



DESTINY

and the

Devil

O L I V I A N O B L E

DESTINY AND THE DEVIL



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PROLOGUE



DESTINY

*B*eing a maid of honor is hell.

I take a sip of wine to help me get through the insurmountable task at hand. I massage my stiff, sore fingers before groaning and picking up the fountain pen for what must be the *thousandth* time this week. I begin to delicately draw out another one of the custom-made, handwritten invitations requested by the lovely bride.

Kill. Me. Now.

When Willow first asked me to be her maid of honor, it seemed like the most wonderful, emotional moment in the world. I cried a little from the sentimentality of it all, and hugged her for a full minute, so overjoyed to be part of planning this precious ceremony for my childhood friend.

Then... reality set in.

This shit is hard work.

At first, the happy couple were thinking of an intimate farmhouse wedding. So, I spent weeks knee-deep in horse poop as I helped them check out local barn venues.

Then, the groom had the wonderful idea of having the wedding *at our restaurant* and inviting *hundreds* of the most influential restaurant people and food critics from around the country. No, that's not correct—from around the *world*.

It's all part of his ongoing efforts to make up for nearly putting us out of business. And those efforts have really made a difference. Traffic is increasing, and we are starting to see

some decent profits. Now we're trying to establish the space as a trendy, classy, new wedding venue.

I wonder how long Willow can hold his transgression over his head? Probably forever.

Anyway, isn't the basis of some of the best relationships that one partner does something horrific and almost unforgivable, and spends years, or perhaps a lifetime trying to make up for it?

It's almost like a sense of guilt is more important than love. I wonder if there is no such thing as romantic love, after all? Guilt seems to work better, and produce better results.

I chew on the fountain pen thoughtfully, pausing in the middle of finishing the invitation. Our cat Clawdia jumps onto the table and curls up for a nap beside the cards. I sigh and gently pet her with one hand as I write on envelopes with the other.

The front door opens and my buddy Roberto, our head chef and roommate walks in. "Wow, Dez. You're still working on all that stuff? You have a lot of patience."

"It's my duty as maid of honor," I affirm with a gigantic yawn, rubbing my sleeve across my tired eyes as the letters blur before me. I force myself to get to the end of the invitation I'm currently working on, and fold it into the envelope before placing it on the pile.

Robbie opens the fridge to put some leftovers inside before grabbing a cucumber and sticking it in my face, like a microphone. "Destiny Adams, how does it feel to be planning your best friend's wedding while knowing that you're probably going to die alone?"

"Marvelous," I respond with a grim look. "Just peachy." Then I smack his stupid cucumber away.

"Aww. Well, if it's any consolation, I'm probably going to die alone, too," Robbie says, hugging the cucumber sadly. "All my relationships have been a shitshow. So, we can die alone together. At least we'll always have cucumbers, and zucchinis."

And all the delicious things I can do with them. In the kitchen, but never the bedroom.”

“Bullshit,” I respond, pointing at him accusingly. “I see you on those dating apps all the time, swiping left and right on hot boys and their eggplants.”

“Because I got my heart broken, babe.” He pouts at me.

“I know, Robbster. But I bet you’re going to find someone and fall in love, and get married in no time. Just wait and see.”

“Meh,” he says with a skeptical shrug and disbelieving look. Then he waves the cucumber in the air. “But if I ever *do* get married? It will be more casual, spontaneous, and lowkey. I *promise* I won’t make you hand-write a thousand invitations.”

“I would really appreciate that,” I say with another huge, face-stretching yawn. It takes all my effort not to just put my head down on the desk and take a nap directly on top of the invitations, snuggling up next to Clawdia. But then I might drool all over the expensive pearlescent paper, and that would not be good.

“I am so glad I’m not a girl, and don’t get stuck with doing that boring stuff,” Robbie says with a grin, before returning his cucumber to the fridge and moving to head upstairs. “Later!”

“Hey! *Stop!*” I shout sternly, slapping my hand down on the table to force him to halt in his tracks. Did I mention that part of the maid of honor duties include being a drill sergeant? “Get your toned ass over here and help with writing all this crap, Robbie.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says with a mock salute, as he obediently joins me at the table and picks up a blank piece of card stock. “But you know my penmanship is not as good as yours. Maybe I can do the envelopes? Holy shit... that’s a lot of names.”

“Leave it to Hardeep to turn this wedding into a PR event,” I say with annoyance as I slide the envelopes over to him, along with the list of addresses.

“I mean, if it puts us on the map...” Robbie muses. “It seems like they are inviting almost all of Silver Mountain. It should bring more people to the restaurant more often, right? And if we expand our capacity with the outdoor seating in the summer...”

“But it’s not so much local townsfolk as it is world-renowned chefs and celebrity food bloggers. That sort of thing. Plus Willow’s extended family and all their business connections.”

“Will that help us?” Robbie asks as he tucks an invitation into an envelope he finished writing, and places it in the pile.

“Probably.” We sit here together, scribbling and chatting, and at some point, Robbie gets himself a glass so that he can sip on wine with me between invitations.

It feels a lot more pleasant doing this with a friend.

But soon, Robbie is also yawning and losing steam. “This is torture,” he comments cheerfully. “Cruel and unusual torture.”

“Like Sisyphus condemned to push a rock up a hill in hell for all eternity,” I say glumly. “Only to have it roll back down when he gets close to the top.” But the time passes a lot easier with Robbie here. Maybe if Sisyphus had a friend to help him push that rock up that hill, his eternal damnation wouldn’t be so terrible.

“Then we’d better not be *Sissies* about it,” Robbie says with a grin. “Get it? Sissy? Because Sisyphus...”

“Ha, ha,” I say dryly. That was a terrible joke—he must be tired. Then I see the next name on Willow’s list.

My blood runs cold.

The little hairs stand up on my arms and the back of my neck.

“Fuck,” I curse softly.

“What’s wrong?”

“She wants me to invite *him*,” I say hoarsely, with a shudder.

“Shit,” Robbie whispers. “*Him* him?”

I nod. “The Devil.”

Robbie bites his lip with worry. “She still doesn’t know what he did to you, right?”

“No,” I whisper, reaching for my wine glass with a shaking hand, and bringing it to my lips.

“I mean, he is her brother,” Robbie reasons. “He’ll probably decline or ignore the invitation, anyway. He hasn’t been to town in years. Maybe not even the country.”

“I’m not going to invite that monster,” I say firmly. “Hell to the no. No. No. No. “

“But you kind of have to?” Robbie says. “It’s your duty as maid of honor.”

“Fine!” I say bitterly, grabbing an invitation, and stabbing my pen into it like a knife, almost slicing the words into the iridescent paper.

DEAR DOUGLAS,

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED to ROT IN HELL forever. Alone and miserable like you deserve to be. I hope you get a nasty infection, like Ebola or smallpox or mad cow disease and die horribly in a mess of your own urine and feces with maggots feasting on your flesh.

PLEASE DON’T COME HOME, even though your sister is getting married. I’ll take care of her, the way I always have. You’re a selfish bastard and a waste of space. I wish I had never met you. I wish you would spontaneously combust.

SINCERELY,

Destiny

I TAKE a sip of wine before thinking deeply about what else I could add to my letter. I realize that the Devil has probably forgotten all about me. He probably feels no guilt. I guess you have to be a normal human being capable of real emotions, to even feel guilt. Not a heartless psychopath.

I settle on adding something succinct, poetic, and meaningful:

P.S. I HOPE your dick falls off.

“GIRL, what did that paper ever do to you?” Robbie asks, coming to my side and rubbing my arm soothingly. “You were writing so fast and furious I thought you were going to burn a hole in the invitation. Heck, check the table underneath. I feel like you just carved a curse into the wood.”

“I wish I knew how to put a curse on him,” I say angrily, feeling my blood pressure rise, and tears prick the back of my eyes, even after all these years. “I heard that some of my ancestors were Voodoo priestesses—I wish I had their skills and could actually make his dick fall off.”

“That would be an amazing talent to have and I would literally pay you anything to use that on my ex-boyfriend,” Robbie admits, emitting a deep sigh.

“Men suck,” I say, grabbing the invitation I wrote and standing up to toss it in the trash. “Except you, Robbster.”

I give him a little hug, and he squeezes me back affectionately.

“Look, Dez,” he says softly, rubbing my shoulder. “You can’t let yourself be filled with hate like this. Maybe it would be good to get some kind of closure? You need to move on and let go, for the sake of your own life and future. I know that

you haven't been with anyone since that summer you and Doug..."

"Please don't remind me," I say quietly, clenching my jaw at the memories. "Ugh."

I grab the wine bottle and head upstairs to bed, my feet trudging heavily on the stairs.

CHAPTER 1



SOME MONTHS LATER...

The restaurant is so quiet at the crack of dawn. It's my favorite time of day.

I'm the only one here, and I can do whatever I please in *my* kitchen. For a few hours, it's *only* mine. And I can even dance while I bake, to whatever music I choose, wearing a pair of ridiculous, flamingo pink booty shorts. With no one around to give me judgmental looks.

Listen, somehow, baking always comes out better when you're in a good mood while it cooks. I can't explain it. But when I'm arguing with someone in the kitchen, whatever I'm working on turns out bitter and burnt.

When I'm peaceful and in high spirits, and shaking my ass, grooving to some great music... the food turns out divine. It's like magic. I don't know if the food can somehow tell how I'm feeling—like Clawdia the cat, who always knows. But the food goes one step further and seems to *absorb* my good feelings and turn it into good tastes.

I swear, that's my secret.

Twinking in front of the oven makes pastries taste sweeter. Don't believe me? Try it yourself. Maybe I am a voodoo priestess. Of bread.

My special collection of sourdough cultures brings all the boys to the yard.

The beeping of the oven alerts me to the fact that my masterpieces are completed.

Pulling on my favorite oven mitts, I open the oven door and retrieve the baking sheet containing my new Danish pastries, filled with sweetened cream cheese and blueberries and strawberries, in the most interesting shapes.

They look and smell *amazing*.

“Oh my god, what did you make?” Willow asks as she enters the kitchen, putting down her keys and purse.

“Just come over here and try some,” I tell her eagerly, nearly bouncing with excitement for how good they look.

“I can’t. I don’t want to put on any weight before the wedding. And we have the dress fitting soon...”

I groan. “Okay, then. Your loss! I’m giving them all to Robbie.” Then I pause and look around. “Where is he, by the way?”

“He didn’t come home last night,” Willow says softly, still staring longingly at the freshly baked pastries.

“Oh, really?” I say with surprise. “I hope that means he had a good night.”

“Can *you* just eat one of the danishes? And tell me how it tastes?” Willow begs as she stares at the pastries with big eyes, like a kid in a candy store.

“For god’s sake, Will, one danish isn’t going to kill you,” I inform her.

“We work in a restaurant,” she responds. “If I use that logic, then I’ll make excuses for trying twenty delicious things throughout the day, and I’ll do it every day, and then by the end of the week, I’ll have gained seven pounds without realizing it. I need to be disciplined.”

“You’re the most disciplined person I know,” I inform her. Then I reach out to pinch her stomach. “You’re also already skinny. There’s literally no fat here. None. I can barely pinch anything.”

“Hardeep works out in his fancy home gym for like hours every day,” she whispers. “That man is *ripped*, and I don’t

want to look soft and squishy beside him. All I do is work at this restaurant. All day and night, it seems.”

“Well, the good news is that girls can still look good a little soft and squishy,” I tell her, pointing at my butt which *I know* looks damn good in these booty shorts. “The better news is that you have a best buddy and maid of honor who is down to start some kind of fun new workout routine with you! Anything you want, we’ll try it. Want to go on some walks? I’m down. Try a barre class? I’m down. Rock climbing? Axe throwing? Pole dancing? I’m down for anything, girl.”

