot?”

“No,” he said.

“No?”

He smiled and reached into his pocket. “I don’t want to date you, Zo. I don’t need time to decide, or to see if this will work out.”

He opened his hand and I stared at the two rings sitting in his palm.

“Oh my god,” I said, my voice trembling. “Are those what I think they are?”

“Yes.”

“Those are... but how did you...?”

“I kept yours,” he said, his voice soft. “Leo found mine outside, if you can believe it. He held onto it for me.”

I touched the two gold bands with the tip of my finger. I’d left my ring on the counter when I’d moved out of our apartment. “I always figured you threw this away.”

“I couldn’t,” he said. “I had it in a box in my closet. I think deep down I knew I’d need it again someday. Or at least, I hoped I would.”

A single tear broke free from the corner of my eye and trailed down my cheek. “Are you saying we should get married again?”

He touched my chin and tilted my face up. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. I want you to be my wife. I know how badly I screwed things up before, and you can be damn sure I’m not going to do that again. Most people don’t get a second chance when they lose something as precious as you. I know how fucking lucky I am. If you need more time, I won’t push you. But I’m in, Zo. I’m yours.”

I started to laugh—because honestly, what else could I do? “You’re crazy, Roland Miles. You just proposed to your ex-wife.”

“About fucking time, don’t you think?” he asked. “So what do you say, Zo? Will you marry me again?”

I popped up onto my tip-toes, threw my arms around his neck, and kissed him—hard and deep. As I pulled away, I bit his lower lip and tugged, just enough to make him grunt.

“Hell yes, I’ll marry you again,” I said. “I fucking love you.”

“I fucking love you, too.”

He kissed me again, his hands sliding low to cup my ass. And I was very glad I’d cleaned off my desk, because the things he did to me in that office made it more than worth the effort.

THIRTY

ROLAND

I tightened the screws on the new office chair. The one that had been in here was shit, so I'd ordered a new one. I made sure the last screw was in, then gave the chair a spin. Looked good.

I'd moved into the office next to Zoe's. It was a little smaller than the one I'd been using, but I liked being right next to her. I'd suggested we knock out the wall and share a bigger space, but she'd vetoed that idea. At first I'd thought she didn't want to share an office because she wanted space from me. But she'd clarified that she tended to let her office get messy, and she knew I liked mine kept neat. She didn't want to give us something stupid to constantly fight over.

She had a point.

But the good news was, she was right next door. And I could pop over there anytime I needed to see her. Or touch her. Or kiss her.

Or fuck her on that messy-ass desk of hers. The door didn't lock, so we always ran the risk of being caught. But that had never stopped us before.

We hadn't gotten remarried yet, but Zoe was planning our wedding. We'd eloped the first time—just went to the courthouse and stood before a judge. This time, we wanted a real wedding. It would be small—nothing extravagant or complicated—but knowing Zoe, it was going to be beautiful. I didn't want to wait any longer than I had to, so she was arranging the details on short notice. But Zo had all the strings

to pull, so throwing together a last-minute wedding was turning out to be pretty easy.

I glanced at the time. It was six. We were meeting my family downstairs and then heading over to the house to have dinner with my mom. I closed my laptop, pocketed my phone, and went next door to grab Zoe.

She was typing, her eyes on her computer screen.

“Hey,” she said. “One second...”

I leaned against the door frame and waited while she finished.

“Okay,” she said. “Done. Contract sent. The wedding I’m booking is going to be small, but they have some serious money to throw around. It’s going to be really fun.”

“Sounds great,” I said. She came around her desk and I drew her in for a kiss. “Ready?”

“Yes, and I’m starving.”

Cooper and Brynn were downstairs in the lobby. Brynn looked exasperated. She stood with her arms crossed and seemed to be trying to get a word in, but Cooper was on a tirade. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I heard Coop say something like *you’re too young for that anyway*.

“Shut up,” Leo said. He sat in one of the leather chairs, resting his elbows on his knees. “Seriously, Cooper, you’re not her mother.”

“Traitor,” Cooper said. “Brynnness is your sister, too. You should be supporting me.”

“Okay, kids, quit your bickering,” Mom said as she came down the hall. She slid her arms into her jacket and adjusted the hood. “You’d think I would have stopped saying that after you all grew up.”

“That’s because Cooper never grew up,” Brynn said.

“Hey,” Cooper said. “I resent that.”

Brynn punched him in the arm.

The front door opened and a young woman with her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail came in. She wore a burgundy sweater with jeans and a pair of ivory low top sneakers.

“Hi,” Mom said. “I’m so sorry, but our tasting rooms are closed for the day.”

Cooper stepped forward and flashed the girl a grin. “That’s true, but I bet we could make an exception. Just this once. I’d be happy to take you back.”

I rolled my eyes and tried not to groan. *Seriously, Cooper?*

“Oh, no, actually...” She adjusted her handbag on her shoulder and glanced around. “I’m looking for Lawrence Miles.”

Mom’s forehead creased. “I’m sorry, he’s not here. I’m Shannon Miles. Is there something I can help you with?”

“You’re...” The woman swallowed hard and fidgeted with her bag. “Right, of course you are. Do you know when he’ll be back? It’s important.”

My back tensed with worry. Why was this girl looking for my dad? She couldn’t be much older than Brynn. I looked at her, a deep sense of dread stealing over me. Oh god, please don’t let this girl be another one of his...

“He doesn’t work here anymore,” Mom said, her voice steady. But I could see in her eyes that she’d had the same thought as me.

The girl’s shoulders slumped. I felt bad for her. She looked defeated. The rest of us stood in tense silence, and Zoe slipped her hand in mine.

“I see,” the girl said.

“What is this about?” Mom asked.

“He’s my father,” she said.

Forget hearing a pin drop, you could have heard a tuft of goose down settle on the shiny hardwood floor. The shocked silence was intense as everyone stared at her. The color drained from Mom’s face and Cooper looked like he might

vomit. Brynn's eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open. Even Leo gaped at her.

Zoe squeezed my hand and I heard her whisper *oh shit* under her breath.

"I'm sorry, did you just say Lawrence Miles is your father?" Mom asked.

The girl nodded. "Yes, and I really need to find him."

The implication of what she'd just said hit me square in the chest. We already knew Dad had been unfaithful. But this girl had to be in her twenties. From what Leo had found out about Dad's current mistress—girlfriend, now—she didn't have any children. That meant this woman's mother was someone else, and the affair had happened when we were all kids.

"Hey, Coop," I said, and he jumped, like I'd startled him. "Why don't you take Mom back to the house. Order pizza for everyone. Leo, maybe you and Brynn should go with her. Zoe and I will talk to... I'm sorry, what was your name?"

"Grace," she said. "Grace Miles."

I stepped closer to her and offered my hand, calm and businesslike. "Roland Miles."

Her eyes widened as she took my hand and shook.

"Mom, I'll figure out what's going on," I said.

My mom touched her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I'm just a bit overwhelmed right now."

Brynn took her hand. "Let's go. Roland can talk to her."

"I'm really sorry," Grace said.

Mom's face softened. "It's okay. Whatever is going on, I'm sure none of it is your fault."

Brynn and Cooper led Mom outside with Leo close behind. I glanced at Zoe. She raised her eyebrows and mouthed *what the fuck*. I shrugged and turned to Grace.

"All right, well... if Lawrence Miles is your dad, I guess that makes me your brother," I said. "This is my fiancée, Zoe."

The guy who looked like he was going to puke is Cooper, and the scruffy bearded guy is Leo. Brynn's the baby. And that was our mom, Shannon."

"I'm sorry to just show up here out of the blue and drop this bomb on you," she said. "I wouldn't have come if it wasn't important. I thought I would find him here."

"Why don't we go sit," Zoe said, tugging on my arm. "Grace, you can tell us what's going on and we'll see if we can help you."

We led Grace to the first tasting room and took a seat at the table. I put my hand on Zoe's leg, feeling comfort in her presence next to me. This was all kinds of fucked up, but it felt good to have her near.

"All right," I said. "First of all, my dad—our dad, if what you're telling me is true—isn't here. My mom found out he was having an affair and she kicked him out. I'm guessing your mom isn't Kristen who lives in Tacoma?"

"No," Grace said. "My mom is Naomi Harris. She lives over in Tilikum. So do I, actually. That's where I grew up, and I live there still."

"Okay," I said. "And why do you think Lawrence Miles is your father?"

Grace blinked. She seemed surprised by my question. "Well, because he is. It's not like he's just a name on my birth certificate."

"You mean you know him?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I haven't seen him in a while, but of course I know him. He's been around my whole life. Granted, he tended to come and go a lot, but I've always known who my dad is."

Zoe had her phone out. She held up a picture of my mom and dad. "I'm sorry, but I just want to make sure. This is who you're talking about?"

"Yes, that's my dad. Here, I'll show you." Grace pulled her phone out of her bag and swiped the screen a few times, then

held it up for us to see. The picture was clearly my father, standing with a younger-looking Grace.

“Yeah, that’s him,” I said.

“I guess this establishes that he was even more of a cheating bastard than we thought,” Zoe said, putting her phone away. I just grunted in reply. She was right.

“God, this is insane,” Grace said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t come here to break up a marriage, although I guess that already happened. I just need to find him.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because of my brother.”

Zoe grabbed my arm. “Oh for fuck’s sake, a brother? Sorry, I have officially lost the ability to watch my mouth. I’m almost afraid to ask, but how old is your brother?”

“He’s six,” Grace said.

“Oh my god,” Zoe said. “And you’re?”

“Twenty-three.”

Zoe clapped her hands over her face and took a deep breath. “Fuck me running. Are there more of you? How many fucking kids does he have?”

“It’s just us,” Grace said.

“Okay, Zo, calm down,” I said. “Is something wrong with your brother?”

“He’s okay now,” Grace said. “But he was really sick last winter. He had RSV, and then pneumonia. He was hospitalized twice. Dad used to send money every month to help my mom with the bills and everything, but about a year ago, he stopped. And then Elijah was in the hospital, and you wouldn’t believe what that costs. Even with insurance. My mom is having trouble paying for everything, and Dad disappeared, and I’m just done. I can’t sit around and watch her fall apart because she has to decide which bills to pay and which to let go another month. She works so hard, and she’s trying, but it’s just too much. And my asshole father fucking bailed.”