Willow laughs softly. “You’re crazy. But yes, let’s do something.”

“Cool!” I tell her. “And I will also support your health and diet goals by not tempting you with delicious pastries.” Picking up my baking sheet, I turn away from her to put the danishes away from her line of sight, but she dives across the countertop to grab one like a linebacker.

“Maybe just this one,” she says weakly, holding the prize in her fist like a football. It’s a star-shaped pastry with blueberry filling. She shoves it in her face and closes her eyes, moaning and making sex noises. “Mmmmmmmmmmmmm. Dez, you’re a goddess.”

“I know,” I tell her smugly. “That’s why you keep me around.”

“This is so good,” she says, taking another bite and another, as she still lies splayed out, belly-down on top of the countertop. “Were they always this good?”

“I mean, I’m always trying new techniques and recipes to improve the food. But... I didn’t go to no fancy French cooking school like you and Robbie. My baking gets better with my mood, and I was just in a really good mood this morning. The pastries absorbed my good vibes.”

“I would tell you that is not an actual technique, and sounds like absolute bullshit, but I cannot deny that there’s something magic here,” Willow says, taking another bite and

letting the flavors mix together on her tongue. “It’s literally perfection.”

Robbie walks into the kitchen then, and also pops one of my pastries into his mouth. “Mmm,” he agrees with a nod. “If I had known that all it took to make good food was giving the oven a lap dance in booty shorts, I would have saved a lot of time and effort from all those international food competitions and apprenticeships.”

“Where were you?” Willow asks him. “I was worried.”

“I met someone,” Robbie says with a grin. “Someone really awesome. And I think I’m moving in with him.”

“What?” we both respond with concern.

“Yep, I know it’s fast, but...”

“Robbie!” Willow says softly. “You just met this guy, you have no idea who he is. He could be dangerous. It’s smarter to take things slow. You can’t just move in because of one amazing night!”

“We are taking things slow,” Robbie explains. “Nothing naughty happened yesterday, we just talked. But I really think this is going to be something special.”

“I’m so happy for you, Robbster,” I say gently.

“I don’t know. It seems suspicious,” Willow says. “I’m freaking engaged and still not living with H.D. full time.”

“That’s because you’re already married to your work, Will,” he comments as he munches on my pastry. “It’s actually not someone I just met. I knew him since high school... we just reconnected. You guys remember Rudy Reinhart?”

“Oh my god!” I squeal. “Rudy? You had a crush on him since you were like twelve.”

“Yeah,” he says with a proud nod and a smile. “I think I just want to give it some time and see where it goes. But I just have a real good feeling, this could be something real.”

“I hope so,” Willow says with a frown.

“Anyway, now I have a potential date for your wedding,” Robbie tells our best friend. “There’s only Dez to worry about.”

They both turn to look at me.

“No. Nuh-uh,” I tell them, shaking my head and backing away. “Dez don’t date. You guys know this.”

“Well, maybe you should try,” Robbie suggests. “It’s not so bad, and sometimes wonderful things can happen unexpectedly.”

“When would I even have time? I work at this restaurant almost 24/7 like you guys,” I complain. “I’m too busy taking care of you fools and making good foods.”

“But things are getting better and we can hire more people,” Willow suggests. “We should not continue to be so consumed by work, we should be able to have lives too.”

“You guys are my life,” I tell them simply.

They exchange a look.

“We need to set her up on some blind dates,” Robbie says.

“Maybe I’ll make her a dating profile,” Willow muses.

“Stop it, guys! I’m fine alone!” I tell them. “If you two leave me, I will still have Clawdia. We’ll hang out on the couch together and watch baking competitions.”

“She needs help,” Willow tells Robbie.

“She needs some dick,” Robbie responds.

“I need you two to leave me alone and get to work,” I scold them. “I am damn well capable of finding a guy if I wanted—or a girl—but I *don’t want*.”

“She’s in denial,” Robbie adds.

“Come on Dez, just one date,” Willow begs. “Let us set you up on *one date*.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell them glumly.

CHAPTER 2



A FEW MONTHS LATER, IN ARUBA...

Sitting here alone with a margarita, wearing a beautiful flowy dress, I look at all the happy couples.

Maybe... I should have let them set me up on one of those dates.

Robbie kept his promise. He didn't make me write a single invitation for his impromptu destination wedding on the beach. Somehow, Robbie ended up tying the knot *before* Willow, whose wedding planning and prep has been taking almost a year.

I guess, Willow and her fiancé are from big, powerful, wealthy families that need to make a spectacle. Robby and Rudy are not from such fancy roots, so they opted for an intimate, tropical getaway with our feet in the sand. Sunsets over the water, islanders pounding on drums, and dancing until dawn.

This was such a beautiful wedding, and it required no heavy lifting from me. No work at all, other than throwing a few things into a suitcase.

I am able to just relax and enjoy myself.

But I wish I *could* just relax and enjoy myself.

As I watch Willow dance with her fiancé, and Robbie dance with his new husband, along with a few other couples—Willow's brother Spruce and his wife, and Rudy's best friend Ava and her man... they all seem so happy.

It starts to sink in a little, just how single I am. How much time and energy I've devoted to the restaurant and my friends, and how little I've spent on building any kind of personal life.

I frown, tapping my fingers on the table. Getting away from home has made it worse, because I have to sleep alone in a large, beautiful hotel room without even Clawdia cuddled up my side.

It feels really and truly alone.

When the couples start retiring to their rooms for romantic evenings, I feel even worse, and seriously left out. I order another margarita. And another.

Finally, I swallow and study the bar, looking for a random guy to hit on, just to strike up some conversation at least. Just to ease the sting of everyone basically forgetting about me.

I mean, they didn't forget. They have been trying for months to set me up on blind dates, which I have been declining. I should have given it a try. But I was too stubborn, and now I'm regretting it.

Moving toward the bar where a handsome Black man is sitting in a Hawaiian shirt, I order another drink very close to him. I can feel his eyes on me.

"What's a beautiful woman like you doing out here drinking alone?" he asks me.

I turn to look at him with a smile. "I could ask you the same question."

"Here for a work event," he explains.

"I'm here for my friend's wedding," I tell him.

"Oh, cool. Where are you from?" he asks.

"Vermont," I answer. "You?"

"California," he responds. "This must be a nice escape from the cold weather, huh?"

"Yeah," I answer.

We sit there in silence for a few moments, and when my drink arrives, I begin to sip on it. Would there be any point to hanging out with him? If he lives so far, I doubt we'd ever get a chance to see each other again. But I can't shake the feeling of incredible loneliness, so I don't listen to my little inner voice telling me to get up and leave.

"Do you want to come back to my room with me?" he asks, very bluntly.

I don't mind him being straightforward about it, even though it surprises me a bit. But looking around, I can't see any of my friends, and that leaves a sinking hole in my chest. I guess I've never really experienced *both* Robbie and Willow having boyfriends. Much less a *husband* and fiancé. This is crazy. It happened so fast. After years of nothing changing, everything seemed to change a lot within the last year.

I feel like a mother with an empty nest.

My little birds have flown away.

"Sure," I tell the random man. Maybe he can make me forget about everything for a few minutes. He stands up, lifting his drink and guiding me back to his hotel room, which isn't far from the bar of the resort. I grab my drink before joining him.

He doesn't make small talk, doesn't say anything polite or romantic. Which I guess, I don't really mind. When we get into the room, he begins pulling off his shirt almost immediately.

I feel a little nervous, but we're on vacation. I think it's a good time to do something I wouldn't normally do. I drink the rest of my margarita to give me courage.

"Just give me a moment to freshen up," he says, heading for the bathroom.

I nod, and walk around his room, examining his stuff.

I shouldn't be nosey, but I can't help it.

The first thing I notice is his watch on the bedside table. And next to it... a wedding ring. Fuck.

And next to that... a phone lighting up with a text message from *Wifey*:

Hey babe, miss you. The kids are asleep, call me if you can!

OH, no. I shudder in horror. *Ewww*. And then I carefully, swiftly slink out of the room, and back to my own lonely little suite. I plop down, face-first on the bed, and grunt in annoyance.

See? This is why I don't date. But I do miss Clawdia.

Attempting to go on a date was a temporary lapse in judgment, caused by the magical romantic atmosphere of Robbie's wedding in a tropical paradise. As soon as I get home, I'll be back to myself, too endlessly busy to worry about romance.

Running our little business keeps me too stressed to even notice that I'm lonely.

And that's just the way I like it.

CHAPTER 3



SEVEN DAYS TO WILLOW'S WEDDING...

“*N*o, no, we’re *not* doing the rustic cake!” I shout into Bluetooth speakers of my car. “We made the changes months ago. We’re going with the 7-tier buttercream on the Swarovski crystal base, with the metallic silver swirl frosting, edible flowers and lavender pearls!”

“Okay, well that’s not what I have in the system. Someone must have made a clerical error,” the woman from the cake shop informs me. “Is there any way you can compromise and take the initial cake you ordered? We’ve been preparing to make the three-tier rustic cake on the wood base. Will that work?”

“No! I don’t understand the mix up, the bride and I came in a second time and did another cake tasting and we carefully chose everything and wrote it down and ordered and paid the difference. I need it in a week! *Exactly* as we ordered. My bride will go crazy if it isn’t what she requested. Literally, she’s in therapy for being a *perfectionist*.”

“That’s not going to be possible ma’am. I’m sorry, but we are so busy and we just don’t have the materials...”

“Then I’m going to need a full refund,” I inform her, in a threatening way. “I’ll go with another shop. If you don’t want your cake to be a part of the Wintergreen heiress’s wedding, by all means, throw this opportunity away. But it’s going to be the biggest party Silver Mountain has ever seen with hundreds of wealthy guests, and this cake is going to be the star of the show. It will probably get photographed and posted by

countless people and it *needs* to be epic and Instagram-worthy!”

“I’ll speak to everyone in the bakery and see what we can do. So sorry again for the mix-up—I see the second order here on your account, and I don’t know why our lines got crossed. Can I call you back in a few hours to confirm whether we can still do this?”

“Sure,” I say, taking a deep calming breath. “Let me know.” Hanging up, I grip the steering wheel with both hands tightly.

If they can’t do the cake, I’ll just have to make it myself. But I’m not a specialist when it comes to cakes. Pies, I can do. I can whip up a badass rhubarb or apple pie like no one’s business. But a 7-tier wedding cake?

I gulp as I stare at the road and continue driving. Maybe if Robbie helped me, we could figure something out... but I’ll have to call every other local cake shop, first. There are so many other tasks to do this week in preparation for the wedding that I would hate to have to fit in making that cake. Like right now, I am on the way to the airport to pick up Will’s mother. Then I have to wake up at 4 AM to start baking fresh pastries for the restaurant.

I don’t even want to think about how many hours it would take to make that cake. But whatever Willow wants, she deserves. I’m going to try my best to make her happy.

Thanks to her, I’m finally able to feel like I have a comfortable and prosperous future ahead of me, as a business owner. I rub my hand over my dashboard happily. I bought this little car with my earnings from the restaurant. Okay, it’s a *very* little car—but it’s mine, and I think it’s cute as Clawdia’s little toe beans. I was able to help my mother out with some of the basic fixes needed for her little apartment.

There’s a lot more needed, but things are looking up. The wedding is causing a bit of added stress, but we’re almost to the finish line. Just a few more days, and I can get some rest.

When another phone call comes in, I look down at my dashboard to see that it's the bride. I try to shake off any of the stress I might be feeling before answering.