“Oh good, we can talk about what an asshole he is?” Zoe said. “I was afraid you liked him, and I needed to watch my mouth.”

I turned to Zoe. “Since when do you watch your mouth?”

“I am excellent at censoring my language,” she said. “Right now is a very bad example.”

“No, I’m not his biggest fan,” Grace said. “Neither is my mom. And, for the record, she never knew he was married. She still doesn’t. I didn’t exactly tell her I was looking for him.”

“So you’re trying to find him so he can give your mom money to help pay your brother’s medical bills,” I said.

“Exactly.”

I took a deep breath. My fucking father. It just kept getting worse. “All right, first things first. Don’t worry about the hospital bills. If you put me in touch with your mom, I’ll take care of them.”

Grace’s lips parted. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Trust me, it’s fine,” I said. “I’ll make sure your mom and your brother are taken care of, okay?”

Tears glistened in Grace’s eyes, and Zoe squeezed my arm.

Grace swiped a few tears from her cheeks. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Really, it’s fine. But we still need to get a hold of Dad. I’m not letting him off the hook that easily.” I stood, pulling out my phone, and brought up his number. Hit call. And immediately got a message that the number wasn’t in service.

“What the fuck?”

“What’s wrong?” Zoe asked.

“His number doesn’t work.”

Zoe tapped her phone screen a few times. “His Facebook account is gone, too.”

“Son of a bitch,” I said. This was how he wanted to handle the split with my mom? By disappearing? “Look, I’ll get Leo to track him down. Grace, give me your number and we’ll figure this out. Then I need to go talk to the rest of my family.”

“I’ll go,” Grace said. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“We’ll call you soon to get together under better circumstances,” Zoe said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Once everyone gets over their shock, they’re going to want to meet you. And your brother.”

Grace smiled. “Thanks. I don’t know how to thank you enough for your help.”

We exchanged phone numbers and said our goodbyes. I felt strangely numb, although maybe it was just going to take time for everything to sink in. My father had hidden a second family from us for most of our lives, and they weren’t even that far away. Infidelity, I’d seen coming. But this? It was a lot to process.

Zoe and I locked up the Big House, then headed toward my mom’s place. She tucked her hand in my arm, and we walked slowly down the path.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, although I didn’t hide the hesitation in my voice. “I’m not sure what all this means, yet. Or how everyone else is going to feel about it.”

“It was good of you to help her like that,” she said.

“Well yeah,” I said. “I wasn’t going to send her off with nothing. Not when I have it to give.”

She leaned her head against my arm. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

I stopped and turned toward her. “Not really. I’m just trying to do what’s right.”

“Which is part of why you’re amazing,” she said.

“What’s the other part?”

“It could have something to do with your ability to give me mind-blowing orgasms,” she said.

I laughed. “Is that so?”

“Maybe.” She nibbled her lip. “Is it bad that I kind of want you to drag me around the other side of the tree over there and fuck my brains out?”

“Why would that be bad?” I asked.

It was her turn to laugh. “You just found out you have two half-siblings you never knew about and the rest of your family is waiting—probably impatiently—for you to come fill them in on what the hell is going on.”

I grabbed her wrist and was about to take her behind the tree—my family could wait a little longer—when Cooper opened the door and came out onto the front porch.

“There you are,” he said. “Jesus, you guys, we’re going nuts in here. Is she our sister? Please tell me she was looking for the wrong guy and I didn’t hit on my sister.”

“You definitely hit on your sister, Coop,” Zoe said.

Cooper groaned. “Oh my god.”

We walked up the steps and Zoe patted him on the shoulder.

“You’ll be fine,” she said. “Just don’t start thinking about whether any of the random chicks you’ve hooked up with over the years might have been girls you’re related to.”

“Aaaand now I’m celibate.” He turned around and went back inside, muttering something about never having sex again.

“You are truly evil,” I said.

Zoe laughed. “He’ll get over it. Besides, he kind of deserves it.”

“Good point.” I took her hand and she squeezed mine back.

“Are you ready to do this?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said.

She lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it. “Everyone will be fine.”

She was right. Although I didn’t know what this was going to mean for my family, I did know one thing. Zoe and I could face anything together. I turned her toward me and touched her face. Brought my lips to hers for a kiss. No matter what happened, I’d always be grateful for her. For this chance. For this woman who meant everything to me.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go talk to them.”

EPILOGUE: ROLAND

“Cooper, why are you standing on the table?”

I looked up at my brother. He was wearing his suit jacket, but the top two buttons of his shirt were open, and his tie hung around his neck. He looked like a guy *after* a wedding, not like he was getting ready for one.

“I like the view from up here,” he said. “How weird would it be to be this tall? Can you imagine? If I was seven feet tall, how big do you think my dick would be? Do you think my junk would be proportionately larger? Or would it be the same and I’d be fucked because it looked so much smaller by comparison? How would you deal with that? A girl gets your pants off, expecting a huge dong, and it looks small because the rest of you is so fucking big. That would suck.”

“Can we shoot him with a tranquilizer dart?” Leo asked.

I thought about telling him to get down off the table, then decided I wasn’t going to try to be his mother. If he fell, he fell. Maybe if he hit his head, he’d calm the fuck down.

The three of us were in the groom’s dressing room, waiting for Jamie to tell us it was go time.