"Hey, Will!" I say cheerfully into my car's speakers. "What's up?"

"I'm freaking out a bit," she says softly. "Did the dress look okay? And the veil?"

"Yes, it was perfect, hun," I assure her.

"My mother's going to hate it," Willow whispers. "I've been rushing around like a chicken with my head cut off, trying to get everything perfect before she arrives..."

"It's already perfect, Will. Don't stress, it's going to be great. I'm almost at the airport, so you've got a few more hours until you see your Mother."

"Oh, shit!" she curses. "She's coming in today? I thought it was tomorrow!"

"No, no. Let me double check the calendar," I say, picking up my phone. "Your mom's arriving today, and your father tomorrow."

"Shit, shit, shit," she curses. "I had it all mixed up in my head. What am I going to do, Dez?"

"You're going to be absolutely fine," I reassure her. "Just sit down and have some water and a bite to eat. You've barely been eating lately."

"I just want to look good in the damn dress," she says with a sigh.

"Willow! You're already skinny as hell, like a toothpick. Your stomach is looking so flat and toned that I want to do laundry on those washboard abs! Let's not develop any eating disorders, okay, girl? *Eat something.*"

"Maybe when my mother gets here," she says.

"No, eat something *now*," I order her. "Please. For me. It can be something little."

"Fine, fine," she says softly.

“And don’t forget that you’ll be standing next to your short, chunky maid of honor with lots of junk in the trunk at your wedding, so you’ll look even better next to me by comparison,” I assure her.

“You are *not* chunky,” she argues. “You’re curvy. And that isn’t junk in your trunk. It’s apple pie and garlic bread.”

I chuckle at this. “I baked some fresh bread this morning, you doofus. Go make yourself a piece of garlic bread. With cheese. So that your ass isn’t so flat in your wedding dress.”

“Oh my god, is it too flat? I’ve been trying to do squats...”

“Willow!” I nearly shout. “I’m kidding. You’re stunningly beautiful, girl. Now I’m almost at the airport, I’ve got to go.”

“Okay, but I’m not eating garlic bread so close to my wedding—I don’t want to blow up like a balloon!” she says, before hanging up.

I’ll have to make it for her, and eat it right in front of her so she can get the delicious smell and won’t be able to resist taking a few bites. Willow’s OCD can get quite serious, and although I’ve never known her to have trouble with food, she is tracking her macros and calories way too meticulously, lately. I’m getting a bit worried.

I hope it’s just a wedding-related thing. But all the bridal magazines said that a good MOH is supposed to keep her bride well-fed and hydrated. Mission accepted.

I carefully navigate into the *Arrivals* pickup area of Burlington International, and stop at the airline that Robbie texted me a few days ago. He’s been helping me set up most of this stuff, almost acting as a deputy maid of honor. I would be lost without him.

Parking my car to wait, I use my phone to check the status of the flight and see that it arrived not long ago. She should be out soon. Mrs. Wintergreen is a powerful and wealthy woman who was always a bit hard on me when I was younger, so I’ve dressed to impress, spending a few extra minutes on my eyeliner and mascara. I’m trying to hold my head up high and

portray a newer, more confident Destiny, worthy of being her daughter's best friend.

I'm about to put my phone away, when some text messages from the cake lady pop up. I rush over to that screen to check on the status of the cake, anxiously. I am so focused on this that I hardly notice when someone pops the trunk of my car and deposits a piece of luggage. I am busy furiously texting back the cake maker.

But when the passenger side door opens, and someone gets in, I realize I'm being rude. "Hello, Mrs. Wintergreen—just one moment, I have to make sure Willow's cake is going to be ready." I keep texting the cake lady angrily.

Then I get a whiff of cologne.

Not perfume. Cologne.

My fingers pause.

My heart starts pounding fiercely in my chest. I'm afraid to look up. Maybe I mixed up the dates? Maybe Robbie mixed it up? Maybe Willow's father is arriving today and not her mother?

But the way my heart is beating out of control tells me that my body remembers that cologne, and a cold sweat breaks out over my shoulders.

No. No.

It can't be.

But I realize that from the way the car dipped with the weight of the body getting in next to me, it was not Mrs. Wintergreen. Or even Mr. Wintergreen, who is somewhat small and frail.

It could only be... a six foot five, two-hundred-pound behemoth of pure muscle.

The Devil himself.

My hands are trembling now. I turn to the side slightly, and I see his knee, clad in worn, ripped jeans that look like trouble.

His knee is pressing against my dashboard, because he barely fits into my tiny car.

Oh my god. I'm stuck in a tiny car, with *him*.

It is him, right? I am too afraid to look to the side and see his face. Maybe... maybe I've been lucky and some stranger just got in, not realizing that I wasn't their Uber driver. Maybe it's just an innocent mistake. Maybe it's some random innocent homeless man looking for a warm car to sit in for a minute to escape the Vermont winter.

Please be a homeless man. Please be a homeless man.

But when I look to the side, I see the dark stubble covering that chiseled jaw, and a masculine, satanic smirk just barely touching a pair of perfect lips. Then, a set of sparkling blue eyes, filled with mirth and amusement... and power.

He looks exactly the same as he did ten years ago. No. No.

Fuck me. He looks even better.

"Hey, Dezzie," he says in that slow, deep drawl that reverberates down into my bones. No one else calls me that. No one else has ever called me that. "Were you expecting someone else?"

I grasp my steering wheel tightly, turning away from him and looking out to the road.

Then I shut my eyes tightly and I *scream*.

CHAPTER 4



“*H*ey, hey, baby girl, calm down,” he says, reaching out to touch my hand. “It’s just me, Dezzie. Just me.”

“Get the *fuck* out of my car!” I shout at him, ripping my hand away. “Don’t you dare *fucking* touch me!”

“Dezzie...” he says softly, almost in shock.

“*And don’t you dare fucking call me that!*” I scream. Putting my car in park, I turn to the side and slam my fists into the side of his shoulder, trying to shove him out of my vehicle. “*Get out! Get out! Get out!*”

But he only chuckles at my efforts, catching my small wrists easily in his big hands. “Dez,” he says softly. “I take it you’re not happy to see me?”

“Fuck you!” I shout, trying to rip my wrists away from him. When this fails, I pull my legs away from the pedals of the car, and awkwardly lift my legs to try to kick his massive thighs with my red high-heeled shoes. “Get out. Get the hell out of my fucking car! Before I call security!”

He holds both of my wrists in one hand, then grasps my ankles in the other hand. Somehow managing to wrestle me into submission quite easily and effortlessly.

“I would leave,” he says gently, keeping my ankles locked against his leg—almost like he’s gently holding my feet in his lap. Ugh. Not like he ever considered them murder weapons, which was my intention. “But you see, I received an invitation to my sister’s wedding. So, I’m here to see Willow.”

My blood is pumping wildly in my ears. “That’s impossible. I didn’t send you an invitation.”

“Oh, but you did, darlin’,” he says in that slow and sexy drawl, with a bit of grin.

I have to look away from his eyes, because they are too hypnotic and mesmerizing, and making me shudder... with revulsion. Yes. That’s what it is.

I’m too revolted to even look at him.

“I am absolutely certain that I didn’t send you an invitation,” I inform him. “Now if you’ll please release my wrists and ankles, I promise to stop hitting you if you’ll just kindly exit my vehicle, and retrieve your luggage from the trunk.”

“Mmm, you sound very professional, Dezzie,” he comments thoughtfully.

I think I feel his thumb moving over the skin of my ankle, and God help me, it sends shivers directly up my leg and into my lady parts where I definitely don’t want any sort of sensation related to *this* man ever again! I yank my leg away violently, causing my knee to slam into my steering wheel.

“Ouch,” I whisper softly, but I’m just grateful to be free. “Get out,” I tell him again. “I’m not joking. Stop acting like you know me. Stop acting like we’re friends. So, get out of my car before I start screaming again. I’m going to call airport security, and someone is probably going to get hurt.”

He stares at me for a long moment, before releasing my wrists, and holding both of his hands up in a gesture of peace. “It’s just that... I have this,” he explains. Then he reaches into the pocket of his blazer.

For a second, I’m afraid that it’s going to be a gun. I’m torn between bolting out of my car, running away, and being frozen in place. Then I remember that I have pepper spray under my car seat, courtesy of Willow.

I reach down with one hand to grab it for self-defence.

But then he pulls out an envelope.

It looks like a wedding invitation.

“That’s impossible,” I tell him quietly. “I sent out every single invitation, and I never sent one to you.”

His lips quirk upward slightly in a grin, once more. Like this is all very amusing to him. “Really, darlin’? Because this was an incredibly interesting invitation, in your handwriting... kind of crumpled up and stained with wine—but definitely the most interesting invitation I’ve ever received.”

Oh, fuck. No. Did Robbie...? No! He wouldn’t betray me like that, would he?

Douglas Wintergreen pulls the card out of the envelope, and my eyes grow wide as blood rushes to my cheeks. Usually, you can’t tell when I’m blushing because of my dark skin... but this time, it might actually be visible.

“You hoped I was rotting in hell, alone and miserable and dying of Ebola or smallpox or mad cow disease, in my own urine and feces, with maggots feasting on my flesh? And that I would spontaneously combust?”

My mouth falls open slightly.

Robbie really did this. He dug the invitation out of the trash and mailed it. I feel mortified. Utterly mortified and ashamed.

“You also hoped that my dick would fall off?” Douglas asks with consternation. “I seem to recall that you really liked that body part of mine, once upon a time.”

“It would be a perfectly good body part, if it were attached to a better man,” I grumble.

“Ouch,” he says, clutching his chest. “You wound me. But nevertheless, I’m here because I’ve been cordially invited to rot in hell. Growing up in Vermont was pretty close to being hell for me, so here I am. At your request, milady.”

I try to think of a way to respond, and maintain some dignity. “Well, the thing is, that was not exactly an invitation to the wedding. One might even say it was an *anti-invitation*. It said you didn’t *have* to come home, because everything is

under control. I have things handled. I was just... drinking at the time..."

"I can tell from the massive wine stain," Douglas says, pointing at the paper.

"Yes, well that may have contributed to me using slightly more colorful language than one would find acceptable in a wedding invitation," I admit.

"You mean, it may have contributed to you finally being really fucking honest with me about how you feel," he responds.

"I didn't mean to send that to you—I thought I tossed it in the trash," I explain.

"So, you weren't going to invite me to my baby sister's wedding?" he demands. "That's cold, Dezzie. Even for you."

"Why would you even come?" I ask, lifting both of my hands to gesture around us at the snowy state of Vermont. "You didn't come home for your brother's wedding last year."

"Spruce was married once before, and I attended the first time," he explains. "I didn't think, he needed me to be part of his ridiculous midlife crisis, marrying the nanny or whatever."

"Her name is June and she's a really sweet girl," I tell him angrily. "And she's an amazing mother to your little nieces that you've never even met."

"Well, okay, whatever," he says with a shrug. "But this is different. It's Willow. We've always had a good relationship."

"So, you think abandoning a young girl who looks up to you constitutes *a good relationship*? I guess that explains why you think it's acceptable for you to be sitting in my car right now. You delusional asshole."

He is silent for a long moment.

He looks down at his ripped jeans, as a flicker of something dances across his face.

Is that guilt?

I squint, narrowing my eyes as I try to identify the emotion. But then I stop. My hand grips the can of pepper spray more tightly. That was my first mistake. Believing this man is capable of emotion. Sure, he's capable of acting it out.

He can make a little mopey sad face to tug on the heartstrings of dumb women like me.