Things around here were still a mess. We hadn’t tracked down my asshole father. Leo was on it, but Dad had apparently anticipated we’d try to find him and taken steps to avoid it.

As if Dad’s affair wasn’t bad enough, we had siblings we’d never known. I’d made sure Grace’s mother had the money she needed to pay for her son’s medical bills. But none of us were sure how to move forward with them. So far, Grace had

kept her distance, and I suspected it was partly to protect her family, as well as to avoid causing more stress for ours. It was complicated to say the least, but I knew we'd find a way to come together and forge a relationship that worked for everyone involved. Eventually.

But today, all the stresses of running the winery, my shitty father, and secret families were far from my mind. Because I was marrying Zoe.

Her parents had flown in, as had her brother and his family. I'd seen her parents yesterday, briefly, and I couldn't decide whether or not they were happy Zoe and I were getting remarried. It was hard to tell with them. The Suttons were nice people, but not exactly expressive. Zoe was a riot of color and light compared to the rest of her family.

One of the many reasons I loved her.

My family, on the other hand, was definitely happy for us. My mom had teared up when we'd told her we would have a real wedding this time. Especially when we said it would be here, at Salishan. It wasn't going to be fancy. Just a short ceremony, followed by a wine and hors d'oeuvre reception. But I knew it meant a lot to her—to all of them—that we were including everyone.

Jamie poked her head in the door. "Time to go, gentlemen."

"Oh shit, now?" Cooper asked.

I took one last glance in the mirror to make sure my tie was straight. Smoothed down my jacket. "Let's do this."

Leo and I headed for the door. Cooper jumped down and somehow his shirt was buttoned and his tie perfect.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

Cooper grinned. "I'm that good."

I just shook my head.

We followed Jamie. I glanced around, looking for Zoe, but she wasn't out yet. I didn't care about the whole not seeing the bride before the wedding bullshit. This was our second

marriage—to each other—so it wasn't like we were exactly traditional.

“Where's Zo?” I asked.

“She'll be out in a minute,” Jamie said.

I was impatient to see her, but Jamie ushered us to the doors and suddenly I was walking up the aisle behind my brothers.

I got to the front, turned in front of our guests. And then, there she was.

Her hair was down—I loved it when she wore it down—and her dress. Holy shit. No demure white wedding gown for my woman. She wore a strapless red dress that hugged her curves in all the best ways. A slit up one side showed a hint of her thigh and she was killing me with those sexy white stilettos. Matching red lips begged me to kiss the fuck out of her.

Soon. Oh, so soon.

She held my eyes as she walked up the aisle, looking like a warrior goddess. It felt like she'd kicked the breath from my lungs. I was captivated. And so fucking grateful. Sometimes I still wondered if I was going to wake up back in San Francisco, miserable and alone, and realize this had all been a dream.

But it wasn't. It was real. Zoe was mine. She always had been, I'd just been too stupid to see it for a while. Because sometimes the universe was a very beautiful place, I'd been given a second chance. And I was going to spend the rest of my life proving to her that I deserved it.

Our wedding was short. We didn't need a lot of ceremony. We faced each other, her hands clasped in mine, and said our vows. Although I knew she wasn't going to admit to it later, she teared up while I said mine. The rings we exchanged were the same rings we'd used the first time. I'd wanted to buy her a bigger one, but she'd been adamant that she didn't want anything else. And now, as we slipped them onto each other's fingers, I knew she was right. They represented everything

we'd once had, and everything we'd been through to make it back to each other. They were perfect.

We sealed our union with a barely-appropriate-for-the-setting kiss. And just like that, we were married again, and everything was right with the world.

Afterward, we mingled with our guests and sipped wine. Zoe's smile was radiant. I couldn't stop looking at her. Touching her. Kissing her. I wanted to worship and devour every inch of her.

We stood near the bar and Zoe put her wine glass down. I brushed her hair out of the way and leaned in to kiss her neck, just below her ear.

"Mm, Roland, you better knock that off," she said.

I kissed her again, pressing my lips to her soft skin and tasting her with my tongue. "Or what?"

"Or we're going to make a scene."

"I think we should make a scene." I wasn't about to stop kissing her. "You're my wife again."

She laughed, a soft sound that made her throat vibrate against my mouth. "We could go. But we haven't had cake."

"Do you want cake?" I asked, speaking low into her ear. "Or do you want my cock?"

"I want both," she said. "Can't I have your cock, and eat my cake too?"

"Where?"

"Groom's dressing room."

I took her hand and pulled her out the door. She giggled softly as we ducked into the groom's dressing room and shut the door.

"The blinds are open," I said as I unfastened my belt. My dick was already hard, aching to be inside her.

"No one's out there," she said. "But we need to be fast."

"Leave the dress on."

I grabbed her hips and bent her over the table, then hiked her dress up. All that stood between me and the perfection of her hot pussy was a tiny black G-string. Hooking my finger beneath the fabric, I moved it to the side.

She looked at me over her shoulder. “Am I wet enough for you?”

“I better make sure.”

I crouched down, grabbed two handfuls of her delicious ass, and buried my face in her pussy. She moaned while I licked her up and down.

When she was good and wet, I stood and finished pulling my dick out of my pants.

She looked back at me again. “You better fuck me good, Miles.”