But I'm not seventeen anymore. I'm not that innocent, dumb little bitch who fell for every one of his sleazy, simple, classic, rich white-boy moves. Just so he could get me. Have me. Use me up and toss me aside. Destroy me.

It worked back then.

It won't work now.

"Can you just drive?" he asks hoarsely.

"No," I respond. "Please get the fuck out of my car."

"You came all this way to pick me up—" he begins.

"I didn't know it was you! I thought I was picking up your mother."

"My mother has a private jet and a chauffeur," Douglas responds with a wrinkled nose. "Why the hell would you need to pick *her* up from the airport?"

I take a deep breath. "Good point."

"Look, I don't want to be here almost as much as you don't want me to be here," Douglas tells me. "Especially not in this cramped, tiny ass Smart Car that feels like it was built for fucking Smurfs. But I came here for Willow. The only member of my family who I actually, truly love unconditionally. And I think maybe it would mean something to her, to see me. I mean, she did ask you to invite me, right? My name was on a list or something?"

I frown. Then I nod, ever-so-slightly.

"Good. Then I would love to go home and see her. Can you take me home, Dezzie?"

Airport security finally comes over then, and knocks on the glass. Took them long enough. I could have been

murdered. I could have murdered him.

“Is everything alright here, miss?” a man in uniform asks.

I swallow down a lump of saliva. I’m torn. Torn between telling them that he’s a possibly a terrorist, and could they please arrest him... or taking him home to Willow. Terrorist? Willow. Terrorist? Willow.

Okay. I probably shouldn’t be wasting the time of airport security. Besides, if he does or says anything offensive later, I can pepper spray him.

“Everything is fine,” I tell the airport security guard, through gritted teeth and a fake smile. Then I turn to Douglas. “I’ll drive you back to Silver Mountain on one condition.”

“Sure,” he responds.

“Don’t speak to me—not a single word, for the entire drive. Or I’m dumping your ass out of the side of the road,” I warn him.

“Deal,” he agrees.

So, I put the car in gear and leave the airport.

I’m going to *kill* Robbie.

For real.

CHAPTER 5



*W*e have been driving in dead silence for over thirty minutes.

The tension in the air of my little car is so thick that it's starting to become visible, like a heavy smog. It's making my vision blurry, as my fingers grip the steering wheel so tightly they become white.

I blink to clear my eyes and try to focus on the road ahead. But I can't stop the fury from rising in my chest, every time I inhale the scent of his fucking cologne.

At least he has stayed true to his word (for once) and kept quiet for the duration of our drive. I appreciate that, at least. Small blessings.

When a large, masculine hand darts out to touch my car radio, all my nerves seem to fire at once, causing my entire body to freak out and tense up.

He is only pushing the dial to turn on the radio, and then navigating to a station for music, to make the drive a bit more pleasant.

Fuck him.

I don't want it to be pleasant. I reach out and smash my hand into the radio, turning it off. I want the silence.

I want the tension.

It keeps me alert and aware. It keeps me from relaxing.

I don't want to relax. I don't want to let my guard down. I don't want to forget that the person sitting beside me is capable of being a monster.

“Really, Dezzie?” he asks with exasperation. “I can't even turn on the radio to take my mind off being so cramped up in this car that my legs are going numb? I've tried to honor your wishes and keep my mouth shut, but I've been pretty damn uncomfortable for the last half an hour.”

My head snaps toward him with fury in my eyes. “I've been pretty damn uncomfortable for the last half of my life, because of you. I think you can grow a pair and deal with it.”

“You have been?” he asks with surprise. I see the emotion flicker across his eyes again, and his neck moves like he is swallowing a lump of guilt or sadness. His hand reaches out to touch my leg. “Dezzie...”

I slap it away, but my heart has begun beating fast again. I have to remind myself over and over that this emotion is just for show, and that I shouldn't let myself get affected by it.

There's no other man on earth who has ever been able to affect me the way he has, with a simple word... a simple touch. And I can feel the walls of defense around me weakening, so I need to build them up stronger.

He is not capable of emotion. He doesn't care about anyone but himself.

He's heartless. He lied to me. Over and over.

He broke me.

“Can I please just put on some music?” Douglas begs. “My back is killing me. After the twenty-four-hour plane ride from Kathmandu, and you know I have that old injury...”

Fuck. He's appealing to my nurturing, maternal instinct. He knows I won't be able to refuse helping him if he's in pain. He knows me. Also... I'm a bit curious about where he's been all this time. I'm dying to ask a question, but I know that if I do, he'll have me exactly where he wants me.

Opening the floor to conversation. I won't do it. I won't bite. I won't ask him where the hell is Kathmandu or what the hell he was doing there. Or how he even received that invitation if he wasn't in the same location, city, or country as it was originally sent to. But I can see out of the corner of my eye that he is expecting me to. Fuck!

Even after all these years, I can *feel* how well he knows me. That means he must know all my weaknesses. I'm still vulnerable, as long as my enemy knows me. I need to be unpredictable. I need to not fall into his trap.

Sun Tzu's Art of War is all about that shit. *If you know your enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*

Douglas has the upper hand. He always has.

Still, I don't feel great knowing he's in physical pain.

"Just slide the damn car seat back a few inches, you idiot."

"Oh, shit... does it go back?" He tries to follow my instructions, looking for the lever, and once he is able to properly stretch out his legs, he exhales a deep sigh of relief. "Wow, that was dumb of me. Now that the seat is adjusted, it's actually quite comfortable in this little car. More than I expected. I don't think I've ever been in a vehicle this tiny! What the heck were you thinking, Dezzie? Buying something like this for Vermont winters? You're going to get stuck in the snow, my dear. You need an all-wheel drive truck to get through all the seasons up here."

The anger is rising in my chest again. Along with little pangs of deep pain, every time he uses that nickname, or an affectionate term of endearment. He needs to *stop*. I need to get away from him. ASAP.

"Please stop insulting my car," I say evenly. "It's mine, and it's reliable and it drives perfectly well from Point A to Point B. If you hate it so much, you should have gotten a fucking Uber." But let's be honest for a second—he's perfectly right. I've already gotten stuck in the snow three times since I

bought this vehicle, and I've needed to beg random strangers for help digging me out.

It might be fine for getting around town in the summer and autumn, but it can barely get out of the driveway in the winter. I probably should have made a more practical choice.

"It is pretty cute," he admits as he reclines in the seat. "A little slow, however. You're being passed by every single car on the road."

I grit my teeth together angrily. Yes, it's a bit slow. But what's really bothering me is that Douglas thinks it's okay to pass judgment over my life and my stuff. Like I'm still fourteen and he's teaching me to drive. Because my father walked out on me when I was young, and my mother was too exhausted from working as a hospice nurse to teach me anything. Because back then, Douglas was the only person who took an interest in helping me.

He was the big brother of my best friend. So, by extension, he was like a big brother to me. He helped me with everything. He was my hero. He was the most important man in my life. He was my secret crush, my fantasy. The subject of my every daydream. And every night dream. My deepest desire.

Until eventually... he became more.

And once we crossed that line, we could never go back.

It was so... earth-shattering. Soul-shaking. Life-altering.

That once in a lifetime perfection that you would give anything for. Just to feel, only once. The stuff all the songs and the books are written about. We were perfect together. We were happy.

We never told Willow. We were scared at first, that it might upset her. Especially because of our age difference. We were planning to tell her, but it happened so fast. We were so consumed with passion for each other.

A burning fire in my chest and body, the like of which I've never felt before, and probably never will again. I remember it, though. I remember every touch and every word. I remember how he made me feel.

And I remember how he ripped it all away.

Glancing to the side, I can't believe that this is the same man from all those years ago. It seems like another lifetime. We were trying to think of a delicate way to tell Willow about the situation, but it was over too soon. Then there was nothing to tell.

Just an empty space in our lives.

Once he walked away from me, just like my father did... I developed such a bitterness and resentment in my heart that I really believe I'll never be able to trust another man the way I once trusted him.

He doesn't know how badly he broke me. Willow doesn't know.

I thought Robbie was the only one who knew, and understood. But he definitely did *not* understand if he tricked me like this and put me in this dreadful situation.

Fuck. What were we talking about again?

Oh, yeah. My car.

"I'll drive whatever the hell I damn well please, Douglas," I say coldly.

CHAPTER 6



We are approaching Silver Mountain when my phone begins to make a weird siren noise. I reach down to pick it up with surprise, but I have to keep my eyes on the road, which has grown dark due to the heavy cloud cover, and the early winter sunset. So I can't read it immediately.

"What's that?" Douglas asks with alarm.

I glance over at him, wondering if he's actually been away from Western society so long that he doesn't know that sound.

"Some kind of emergency. Maybe an amber alert," I say, before I can finally look down and read the text. "Oh, wait. No—it's actually worse than that."

A little chill runs over my shoulders as a million possibilities run through my mind.

"Destiny!" he shouts, grabbing the steering wheel as I begin drifting out of my lane slightly, toward a snow pile.

"Sorry. I've got it," I tell him firmly, but truthfully, I'm a little too shaken up by the emergency alert, and I need to read it again. I pull over to the side of the road—but not too far to the side of the road. The snow covers the area where the road ends, and this car is definitely not capable of getting out of a ditch on its own if I happen to drive into one.

We would probably need to get towed.

Or... maybe Douglas would be strong enough to just push it out.

Putting the car in park, I study the emergency warning with confusion. The words seem to blur together, and I'm not quite sure what I'm reading. My heart begins pounding a little faster again.

Douglas reaches out to take the phone from my hand, so that he can read it.

“ACTIVE SHOOTER ALERT,” he says softly. “Take cover. Suspect is Armed and Dangerous, with a stolen vehicle. If seen, do not approach. Call 911 immediately.

Stay in your homes. All roads in and out of Silver Mountain are being locked down by police and military personnel to contain the situation.”

I rip my phone back away from his hand. “I have to check on Willow and my mother,” I say in a panic.

He wraps his large hands around both of mine, keeping them stationary. “No,” he says firmly. “In the event that the shooter is in Willow’s restaurant, or in your mother’s hospital, you wouldn’t want to call either of them. They could be hiding, and might not have the presence of mind to silence their phones. The sound of ringing could bring an active shooter directly to their location.”

“Oh, god,” I say with worry, taking a deep and shuddering breath. I don’t even realize that Douglas has reached out to squeeze my shoulder comfortingly. And that it feels natural, and easy, and reassuring.

It’s a chilling reminder—that there are actually worse people in the world than this man, whom I’ve been calling the Devil for a decade.

I find myself stealing a moment to look into his blue eyes, and I can see some differences there now. There’s a hardness in them, and around them. There’s a bit of tiredness, and age. New wrinkles around his eyelids and creases on his forehead. A bit of grey mixed in with his beard and the gorgeous hair, thick dark hair on top of his head.

Somehow, he’s still the most gorgeous creature I have ever laid eyes on.

I am hypnotized, and the simple warmth of his hand on mine is causing my whole body to tremble. I could just say it's fear from the Active Shooter situation, but it's not just that. And I can see from the way his eyes change, and stare into mine hungrily, that he knows exactly how he's affecting me. His eyes drift down to my lips for a brief moment—but I saw it.

I know how I'm affecting him, also.

That makes it worse. I can feel it in my stomach, the little spark of electricity. I don't want to feel it, but I do.

I guess all the kicking and screaming and cursing couldn't really put up enough defenses against him. I don't know what could possibly be strong enough to cut through the power of this magnetic connection between us.

I don't even have to kiss him, to be inundated with the memories of the way he tastes. He's too close. I knew it was a bad idea to have him in this car with me. How could I be expected to last the entire drive, in such close quarters?