I smacked her ass cheek and she gasped.

“Did you just spank your wife?”

“Fuck yes, I did.” I spanked her again, because I loved the sound she made when I did. Then I grabbed my cock around the base and lined it up with her opening.

Groaning at the exquisiteness of her body, I slid inside her. She arched her back and pushed her ass against me. She wanted me to fuck her good, so I took hold of her hips and gave her everything she wanted.

I slammed into her a few times as she gripped the edge of the table. Behind me, I heard someone open the door, but I didn't give a fuck. There was a quiet expression of surprise, then the door clicked shut again. I probably should have locked it, but I didn't care about that either.

And I certainly didn't stop fucking my wife.

I gave it to her hard and fast, thrusting into her. She consumed me. I loved this woman with everything I had. She was strong, and brave, and beautiful, and I adored every inch of her.

I pulled out and spun her around, then helped her up onto the edge of the table. She wrapped her legs around my waist and I slid inside her again.

With her taste on my tongue, I kissed her deeply. She clung to me, and I held her tight while she moaned soft sounds of bliss into my mouth. I reached between us to stroke her clit and felt her come apart. Her head tilted back and she breathed my name, her pussy clenching tight around me.

One more thrust and I was done. My body went rigid as the tension in my groin unleashed. I came into her hard, my cock throbbing inside her.

She collapsed against me and I wrapped my arms around her. Held her and stroked her hair.

“Fuck, I love you so much,” I said.

Her voice was breathy and low. “I love you, too.”

After breathing against each other for a long moment, I pulled out and helped her clean up. We fixed our clothes, and she smoothed down her hair. Her cheeks were flushed, but there wasn't much we could do about that. And she looked sexy as fuck.

“Did someone almost come in?” she asked.

“I think so.”

She shook her head and gave a slight shrug. “Oh well. We're married, so fuck 'em.”

I grabbed her, pulling her against me, and kissed her hard. “I fucking love you, Zoe Miles.”

She laughed and nibbled on my bottom lip. “God, it feels good to hear you call me that again.”

“Good. Because you're mine. And you always will be.”

And that was the truth. Zoe was mine. She belonged to me, just like I belonged to her. She had all of me—every breath and beat of my heart. I loved her with everything I had to give. I'd spent too much time chasing the wrong things, never

finding happiness. Now I had it, and I was going to do everything in my power to make her as happy as she made me.

Forever.

Want more Roland and Zoe? How about a bonus epilogue for a peek into their happily ever after!

Tap here: [GIVE ME MY BONUS EPILOGUE](#)

The Miles Family Series will continue with Brynn's story, coming summer 2018.

Turn the page for a preview of [Remembering Ivy](#).

REMEMBERING IVY: CHAPTER ONE

BLUE EYED STRANGER

Ivy

Boredom and loneliness were an unfortunate combination.

My oversized white German shepherd, Edgar, blinked at me, then huffed out a breath through his black nose. I'd taken him for a walk earlier, and these days he needed a nap to recover. His hips tended to bother him, and we'd had an active morning.

I looked down at my crossword puzzle, the book laid out flat on my small dining table. It was literary-themed, so it should have been a piece of cake. After all, I was a literature professor. I taught the classics in lecture halls filled with college students. But today, my mind wandered, the allure of puzzle-solving not enough to hold my attention.

Perhaps it was because I was facing yet another Saturday with no plans. There are certainly times when a long day free from outside obligations is a blessing. But other times, a girl needs a reason to go out. To put on something pretty. Wear those impractical shoes sitting untouched in the closet. Break out the red kiss-me-now lipstick. Maybe for someone who might kiss that lipstick right off.

It had been a long time since there had been someone to kiss the lipstick off these lips.

To be fair, I wasn't sure I owned red lipstick anymore. And the impractical shoes... I probably still had them... somewhere. If I'd had a reason to dig them out of the recesses of my closet, I'm sure I could have found them. But I didn't.

“It is a great misfortune to be alone, my friends; and it must be believed that solitude can quickly destroy reason,” I said.

Edgar raised his head and blinked at me.

“Jules Verne,” I said. “It means spending too much time alone can make you crazy. I think I’m proof of that, considering I’m quoting *The Mysterious Island* to my dog.”

He put his head back on his front paws.

My phone beeped with a text. It was my best friend, Jessica.

Jessica: Busy today?

Me: So busy. This puzzle won’t solve itself.

Jessica: Peter’s ignoring me. Want to meet for coffee?

I smiled. Jessica and her husband were great together, but they were polar opposites—the passionate art history teacher and the nerdy math professor. Sometimes Jessica’s social needs exceeded Peter’s ability to keep up with them.

Me: Sure. Meet you at Café Lit?

Jessica: Yay!

“Well, buddy, it looks like Mama has a reason to put on real pants.”

Edgar ignored me as I got up and went to change out of my favorite comfy gray sweats. I stopped in the bathroom to pull my long hair into a low ponytail. It was just coffee with Jess, so dressing up wasn’t necessary. But I did put on a cute green sweater with my jeans, and slipped on a pair of black flats.