And now with an emergency situation causing this fear and anxiety...

Just the touch of his hand on mine feels like a lifeline, like a promise of safety. The warmth of his skin is making my body melt in ways I don't want to allow it to melt. All my strength is fading, as liquid heat pools in my insides and I just want to throw myself into his arms and hear him say that everything is going to be okay.

But then he does something unexpected, and the spell is broken.

He laughs. He pulls away from me and laughs, and suddenly, all the warmth leaves me and my blood runs cold again.

"Your sister could be in danger," I say shakily, pointing toward Silver Mountain. "Your brother, your little nieces could have the shooter in their school. Do you know how many kids have died in school shootings lately? And you're laughing?"

“It’s just...” He shakes his head incredulously. “My first day back on American soil in over a decade, and of course this happens. I heard the stories, but it seemed so far away and surreal. When I was dealing with monsoon rains in Nepal causing landslides, and earthquakes, wildfires, floods... I saw hundreds of people die. Thousands in 2015, many of them children. And everyone tried so hard to help each other. And now, to come home to a place that’s supposed to be safe...”

He looks at me with disbelief, and an aching pain behind his eyes. “What the hell happened while I was gone, kid?”

I can only stare at him. I can feel his pain, and I don’t know where it comes from or what he’s been through. But as much as I’ve tried to convince myself a hundred million times that I hate his guts, I can’t bear to see him in pain. Without intending to, I reach out to touch his knee, and squeeze it firmly.

“It’s okay,” I tell him hoarsely, swallowing down my own lump of fear. “I’m sure everyone is safe. Maybe we’ll just find a place outside Silver Mountain to seek shelter, and wait for an update.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” he responds. “And once we know more, maybe we can do something to help.”

CHAPTER 7



I begin driving toward the first spot I can think of, without being able to really think clearly about the choice. I keep glancing down at my phone every few seconds, hoping that Willow or my mother will call.

“Do you have any suggestions on where we should seek shelter?” Douglas asks.

“Yeah, I think so,” I say softly, as my eyes focus ahead blankly on the road.

“Is it safe?” he asks me.

“They had a gun collection,” I inform him. “It’s one of the local farms that Willow had me check out, one of her potential wedding venues. This one had some little rental chalets on the property, but they also offered hunting lessons, and I saw lots of fancy rifles in glass cases. So they should have enough weapons for us to defend ourselves, in case of anything.”

“That’s quick thinking, Dezzie,” he says softly. “That’s my girl.”

I glance over at him, trying to appear annoyed at his constant use of affectionate pet names, like not a day has passed. But the truth is that his words still tickle the insides of my tummy and make me feel good, almost like a single day hasn’t really passed at all.

Anyway, the active shooter situation has stolen all the energy that I was using to try to keep strong, and act bitchy and push him away. I don’t have the strength to keep being

prickly and abrasive and furious—not until I know that my family and loved ones are safe.

“Here’s the farm,” I say as I drive onto the property, and sure enough, the old couple who owns the place comes out into the driveway, holding the aforementioned shotguns.

But when they see my Smart Car, they seem to recognize it, and they lower their weapons. I step out of the vehicle with my hands raised.

“We were just heading to Silver Mountain when we got the alert,” I call out to them from a safe distance. “Would it be possible to crash here until the threat passes?”

“Honey, you’re not the only one who had that idea,” the old woman says, gesturing to the parking lot filled with a few parked cars. “We had some families come in, and they took all our chalets.”

“Crap,” I respond softly.

“What if we pay double?” Douglas asks, also stepping out of the car. “Do you have any extra space for us to stay? Even a room, anything. And maybe a gun for self-defense, just in case?”

The old man hesitates. “There’s a little cabin down by the river. It’s not very large, but it’s cozy. You’ll have to drive a bit down that way,” he says, pointing down a path.

“Perfect,” Douglas says, getting out his wallet to handle arranging the rental for us. I sit back down in the car while he does this, taking some shaky breaths as I stare at my phone. Wishing someone would call.

When he returns, he’s got a room key, and a few weapons.

“Can you fit all these guns in a Smart Car?” he asks as he tries to arrange them in the back. But he ends up holding them between his legs as we drive toward the cabin.

“Good grief,” Douglas comments as we approach. “That cabin is pint-sized. It’s like the Smart Car of cabins.”

“Anything works for now,” I tell him, parking the car and grabbing my phone, and the room key from him, before

getting out and walking up to the miniature house. A little bit of snow has gathered on the ground, and the walkway is covered in cobblestones.

Why did I wear heels again?

Oh, yes. I thought I was meeting his rich and fancy mother. I sigh as I try to carefully walk up to the house, using the muscles in my legs for balance. At least I wore something cute.

“Do you need a piggyback ride?” Douglas asks softly from beside me, where he is carrying the guns and his suitcase.

“No. Most definitely not. I’m a grown ass woman now, in case you didn’t notice,” I inform him with my head held high.

Then my shoe slips on the icy rocks and I faceplant to the ground.

Somehow, Douglas is able to catch me with only one arm, preventing me from cracking my skull open. He holds me awkwardly, as his other arms are occupied with firearms and luggage. He then begins to chuckle softly at the situation, which makes my blood boil.

“A grown ass woman, huh?” he comments with amusement, his words tickling my ear.

“Let go of me,” I grumble.

“What if I don’t want to?” he asks.

And the amount of heat that spreads through my stomach is not even funny. I have to reach down and grab a handful of snow off the ground, and turn around slightly to toss it into his face. He sputters slightly and blinks it out of his eyes, but he does not drop me.

He does, however, drop the luggage and the guns so that he can restrain me with both hands, slowly lowering me to the ground. “Why you little minx,” he says with a chuckle. “Say you’re sorry.”

“Never,” I tell him as my body collides with the snowy ground. I twist around to try to break free, but he follows me,

pinning me down with his weight, and catching my wrists again to hold them above my head.

I gasp slightly at this, and struggle against him, but he smiles down at me playfully.

“Say you’re sorry, Destiny.” His voice is a low growl that sends shivers through my body.

“Nope,” I respond, challenging him.

“So be it,” he responds reaching to the side for piles of snow which he grabs and then shoves down my shirt. Effectively making me squeal. It feels like he’s dumped a tray of ice cubes on my boobs. “You dickhole!” I yelp, but he only chuckles lightly at this.

“Payback’s a bitch, right, love? I was just trying to be a gentleman and rescue you, and you were quite rude to me. I think you’re going to have to make it up to me.”

“Oh, yeah?” I ask softly, breathing heavily as he puts his face very close to mine.

“Yeah,” he responds softly, looking at my lips again.

My stomach twists. I realize that I want him to kiss me—but not for the right reasons. I just want to alleviate some of the stress of the uncertain situation at home.

He seems to realize this too, for he pulls away abruptly, and dusts himself off. He seems to take a deep breath to steady himself, before picking up his luggage and the weapons again. He offers me a hand to help me stand.

“Let’s get inside, and get warm,” he says quietly, all sense of playfulness gone. It’s right back to business.

I nod, ignoring the cold trickles of melted snow dripping down my boobs and stomach, as I reach for the room key, heading for the door. But once I step inside, I feel a large hand smacking my butt.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask, turning around with horror and rage.

“Just brushing some snow off your grown ass,” he comments with a grin. “Before you bring all that ice inside and it melts. I don’t know what the heating situation is like in this cabin yet.”

I growl at him with warning. “It looks like we need to make a fire.”

“Well, that’s not a problem,” he says, moving over to crouch in front of the fireplace, and grabbing some firewood. “I got this.”

“Thanks,” I say softly, still staring at my phone. I decide to search the internet for any news updates about the situation, but I can’t find much.

“You’re right, by the way,” Douglas says as he works on the fire. “Your ass is grown. It has gotten quite a bit larger since the last time I saw you, hasn’t it?”

I nearly drop my phone in shock. My mouth hangs open before I can gather my composure. “Watch yourself, boy. We have guns here. Unless you want this *cabin* to become an active shooter situation, you better shut your damn mouth, Douglas.”

He only smiles at me fondly in response.

And then I realize that he’s just talking shit to annoy me intentionally, and distract me from worrying about our family members. Which is kind of sweet.

Damn him.

My ass hasn’t grown *that* much. Well, maybe a little. But I know it’s in a good way.

Especially since he can’t seem to keep his eyes off it. And the rest of me.

CHAPTER 8



Once the fire got going, Douglas left to shower in the small bathroom. He said he felt gross after his long flight. I went into his suitcase and stole a fresh shirt of his to wear, since my top and bra were quite wet with the melted snow. I hung them near the fireplace to dry off, and sat on the bed with my phone, hunting online for any updates about the situation.

It's taking quite a lot of strength not to send even a text message to my loved ones to ask if they are safe. But I realize that they are probably not texting or calling me for the same reason.

Except for Willow and Robbie, who knew I wasn't in town. I frown as I stare at my phone, feeling the anxiety rise in my chest.

Then Douglas steps out of the bathroom, wearing only a small towel around his waist, and my eyes grow wide at the sight of his muscled chest, still glistening with water. He ignores me and moves over to his suitcase, seeking some clothing.

"What the hell happened to you?" I croak, unable to peel my eyes off his body.

"Huh?" he asks, looking up.

When he sees my shocked face, he grins. Then he flexes his massive bicep proudly. "Do you like it? I guess I'm a grown ass man, now too."

“You’re fucking *jacked*,” I say in amazement. “When did you have time for the gym while helping impoverished people out of natural disasters?”

“This isn’t a gym body, my love. These are genuinely useful muscles built by manual labor. A lot of the work I’ve been doing is quite physical.”

“You... look good,” is all I can manage to say, nodding with approval. Then my phone dings, and I look back down. “Oh, thank goodness!” I say happily. “My mom just texted. She’s safe!”

“That’s great, darlin’,” he says softly, dropping the clothes he was about to put on, and moving to my side to sit and give me a hug. I hug him back eagerly, before realizing exactly *who* and *what* I am hugging.

My heartbeat quickens again, as I feel the massive swell of his back muscles under my hands. My hands slide around over his broad shoulders, even though I’m trying to peel them off his body.

“Doug,” I say hoarsely, as his face rests against my hair, and his Herculean arms wrap around my body. “It’s bad enough we had to share a car, and now we’re stuck here until they open up the roads to Silver Mountain. I’m glad we found somewhere safe and warm to wait this out, even though the cabin is tiny. But can you *please* not rub your naked body all over me? Good grief. Have some freakin’ manners!”

“Oh,” he says with surprise, pulling away. “I forgot that I wasn’t wearing clothes. Silly me.” He scratches his nose with embarrassment as he rises to his feet, awkwardly turning away to hide the bulge underneath his towel.

But not before I see it, and gasp a sharp intake of breath with surprise. I know I just scolded him for being naked, but I wish I could grab that damned towel and rip it off his hips.

Once upon a time, I could have. It would have been so easy and fun. Our natural, playful vibe, wrestling each other with witty banter and poking fun at each other as only old

friends could. So much of it seems to still be here, when I thought it was all gone forever.

It almost makes me want to find out how much of what we lost could be recovered. But that's a stupid thought. I know I can never trust him again.

The words he said to me. The promises he made...

It wasn't just some rushed, meaningless one-night stand.

It was a lengthy, secret, passionate love affair.

We cuddled up naked in each other's arms, and talked about our dreams. Our plans. Our hopes. Our goals. We talked about having children together. We picked out *their names*.

I know I was young, but I really thought I mattered to him.

I believed every single word he spoke to me.

And now he's here.