Café Lit was right across the street from Woodward College, the small private university just north of Seattle where Jessica, Peter, and I all taught. The *Lit* in the name was supposed to be short for *literature*. Wood paneling and lots of brown leather gave it an old-fashioned library atmosphere, and there were shelves lined with books you could read while you were there. It was particularly popular with the college staff. Jessica and I met here often, usually in the morning before

work. But sometimes we came in on a weekend, especially if she was restless and Peter was absorbed in a project.

Jessica was already at a table when I arrived, dunking a tea bag into a mug of steaming hot water. I'd known Jess for years. We'd met as wide-eyed college freshmen and been friends ever since. In some ways, she and I were as opposite as she and her husband. We looked it, at least. Jessica was dark-skinned and curvy, with a gorgeous mass of black curls. I was fair—she joked that I was so pale I was *clear*—with blue eyes and long blond hair.

I smiled and waved, then got in line to order. It was busy for a Saturday, although there was still open seating. The woman at the head of the line appeared to be placing an enormous to-go order. She held up a pad of paper and checked things off a list as she spoke to the barista. Glancing at Jess, I shrugged. I'd be in line for a while.

The man in front of me looked back over his shoulder. "I hope you're not in a hurry."

"Fortunately not," I said.

He shifted his feet, so he was partially facing me. "Me neither."

My stomach tingled with pings of anxiety. Was he about to flirt with me? Was he just making polite conversation because we were stuck in the same line? He was nice-looking, casually dressed, probably a bit older than me—mid-thirties, perhaps. No sign of a ring. Cute. Definitely cute.

"Well, you know... *There will be little rubs and disappointments everywhere, and we are all apt to expect too much,*" I said.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*." I cleared my throat. "Never mind."

"Do you go to school here?" he asked.

Being one of the youngest teachers at Woodward, I was accustomed to people mistaking me for a student. I tended to

compensate by dressing in smart blouses and pencil skirts with practical black pumps. Pearls seemed to help. But today my casual clothes and careless hair probably made me look quite a bit younger than twenty-nine.

“No, I’m a teacher,” I said.

“Really?” he asked. “What subject?”

“Literature.”

“I guess that explains the Jane Austen reference,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “You know, what’s interesting about Jane Austen is that she wrote such witty love stories, but her own love life never worked out. In fact, the first man she ever fell in love with would have lost his inheritance if he’d married her. She was too far down the social ladder. His aunt whisked him out of the country to get him away from her.”

“Huh.”

The woman with the large order finally finished and the line moved forward.

“It could have been a plot for one of her novels,” I said. “Although if she’d written it, I think it would have had a different ending. It’s not like he came back for her.”

“Too bad,” he said.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I brushed a tendril of hair away from my face. I was so out of practice at this. Jessica caught my eye and gave me a thumbs-up. I winced and shrugged. What was I supposed to say now?

The cute guy got to the front of the line and put in his order. He gave me a small closed-mouth smile as he walked over to the other side of the counter to wait for his coffee.

“What can I get you?” the barista asked.

“Sixteen-ounce latte,” I said.

“A name for your order?”

“Ivy,” I said. She paused, blinking at me, her Sharpie poised over the cup. People were forever asking me to repeat

my name. “Ivy, like the plant.”

She nodded and wrote it on the cup. I paid and glanced at the cute guy, but he was looking at his phone, so I went straight to Jessica’s table.

“What was that about?” she asked.

I pulled out the chair and sat across from her. “What?”

“Why didn’t you keep talking to him?” she asked. “He’s cute.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “As soon as I opened my mouth, he looked bored.”

“Who did you quote?”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t—” I sighed. “Jane Austen.”

“Of course you did.” She patted my hand. “Maybe next time don’t lead with dead novelists.”

I crossed my legs. “I’m terrible at this. I belong in a world with strict social norms where it’s expected you’ll settle for a husband based on your family’s status.”

“Except in that world, you’re already an old maid,” she said.

I scowled at her.

She started to speak, but paused, her eyes focused on something to my left. “Wow. Hello, gorgeous.”

I glanced over my shoulder. A man stood a few steps inside the door. He was indeed gorgeous. Thick, dark hair. Exquisite bone structure, his strong jaw covered in stubble. He was dressed in a blue waffle-knit shirt and jeans—casual, but he wore it well. He was obviously lean and muscular—you could tell even through his clothes.

But his eyes. They swept across the room, like he was looking for someone, and for a second, they settled on me. Bright blue, they stood out in stark contrast to his dark hair and rough jaw. They looked... innocent, somehow. Almost strange in that face that was so rugged and masculine.

I blinked and tore my gaze away, hoping he hadn't seen me looking at him. Jessica gaped, her lips parted.

"Jess, you're married," I said. "Stop ogling him."

She startled, like she hadn't realized what she was doing. "What? Oh, come on, I'm just enjoying the view. I'm married, not dead. Besides, no one could possibly be immune to whatever magic that guy has."

I glanced at him again. He was probably the most beautiful man I'd ever seen in person. The kind of guy you see on billboards or in magazines—and you assume must be photoshopped in a hundred different ways, because no one actually looks that good.

This guy did.

Jessica started talking again and I watched the man from the corner of my eye. He took slow steps into the shop, looking carefully at everything. The way he moved reminded me of a detective in a movie—not the serious one with the gravelly voice and a drinking problem. The quirky one—the genius who no one really understands, but always seems to discover what no one else can see.