The love of my life is here, in the same room with me, after all those years of crying and missing him, mourning his departure and wondering where he'd gone. Trying to contact him, asking his family if anyone knew how I could get in touch... sending messages desperately on every social media platform.

He was everything to me, and he will never know how deeply he hurt me.

And now he's just *here*, acting so casual and normal, like it didn't even happen. Like everything's A-OK.

Tears touch the back of my eyes. I want to cry and throw up all at the same time, when it really hits me, the memory of how torn apart I was after what he did.

The realization that I'm playing with fire right now—wearing his clothes, sitting in a car with him, sitting on a bed with him, teasing and bantering with him, wrestling with him, embracing him...

It's going to happen to me again, isn't it?

He's going to do the same thing, once again. Isn't he? Reading that anti-invitation I wrote must have felt like a challenge, and he must have felt the urge to come back and take whatever he wanted from me, one more time. Because he knew he could.

He knew that despite all my harsh words, that I was always putty for him underneath it all. I was always *his*.

And I'm powerless to resist him.

Do I have any strength left in me to fight against this? Do I even want to fight against this? Would I rather experience a little taste of passion, one final time, before I go back to the loveless life he condemned me to live?

Would it hurt any less if I can walk away now, and prevent us from getting close, prevent the inevitable *crash* from happening?

It doesn't really matter, I realize to myself, as I try to fight back tears.

It's always going to hurt like hell, to be away from him.

Whether or not he causes any more harm—he's already ruined the best years of my life with the way he tossed me aside like trash.

I let him ruin those years, because I couldn't let go.

And I don't think I ever could.

"Destiny," he says softly, when he sees me struggling with the emotions which are hitting me like a ton of bricks.

I put my head in my hands to try to conceal it all.

"No," I respond, unable to look at him. Unable to form a coherent sentence. "No."

CHAPTER 9



I am struggling to keep from crying when my phone rings, and I reach for it frantically, hoping it will be Willow.

Instead, I see Robbie's name on the caller display. I hesitate. I know I should answer. I should try to find out whether Willow is okay. But I feel so deeply betrayed by him. I don't think I can speak to him.

I stretch out my arm and hand my phone to Douglas.

"Please," I say softly.

He nods and takes it, understanding. "Hello?" he says upon answering, and putting the phone on speaker.

"Hey!" Robbie says. "Oh, you're not Dez. Douglas, is that you? Is Dez okay, can you put her on?"

I shake my head in refusal.

"She can't come to the phone," Douglas responds.

"Bullshit," Robbie says with a sigh. "I guess she's not talking to me. That's alright. I did this for your own good, Dez! Do you hear me? I know you're pissed, but you can't keep holding a grudge forever! Living in fear. You need to be brave, and face your demons, and heal! Consider this my special little gift to you. It's like therapy!"

I scowl wordlessly at the phone, lifting both of my middle fingers up in a gesture to demonstrate to Doug exactly how I feel about this whole situation.

Douglas smiles. “I’m sure she appreciates the surprise. At the very least, she seems to appreciate my new muscles.” This causes me to roll my eyes.

“Now, Roberto,” Douglas says seriously. “Can you tell me if my sister is safe?”

“Oh! Yes, of course. Willow’s good—well, she’s kind of good. She was really working herself up into a cleaning frenzy, and stressing herself out thinking her mother was coming to visit. She had to take some benzos to calm down, and she’s sleeping. Which is good—because if she hadn’t taken those pills, the active shooter alert would have definitely stressed her out way more, worrying about the twins.”

“I’m glad she’s okay,” Douglas responds.

“As okay as she can be, for a girl struggling with some tough mental illness,” Robbie responds.

Douglas frowns at me, as if he didn’t know this. “Is the rest of my family safe?” he asks. “Spruce and the girls?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly,” Robbie admits. “The shooting was at the school the girls attend. And there have been kidnapping attempts on them in the past, due to your family’s money... so, I don’t know. The police aren’t releasing any information. Everything is still locked down.”

“Fuck,” Douglas whispers.

“Yeah,” Robbie says. “Sorry I don’t have better news, but I’ll text updates as soon as I receive them. Hey, Dez? You ever gonna talk to me again, babes?”

I shake my head to indicate the negative.

Douglas clears his throat. “I don’t know, bro. You and Dez are going to have to work that one out. But I really appreciate you sending me that invitation. Thank you for getting me to come home.”

“No problem, man. Sorry that... this is what you came home to. But those girls are smart as hell, and tough. They are trained in martial arts, so if any kids are going to survive, it’s those little Wintergreen ladies. Later, man.”

“Later,” Douglas says, hanging up.

He begins to pace back and forth in the cabin, thoughtfully, anxiously. This reminds me a great deal of Willow.

I watch his feet, feeling numb.

“So,” he says slowly. “My baby sister is on benzos, and my little nieces whom I’ve never even met may have been hurt in a school shooting. Is that all correct?”

“Yes,” I respond.

“Fuck,” he says softly.

I try to hunt inside myself for something reassuring to say. “But we don’t know what happened to the girls. Like Robbie said, they could be fine.”

Douglas stops pacing when he reaches a small writing desk, and he smashes his fist down into the wood, causing me to flinch in surprise.

“Fuck!” he shouts brokenly. “I should have been here. I should have been home!”

“There is nothing you could have done to prevent this active shooter situation,” I inform him, trying to be nice.

“And Willow’s health?” he asks hoarsely.

I hesitate. “Well, honestly... there were some really bad days. She really needed you.”

“Fuck,” he whispers, moving to sit beside me. “I never should have left.”

“She could have really used her favorite big brother’s shoulder to cry on,” I say with tearful eyes. “She really loved you and looked up to you. But anyway, like I said in the letter... I’ve done my best to take care of her. And she also has Robbie and Hardeep. So feel free to walk away and go back to the farthest corners of the Planet Earth, because she’ll manage. They’ll all survive without you.”

“I know,” he says softly, reaching for my hand and giving it a squeeze. “But I don’t think I can leave again, Dezzie. Not

after this. I hope the girls are okay. I hope everyone is alive and safe.”

A single tear rolls down my cheek as I stare at his big hand, holding mine. Like it’s the most normal thing in the world. “I’m not,” I whisper, so softly I hope he won’t hear me.

But he does.

“What do you mean?” he asks, turning to gaze at me with concern.

I shake my head, not really wanting to respond. But knowing that I probably should. Robbie was right. I should face my demons. “I know I seem alive and perfectly okay,” I say with a sad smile, returning the pressure on his hand. “But the truth is that you killed me a long time ago, Douglas. All those years ago when you left. You just took a part of me with you. And I tried to hold on, but... you killed a part of me that will never be alive again. And I’ve only been half-alive since then. I just thought you should know.”

He remains silent for a long while. All the muscles in his jaw clenched. His Adam’s apple moving wordlessly.

Then he turns to me and pulls me into his arms again. “I know, Dezzie,” he whispers brokenly, holding me tightly against his chest. “Me too. I wish to God I could back in time and undo what I did. I wish I could be stronger.”

“Then why’d you do it?” I ask him softly.

He takes a deep breath. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes,” I respond. “Please.”

CHAPTER 10



“Come here,” he says gently, moving to lay his body back down on the little bed in the cabin, and open his arms to me.

I hesitate for a moment, but then I move to his side and snuggle against his chest, the way I always used to. I exhale shakily at the feeling of peace it gives me to be near him.

A perfect sense of peacefulness—along with the fear that it will all be ripped away.

He holds me close, stroking my arm as he stares at the ceiling and seems to be preparing himself for something mentally.

“My mother knew about us,” he says softly. “I’m not sure how she found out. Maybe she had us followed. She didn’t approve of you. She didn’t want me to be with you, because I was one of her eldest sons, and her favorite. I was supposed to be the primary heir to the Wintergreen fortune. She was trying to groom me for a certain role.”

“Like a Prince,” I say softly.

“Yes. And she thought she owned me. Body and soul. She thought I was just her pawn to play with. She had girls from wealthy families lined up to marry me from basically the time I was born. She would introduce me to them, and expect that one of them would catch my interest, and that I would accept one of her choices for a suitable mate. But I only had eyes for you.”

“And I was poor,” I say softly.

“And you were Black,” he responds angrily, holding onto my arm tightly. “She said it outright, plainly. That she wouldn’t accept it. That it simply wasn’t acceptable for our high-class *prestigious* family. So she threatened to disinherit me. And I said fine, go ahead. I don’t give a shit about the money. Then she threatened worse.”

“Oh, God,” I say softly, my tears slowly soaking his clean shirt. “What did she do?”

“My mother owned the hospice where your mother worked,” Douglas says with a clenched jaw. “She threatened to not only get her fired, but to file a report that she had been stealing medical equipment and opioids from the clinic. So that she would never get a job anywhere, ever again.”

I am quiet for a moment, in horror at this. I don’t realize that I am clenching bunches of his shirt in my hands.

“We could have survived it,” I tell him angrily. “My mother hated that job, anyway. I could have just worked harder, and tried to support her. You could have... we could have gone anywhere. Done anything. I just wanted to be with you.”

“Dezzie, my love, my parents own this town. They own everything. They own the police, they own the justice system. Where could we go? They have connections all over the world. My mother promised me that she would get your mother placed behind bars, and that she would remain there for the rest of her life if I didn’t break things off with you. She said it would be easy as pie to put another Black woman behind bars for no reason. She laughed about it. She was eager to demonstrate how she could do it so easily, without lifting a finger. I had no choice, I couldn’t do that to you. And your mother.”

The tears are flowing more freely now, as I sob against his chest. “How could she be so cruel? And I drove for hours today, intending to pick that bitch up from the airport!”

He holds me close as I cry. “I never wanted to tell you, and break your heart,” he whispers softly against my hair. “I also didn’t want to jeopardize your relationship with Willow. I

know how much you two mean to each other... and if you knew who my mother really was. You might not want to come anywhere near my family. I didn't want to go anywhere near my family, after that. So, I walked away. I never planned to ever come home again, after that happened. Never. She wanted to control her precious little heir? I removed myself from this family. I changed my name. I disinherited myself. I never spoke to my mother again. I just wanted out. To be free."

"You should have taken me with you," I tell him. "Fuck her, Douglas, and her racist bullshit. We could have... we could have..." I can't continue speaking, for the pain is too great. I am glad that he is holding me so tightly, because I wouldn't be able to bear it otherwise.

"You were so young," he tells me softly, running his hand over my hair. "I thought you'd move on fairly easily. I thought you'd find someone else and be happy. I didn't want to turn you into a fugitive with me, and destroy your life."

"You destroyed it anyway," I tell him hoarsely, although my words barely come out, muffled now by all the tears and snot and the shaking sobbing of my shoulders as I ugly cry. "I could never move on from you. How could I? Douglas... it hurts that you thought that what we had... was so paltry and small that it wasn't worth fighting for. You were everything to me. Everything. I would have done anything to be with you. You just had to ask."

And now I can feel that he is shaking and crying, too. "Dezzie, you were everything to me, too. I should have found a way. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have found a way. But what's done is done, and those years are gone. And I know you'll never forgive me. But if I could do it all over again... I would find a way. I swear to you. If I could go back in time, and make that decision... I would fight for you with everything in me. And fight for the life we dreamed about. The family we never got to have."

He kisses my forehead, as we lay here together in this tiny cabin. The fire crackling behind us, and the silence of the forested mountains all around us.

I feel so weak and drained, and defeated. Like I've been totally trampled. Like the most precious thing I ever owned was stolen, and I'll never get it back.

"I would find a way, Dez," he whispers against my hair. "I swear, I would find a way."

CHAPTER 11



This morning, I've felt completely dead inside.