He stood back from the counter, studying the menu like he'd never seen one before. His brow furrowed, making a groove between his dark eyebrows. Two women came in and hesitated behind him. One said something, and he looked at her like he was confused that someone was speaking to him. But his expression quickly softened, and he smiled—a gesture that made him even more attractive—and waved them by.

"Ivy?" Jessica said.

I shook my head a tiny bit and turned to Jessica. "Sorry, I was... thinking about something else."

"Thinking about Mr. Amazing over there," she said.

"No."

"Go talk to him," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "No, thanks."

“Why not?”

“What am I supposed to say?”

She shrugged. “Hi, my name is Ivy. Would you like to have coffee with me?”

“That’s so...”

“What? Direct? Honest? Effective?” she asked.

I shook my head. She might have been right, but I wasn’t about to walk up to a man—especially a man who looked like *that*—and start a conversation.

“Ivy,” the barista called.

I went to the counter to get my coffee and I could feel the man watching me. My back prickled and the hairs on my arms stood up like I had goosebumps. Why was he staring at me like that? Beautiful or not, he was starting to make me uncomfortable. I glanced away as I went back to my seat.

When I sat down, Jessica’s smile was so sympathetic it bordered on pity. “I’m only bugging you about this because I want to see you happy. I know it’s been tough since... well, you know.”

“It’s okay, you know we can talk about my dad without dancing around the subject.”

After a grueling two-year battle with cancer, and a stroke near the end, my dad had passed away almost a year ago. Although I was coping with the grief of losing him, I was having a hard time restarting my life. When he was first diagnosed, I’d dropped everything to take care of him. Quit my job. Gave up my apartment. Moved home.

I had no regrets. I was grateful I’d had the time with him, even when it had been hard. But now I was ready to move forward with my life again. I just couldn’t seem to figure out how. Thanks to recommendations from Jess and Peter, I’d landed a teaching position at Woodward, so at least I had that. And I loved my job. But to say my personal life was lackluster was a vast understatement.

“I’m glad you’re doing better,” she said. “You seem like you’re adjusting. But I’d love to see you get out there more. You can’t spend all your time with your dog, or doing word puzzles.”

“I don’t.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“I hang out with you guys.”

“And we love you, but wouldn’t a date be nice?” she asked. “What about that guy you met who keeps hinting?”

Mr. Amazing had circled around us, and although I couldn’t see him, I was sure he was behind me. It was like he was magnetic. The urge to turn and look was almost more than I could resist.

I was distracted again. I brought my attention back to Jessica. “Blake, the guy who works at Dorset Financial? I don’t think he’s been hinting anything.”

“Sure he has,” she said. “Based on what you told me, he’s definitely interested. You just turned off your radar for too long, you don’t recognize it.”

“I don’t know. Even if he was hinting, he’s so... banker-ish.”

“You mean so much like Julian,” she said.

I sighed. I’d been dating Julian when my dad had gotten sick. Although I’d thought we were serious—maybe even forever serious—the strain of me moving ninety minutes away to care for my dad had taken its toll on our relationship. When Julian had gotten a job offer in Boston, he’d decided to take it. Which had meant leaving me behind.

“Yes, the fact that he works in finance reminds me of Julian,” I said. “Although that’s probably not fair to Blake. But I still don’t think he’s interested.”

“When will you run into him again?” she asked.

“I have an appointment at Dorset on Tuesday, actually,” I said.

Her lips turned up in a conspiratorial smile. “I bet if you give him the right signals, he’ll ask you out.”

“But—”

“Hear me out,” she said. “If he strikes up a conversation, just relax. Make eye contact. Smile a little. And if he does ask you out, say yes. Oh, and save the lit references for at least the second date.”

“I don’t know...”

“It doesn’t have to be a big deal,” she said. “You need a dating ice-breaker. Something to get you past this block you’ve created.”

Maybe she was right. I did want to get out of this rut. Maybe a dating ice-breaker would do the trick. I didn’t have to commit to anything else. Just a date. *If* he asked.

I took a deep breath. “Okay. If he talks to me this time, I’ll try not to bore him into oblivion. And if he asks me out, I’ll agree. But I still don’t think he will.”

“I guess we’ll see.” She shrugged, looking a little smug, and took a sip of her tea.

Thankfully, Jess changed the subject, and we talked about work for a while. We both finished our drinks and I started wondering if they had any good muffins in the case up front.

Jessica’s eyes narrowed and she looked over my shoulder for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“What do you keep looking at?” I asked.

“Don’t look,” she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. “Mr. Amazing has been sitting behind you this whole time and he keeps moving closer. He’s leaning toward you like he’s trying to listen in.”

My back tightened, and prickles ran up my spine. “Really?”

She nodded. “He might be cute, but he’s acting weird. Maybe we should go.”

I nodded and picked up my bag. Jessica situated herself between me and Mr. Amazing, as if she was worried he was going to attack me, and we left.

Outside, Jess pointed across the street. “I parked over there. Do you want to go out to dinner with us tonight?”

I smiled, genuinely grateful for the invitation. But staying home with Edgar was preferable to being their third wheel yet again. “Thanks, but I’ll pass. Another time.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

After saying goodbye to Jess, I walked to my car. My mind kept returning to the man in the café. Why had he been watching me? Had he really been listening? It was so odd.

I got home and took Edgar outside, but I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Yes, he was attractive, but I’d never been one to get googly-eyed over a man, no matter what he looked like.

But those eyes. They were so blue. So searching. I could still see them, watching me, scrutinizing. There was something mysterious about him, like he was a puzzle. And I loved a good puzzle.

But I’d probably never see him again, which was kind of a shame. I’d have liked to know what he saw when he looked at me.

[Continue reading Remembering Ivy...](#)

AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

The path to this series was an interesting one. If you've read my recent books, you know the last two were stand-alones. They were also departures for me in some ways. *His Heart* was a deeply emotional ugly cry story that dealt with death, loss, grief, abuse, and the healing power of love. And *Remembering Ivy* had some twists, weaving a mystery through William and Ivy's romance.

After wrapping up *Remembering Ivy*, I had to decide where to go next. There's no shortage of potential stories in my head, and in my idea file. I have notes, excerpts, images, quotes, and random snippets for probably dozens of books. The challenge was picking a direction.

In the end, I decided to take what I've learned about myself as a writer, and about you as readers, and apply it to a new series. Over the last year, I've learned a lot about what my readers enjoy. I wanted to take some of my favorite things to write, and your favorite things to read from me, and create a brand new series.

I wanted to dive into a new world with a new set of characters to fall for. And I wanted it to be centered around a family. I love family-saga romance series, and I love writing families, so that seemed like a natural fit.

So the Miles family was born.

Like a lot of the books I write, some of the ideas for this series came from my husband. He suggested creating a family

that owned a business and rattled off a few ideas for what that might be. As soon as he said winery, I was sold. That idea resonated with me immediately, and not just because I love wine. There was something there, a place already coming to life in my mind.

From there, it was a matter of creating this family—the parents, their children, and the types of stories this series would contain.

I decided to tackle a second chance romance for the first book. Why? I like a challenge, and I've never written about a divorced couple before. That seemed like a tall order. Obviously it's been done. I certainly didn't invent the idea. But how do you take a couple who's actually been through a divorce and heal those wounds?

It wasn't easy. Both Roland and Zoe had some learning and growing to do. They had to come to terms with their past together, as well as the state of their lives when the story begins. Ultimately, they had to make a decision for each other. They had to look past their hurt and regret to see the possibility for happiness that was right in front of them.

Roland is a bit of an ass in the beginning. He's a self-absorbed workaholic who thinks he has everything figured out. And he's sure that his life was meant for bigger things than working for his parents' winery. He has a high-pressure, but lucrative career. A prestigious job. A girlfriend who requires very little in terms of his attention. And plenty of money. Seems like maybe he does have it all.

Only his life is hollow, and although he won't admit it in the beginning, he's lonely. My hope was that your first few encounters with Roland would show you a man who is telling himself a very convincing story, but the truth is just below the surface.

He's not a bad guy. He's just spent a long time putting his time and energy into the wrong things, and now he's beginning to wonder why those things aren't bringing him the happiness he thought they would.

Zoe is struggling in her own way. She was the one who ultimately chose to end the marriage, and at the beginning of the story, she's still confident of that decision—even if it makes her sad. She feels she was wrong about Roland. He wasn't the man she thought when they got married. They grew up, and grew apart. She's returned to the place where they met and is still close with his family.

But her life isn't all sunshine and roses either. She'd like to find love again, but she hasn't had much luck. Her attempts at relationships haven't worked out, and she finds herself single and indulging in a sort-of-friends-with-benefits situation with Van. As Cooper and Chase help her see, in their own hilariously obnoxious way, she's settling, and she's not moving her life in the direction she really wants it to go.

Neither Roland nor Zoe see their reconciliation coming. When Roland comes back to Salishan Cellars and winds up staying, it isn't as if either of them are pining for the other. They're both trying to move on, even though it's clear from the beginning there's still something there. It could have just been their history together. Memories of a relationship gone awry. But it turns out, it's much more than just echoes of a shared past.

I loved writing Roland and Zoe's second chance at love. Zoe showed a lot of depth and heart in giving Roland her trust again. And Roland's gradual shift from detached workaholic to a man willing to risk his heart for the woman he loves was very satisfying to write. I loved seeing them dance around their attraction to each other, only to give in, and ultimately find their way home.

I hope you enjoyed their story! There is definitely more to come from this fabulous family. Brynn's story is next, and the drama with their father Lawrence will continue.

Thanks so much for reading!

CK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Reviews are a great way to help other readers discover new books and authors. Thanks to everyone who's read and reviewed **Broken Miles**. I appreciate it so much!

Thank you to my readers, always! You are amazing and wonderful and I'm so glad I get to share my words with you.

Thank you to Elayne for helping sort out the clutter, and to Cassy for an absolutely stunning cover.

To those of you behind the scenes who listen to me vent, help me when I'm stuck, and encourage me when I'm down. You're the best.

And a huge thank you to my family, for your support, belief, and patience.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Kingsley writes smart, sexy romances with sassy heroines, swoony heroes who love their women hard, panty-melting sexytimes, romantic happily ever afters, and all the big feels.

She can't imagine life without coffee, her Kindle, and the sexy heroes who inhabit her imagination. She's living out her own happily ever after in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and three kids.

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