I haven't been able to appear chipper or friendly or polite to anyone.

Waking up in Douglas' arms, with my mascara smeared all over my eyes from crying, I didn't even bother to fix it. What does it matter? I can change a lot of things about my appearance—I can change my financial status. But I can never change my skin color.

We returned the rifles and room key to the couple who own the farm, and we checked out.

The lockdown was lifted once the shooter was apprehended. A few kids were killed, but that doesn't surprise anyone anymore. It's just another day in America.

It will probably be all over the news for a few days or weeks, and it will be all that anyone talks about. The parents will cry and beg for change, beg for something to happen to make things more safe. Nothing will happen. And eventually, everyone will forget.

And there will be another mass shooting, and another, and another.

Usually, I'm not so bleak on my outlook about things, but today, I don't have the energy to pretend that the world is any better than it is. This is what life is like. This is where we live. In a world where people like my ex-boyfriend's mother make the rules.

We got in my car to drive over to the Wintergreen manor where Willow and Doug grew up. Now Spruce lives there with his daughters, who we heard were luckily, and thankfully, alive and well.

But some of their friends are not.

I drive wordlessly, unable to really carry on a normal conversation. This whole experience has been too traumatic. When I reach the front door of the mansion, which is surrounded by armed guards, Douglas gets out of the car, and I tap the steering wheel anxiously, wanting to leave.

“You’re not coming in with me?” he asks after he pulls his suitcase out of the back and returns to the passenger side of the car. “To check on Willow even? And the girls?”

“No,” I respond. “It’s not my place. I don’t belong in there. With Willow. With you.”

“Dezzie, that’s not true,” he says, reaching for my hand. “Will’s your best friend. And I know that you belong with me.”

“Then you should have done something about it,” I tell him miserably, pulling my hand away and wiping some disgusting clumps of dried mascara away from my cheeks. “Just go home, Doug, to your fancy little mansion. Forget about me.”

“Destiny, I’m not leaving this car without you,” he demands, reaching for the shifter and putting it in *Park*. “Please.”

“You left the country without me. You didn’t even speak to me,” I remind him. “It should be easy for you.”

“I left *them*,” he explains. “I left it *all* behind. I was dumb, and weak, and angry, and brokenhearted. I don’t know how to make any of this better. I just... I wish you would give me a chance.”

“Ask them to give you a chance,” I tell him. “Get out of my car, Douglas. Go to your family. Go to Willow. I need to leave. Please. Please. Please don’t make me go in there.”

He pauses, staring at me. “Don’t take this out on Willow,” he begs. “Don’t make her pay for my sins.”

I laugh softly. “Dougie, all of you are the same. Willow treats me like her little slave, always expecting me to do all her dirty work and kill myself to make her happy. I’m her assistant in her business, her personal life, everything. Do you know I even brushed her hair like a little maid, and did her makeup?”

I feel like throwing up now, thinking about everything in a new context. “I always did everything she needed without question, and I never thought twice about it. I was by her side through every struggle of her life. But now, understanding a little more about the home she grew up in... and your family. I know what I am to Willow. The same thing I am to you and your mother. I’m nothing. I’m disposable. I’m the help. I’m free labor. I’m a free toy. A free fuck.”

“Dezzie,” he says again, reaching for my hand and squeezing it. “That is not true. It’s *not* true, you know it’s not. Can I be completely honest with you? I didn’t come home just for the wedding. It was your letter... seeing how angry you still were after all this time. I came home for you, not them. I came home because I wanted to heal some of the damage I caused. But you’re the one who has my loyalty. So, if you’re leaving, I’m leaving, too.”

He gets out and tries to put his suitcase back in my car, and I almost think I might let him. I’m not sure. I stare at him in confusion.

But just as he opens the trunk, his brother Spruce rushes out of the house and pulls him away from the vehicle to smother him in a giant hug.

“Douglas! I can’t believe you’re here!” Spruce is saying as he claps his brother on the back affectionately.

“*Dougie!*” Willow screams as she runs from the inside of the house to launch herself at her brother and tackle him in a giant hug. “You came! I knew you would come!” She covers his face in kisses.

I take one last, long look at the two of them in my rearview mirror. My best friend, and the love of my life. I stare at Willow's beautiful blonde hair, which Robbie and I have helped her dye in the bathroom sink so many times, to cheer her up with a makeover from her drab brown locks.

I see our whole lives flash before my eyes. All our memories from childhood, our teenage years, and college. Starting a business together.

Looking at Douglas hug his little sister back, I see his large strong arms and his beautiful smile. My heart swells at the sight of his happy expression, and I drink it in like water. My soul soaks it up, committing this moment to memory. So I can tuck it away and keep it somewhere safe, deep down inside, forever.

And I make peace with the fact that I may never see them again. Putting my car into gear and driving off, I let the passenger side door close with the momentum of my acceleration.

I need to get the hell away from here. From this place, this life, these people.

I need to get the hell out of this town.

I just want to be somewhere *safe*.

CHAPTER 12



DOUGLAS

I can't help but glance over my shoulder as I hear Dez's little vehicle speed down the driveway, while I embrace my little sister. I should be taking in this special moment, and focusing on catching up with my long lost siblings. But truthfully, all I can think about is how I turned Dez's world completely upside down, and the pain and suffering she must be feeling.

There's a very heavy feeling in my chest. This is not a good day.

"Where is Dez going?" Willow asks, when she finally stops suffocating me with the biggest hug I've ever received in my life. "It's safest if she stays here, with the armed security."

"Maybe text her and tell her to come back," I suggest to my sister, realizing that I don't even have Destiny's phone number.

"The town should be safe now," Spruce says quietly. "It was only one shooter, and they got him. Dougie, man, I'm just so glad you're home. Come on in out of the cold, it's freezing."

Spruce grabs my suitcase and brings it inside as I playfully mess up Willow's hair, which is surprisingly now blonde. I've only known her as a brunette, and this is a striking new look. She has definitely grown up a lot since I last saw her. She used to be a kid, and now she's a woman.

I swallow, wondering how much of her life I've missed. Wondering how she's doing, *really*, underneath her beautiful,

bright and cheerful exterior. I feel like such an asshole.

Willow clings to my side as we walk into the house, following Spruce into the warmth of the mansion. It seems not much has changed in this place since I left it so many years ago. Most of the decorations and design haven't changed in decades. The furniture is almost entirely the same.

The old photographs on the walls that we posed for as children. The family oil paintings that my parents had commissioned. Photographs of our grandparents and ancestors.

I was full of warm, fuzzy, and good feelings when I initially arrived here, but this place is beginning to stir up all the *other* emotions that I repressed many years ago. They're starting to come flooding back, making me feel a bit uncomfortable, making my skin crawl. I love my family, and we shared so many beautiful memories here together—but there were also terrible memories, the ones that caused me to lose everything. I clench my jaw.

I can't even begin to imagine how awful Dez must be feeling right now.

Should I have told her what really happened? I'm not sure.

Was it better to keep her in the dark, innocent of how cruel the world can be?

But she deserved to know. And she was in so much pain, anyway...

I wish I could have handled this whole situation better... for everyone. I wish I could have been there for my sister to help her through her anxiety, and there for my brother to help raise his children. I could have been a favorite uncle, bringing gifts of toys and stories and joy.

Instead, I'm a stranger.

Because I was terrified of my parents. Looking at the photographs on the walls, I wonder about all the sickening things our rich ancestors did to amass their fortune. That's

what old money means, right? We don't think about much. It means plantation owners. It means slave trade.

It means that some trickle of that mentality and that cruelty slides down through the generations, and still exists. Can never really be forgotten.

“Big brother, you're still a million miles away,” Willow says, tugging my sleeve. “Want a cup of coffee? How about a vanilla-coconut cappuccino? I'm kind of good at making stuff, now.”

I turn my attention back to her and smile. “That sounds super tasty, Will. I desperately need some caffeine, but you don't have to do anything fancy.”

“Nonsense!” she says, guiding me into the kitchen. “I haven't seen my Dougie in years and he's going to get a damn good coffee, okay?”

She almost seems to move in ultra-speed as she bounces around the kitchen like a ping-pong ball as she gathers her ingredients. Honestly, the girl has some pep in her step. My eyes blur as I try to keep up with her, almost like I'm playing a game of pinball and trying to follow the ball so that I know when to press the little lever. But as she finishes up with making the beverage, she slows down to a more relaxed pace, gliding around the kitchen, floating like a fairy as she gently adds the finishing touches.

Like a garnish of toasted coconut that she just torched in front of me.

Then she slides the cup across the marble of the kitchen island, so that it lands perfectly in front of me.

“Damn, girl,” I say as I lift the cup to my lips and take a sip. “When did you become a magician?”

“I run my own restaurant now,” she explains with a smile. “With Dez and Robbie. You've got to come and check it out sometime. We'll cook for you.”

I take sip after sip that slowly begins to fill my insides with warmth. Spruce returns from taking my luggage upstairs.

“I stuck your stuff in your old room,” he explains quietly, as he sits at the kitchen island beside me. “It’s actually untouched since you left, so all the clothes and belongings you left behind are up there waiting for you.”

“I really appreciate that,” I say, with a lump in my throat.

“Always wondered why you left in such a hurry like that,” Spruce says gently. When I am only silent, and cannot respond, he clears his throat. “But I understand you must have had your reasons. Can’t say I haven’t wanted to get away from all the crazy family responsibilities and crushing pressure, sometimes.”

I nod slowly, as I continue to sip Willow’s coffee. Then I point at a framed photo on the kitchen wall of two adorable little girls. “Are those your daughters? How are they doing after... everything, yesterday?”

Spruce shakes his head sadly. “I’m not sending them back to school. June thought it would be good for them to socialize with the other kids, but... it’s not worth the risk. I’ve always tried to be so careful, and protect them... but yesterday... I nearly lost them, and I nearly lost my mind a bit, to be honest. I felt like the police weren’t doing anything? Just waiting, hiding to protect their own asses, and letting the shooter roam around the school freely to find more victims? I’m telling you, man, I nearly grabbed a weapon and marched in there myself. June had to physically hold me back.”

I reach out to touch his shoulder, and squeeze it firmly. “I can’t even imagine.”

“It’s something no parent should ever have to go through,” Willow says softly. “This is insane.”

“I run a few hospitals, so you think I’d be numb to this by now. Victims of gun violence, mass shootings, it’s just part of daily life,” Spruce comments. “But when your kids are in the building? It hits differently.”

“Can I make you a cup of coffee, too?” Willow asks softly. When our brother nods, she begins preparing his beverage, and

I can see how much it means to her, like she's creating some sort of special medicine to heal his wounded heart.

I take another sip of mine, and now, I can taste the hidden ingredients of love and care she put into the drink. It's something so simple and small, but it nearly brings tears to my eyes. I've missed and needed her sisterly love so badly over the years, and she literally put it into a cup for me so I could drink it up and feel refreshed and renewed.

When Spruce takes a sip of his, I can see that it begins to warm his soul. His face seems to brighten, almost immediately. "We have a lot of catching up to do, Doug. You'll have to meet my girls. All four of them now, actually. June and I have a newborn baby, and she's a handful," he says with a chuckle.

"I can't wait to meet them," I say honestly. "I brought back some presents from Nepal, just things the kids like to play with there."

"They don't need any stuff, they just need their uncle around," Spruce says, clapping me on the back. "We all do."

I nod sadly, looking down at my coffee cup with guilt. But then I try to shake it off. "So, who's this lucky guy that managed to win over our picky little sister? I nearly had a heart attack when I got the wedding invitation. I didn't think in a million years that *Willow* would find a man she could tolerate," I say teasingly.

"I *couldn't* stand him at first," Willow admits with a grin. "But he wore me down. I'll have to tell you all about it."

And we sit at the breakfast table, chatting comfortably like family, like no time has passed. Until we hear the sound of little footsteps upstairs.

CHAPTER 13



“That’s my little pack of wild animals,” Spruce says fondly, looking up at the ceiling. “You always hear them long before you see them.”

“Could I whip up some breakfast for everyone?” I offer. “I would love to make some exotic food that I’ve discovered overseas, on my travels.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that. My housekeeper Mathilde can make something—but we’ve also got Will right here, and she’s been to culinary school in France, so...”

Will moves to the refrigerator and opens it, studying the produce on the shelves. “I could definitely make something delicious for Holly and Hazel. I know what they both like,” she explains.

“They aren’t quite themselves after yesterday,” Spruce says in a low voice. “They couldn’t eat last night. So, if you could make something they would actually eat, I would be really grateful. I’ll go upstairs and check on everyone.”

I watch him leave, thoughtfully. Spruce seems different—stronger. Despite the difficult situation, he seems so solid and... proud, full of life. June must have really made a huge impact on him. The last time I spoke with him I could feel the struggle and stress he had, of raising his daughters alone, without a mother. I’m glad he has found someone to bring the joy and peace back into his world.

“Come here and cook with me,” Willow says with a smile, patting the oven with a silicone spatula. “I’m so glad that it

was *you* Dez was picking up from the airport and not Mom. What a crazy surprise. I kinda had a panic attack thinking it was Mom,” she admits softly. “I was trying to fix up the restaurant, and my little house to avoid her criticism... nothing I ever do is good enough for her.”

“I definitely know that feeling,” I say softly, as I move to her side and grab a mixing bowl to prepare some of my special pancakes, inspired by a recipe with honey and coconut milk I had in Nepal.

“Dez has been helping me plan the wedding, trying to get everything right... but I’m sure Mom’s going to hate it anyway,” Willow says with a sigh. “She and Dad are flying in later today, you know?”

I pause, hesitating in my cooking. I am not really ready to confront our parents. “I might have to grab a hotel room,” I say softly.

“Or you can stay at my place,” Willow suggests. “It’s small, but Robbie’s room is usually vacant since he got married. I don’t think Dez would mind.”

“Dez lives there too?” I ask softly, as the memory of holding her body in my arms all night comes back to me. The fragrant smell of her hair against my nostrils. I immediately feel like a creeper, because I know that there’s no way I can stay in the same house with Dez and not sneak into her room at night. “Sounds perfect,” I tell my sister. “I’m crashing with you to avoid our parents.”

“Deal,” she says with a soft laugh as she tosses an egg mixture into a frying pan. “Now where are those girls? They are usually like little heat-seeking missiles that lock onto delicious smelling food, and come blasting toward the kitchen in nanoseconds from wherever they might be hiding...”

I continue to prepare my special pancakes, sharing the cooking space comfortably with my sister, but somewhat in awe of her expertise, as everything she does has that extra flourish I never would have considered. But she has always strived for perfection.

After only a few minutes, I can hear the rumbling beginning to stir upstairs. Spruce wasn't kidding around—if I was back in Asia I'd think I have a leopard stalking an unsuspecting bird up on my roof.

I can hear the old wooden steps creaking as multiple sets of feet are on their way to the kitchen. But rather than a stampede of beasts, the sound is slow and steady. Two little girls round the corner and head towards the table without giving me much notice at all.

Spruce walks back into the kitchen after them. "Girls, say hello to your uncle Doug," he says, clapping me on the back again. "This is Daddy's brother. We used to cause almost as much trouble as you girls when we were kids. Almost," Spruce says with a smile. "I have to get back upstairs to help June with the baby. Be back in a few."

When he disappears, I walk toward the girls slowly. "Hello, my favorite nieces! It's nice to meet you both."

What I get in return isn't a sound, but empty gazes. After a few seconds of awkward eye contact and deafening silence, Hazel mutters hello and tells me her name. Thankfully, because I wouldn't be able to tell them apart. Not to be left out Holly then follows suit and formally greets me as well.

"We've been whipping up a special breakfast for you," I say to them. "I hear Auntie Willow is a really good cook, right? I made something special, too. Can I bring you girls a plate?"

Holly looks over and nods her head in approval. Hazel on the other hand responds,

"I'm not a kid, I can get my own breakfast thank you very much."

I fix a plate for Holly and then hand over the utensils to Hazel for her to serve her own meal as requested. Willow joins us, and we all begin to dig into the food.

"Hey, this isn't half bad," Willow says as she tries my pancake. "I'll have to get the recipe."

“Thanks, Will. I learned a few cool tricks, living on the other side of the planet.”

“Did you see any tigers?” Holly asks, as she munches on Willow’s eggs.

“I saw lots of scary Bengal tigers,” I inform her. “They are so beautiful.”

“Cool,” Hazel says coldly, acting kind of standoffish.

I don’t blame her. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around, or met you girls sooner,” I tell them. “But I’d love to hang out a little more in the future, if you guys will let me. I think I could be a pretty fun uncle. What do ya think?”

For a few moments the only sounds in the room are forks hitting the plates, drinks being sipped, and glasses being placed down.

Hazel frowns. “We already have a fun uncle. His name is Ash. He actually takes us on cool adventures, sometimes.”

“Well, he did more before he met his new girlfriend,” Holly says pouting with annoyance.

“How’s Ash doing these days?” I ask Willow softly.

She shrugs. “He’s kind of brilliant. Turning crisis into cash, spinning scandal into sales. I don’t know how he does it. Probably due to the help of the new girlfriend.”

“Yeah, she’s kinda cool,” Hazel says as she stabs her food. “She’s our Mom’s sister. So, we have lots of great aunties and uncles, Mr. Douglas. We don’t really need you.”

Ouch. I wince, and Willow grins at me. “Well, maybe it doesn’t hurt to have one extra, in case everyone is busy?” I ask. “Plus, I’ve got some cool stories about tigers, that everyone else doesn’t.”

“We’ll see,” Holly says with a shrug. “If you stick around.”

“I’m not counting on it,” Hazel adds, wiping off her hands, and pushing the plate away. “Tigers are cool, but we can just

look up videos online. We have been managing just fine without you.”

Sitting here, I feel a bit caught off guard by their response. I’m sure it shows on my face. I look over at Willow, who shrugs.

“Girls, Uncle Doug has always been really nice,” she says, vouching for me. “Maybe we give him a chance, yes?”

Hazel sighs. “Yeah, but he’s also some strange dude who just randomly showed up in our house.”

Holly nods. “Most of our life we never even met our birth mother, then one day she shows up acting normal like she wasn’t a stranger. She was even a bitch to our *real* mom, Miss June, and made her go away! So, we don’t really trust anybody after that.”

Willow clucks her tongue slightly. “Language, Holly.”

“Well, I won’t be a b-word to anybody,” I promise. “I just want to be family, and have fun with you girls, and be there if you ever need me.”

They both seem to look at each other, and kind of roll their eyes.

“I guess it’s just normal for grown-ups to act this way,” Hazel says. “First that crazy woman, now a surprise uncle. I’m going back to bed.” She pushes her food away and marches off.

Holly, however, stays. But she just looks down at her plate with a blank expression.

I’m at a complete loss for words, and there’s a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. After a few seconds of silence, I go to say something but then reconsider. Maybe it’s better to not say anything, and just listen. What could I possibly say that would make up for me being a ghost for their entire lives? The guilt is threatening to suffocate me.

“Thanks for food, Mr. Douglas and Auntie Willow,” Holly says finally, getting up and leaving away to find her sister.

It is not lost on me that I don't get to be called Uncle. I guess that's a name I'm going to have to earn. I've never felt like such a giant piece of shit—well, maybe when Destiny's letter arrived in the mail. Maybe when she looked into my eyes at the airport, and I saw the pain on her face. Maybe when she cried so brokenly, for hours, and her tears soaked my shirt. Maybe when she looked at me with completely dead eyes, this morning, before driving away.

Yes, okay, I've felt like a bigger piece of shit.

No one ever said that coming home would be easy.

Willow reaches for my hand, and squeezes it reassuringly. "They've been through a lot," she says. "It will take time. But you'll always be my brother."

CHAPTER 14



DESTINY

*H*ave you ever learned something that made you feel like your whole life was a lie?

As I drive toward the little house near the restaurant where I've lived with Robbie and Willow for years, I clench my jaw, locking my teeth together so tightly that it hurts. Willow texts me a few times, asking me why I drove away and didn't come inside, but I don't respond.

Everything is different now.

Have you ever learned something that made you look at the whole world in a new light? Something that changed your perspective so deeply that the colors just seem to disappear? The blue just seems to have been sucked right out of the sky. Passing red fire hydrants, they all seem faded and worn to the color of rust.

It feels like everything is just dying or dead, turning to dust and ashes around me. The other cars driving on the road used to come in a variety of cute colors. I remember yellows and greens and purple and orange. But it's all gone now.

Everything is grey.

It seems like every drop of vibrant beauty has been ripped out of the world, and I'm living in this monochromatic, ugly dystopian society where everywhere I look, I only see grey.

I see grey walls and prison bars.

So now, when I approach the little cute house where my friends and I have lived like family, I don't feel any of the joy

and comfort I used to have here. I just feel misery. I just see a prison.

Shaking it off, I head inside where Clawdia is happy to greet me and rub against my legs. I am hoping that Robbie won't be here, and luckily, I don't think he is. Probably staying with his new husband Rudy.

Right. Well, that makes things easier.

I grab some large plastic trash bags from the kitchen and head to my bedroom, emptying some drawers and throwing most of the clothes I need into the bag. I repeat this with another bag and grab most of my shoes. Just the essentials. Whatever I need.

Whatever I can fit into my car, which isn't exactly built for moving furniture. I try to move quickly, running downstairs with the filled bags, and grabbing more. Clawdia follows me around, sitting and staring at me with confusion.

When I've done as much as I can manage, I open the door and begin to load up my car. I stuff the trunk with trash bags until I know I will have absolutely zero visibility through my rearview mirror.

Oh, well.

But I still feel like I'm missing something.

I turn back to the house, trying to think of what it could be. Is it some papers or important documents? I don't want to have to come back here or ask anyone for anything later on.

Moving back into the house for a quick double-check, I see a framed photograph of the three of us on the wall. It was shortly after we opened our restaurant, and Robbie is wearing his chef's hat.

Willow and I are wearing aprons. We all look tired, and frazzled, but happy. I reach up to touch the edge of the picture, missing the feeling I had on that day. When I still thought I could trust both of them.

But I shake it off and turn to leave.

"Meow," says a small voice behind me, sadly.

I turn around and feel a pang of pain shoot through my heart. The little cat is sitting there and looking up at me with big eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I whisper to her.

“Meow,” says Clawdia again.

“Okay, okay,” I tell her softly, reaching down to pick her up and hold her against my chest. “You’re coming with me, right? The others don’t have time for you, anyway. Willow has Deeps, Robbie has Rudy. But you have me, and I have you, right?”

“Meow!” Clawdia says, seeming happier. So I grab a few of her favorite toys and other random items in my other hand, before taking her out to the car with me. I put her in the passenger side, and she seems content to join me.

“Are we missing anything, Claw-claw?” I ask her.

She meows persistently.

“Okay, I’ll grab more of your stuff,” I tell her, rubbing her head. “Honestly, Claw, you probably have more stuff than I do.” After another trip, just grabbing random items, I get into the driver’s side of the vehicle and drive toward my mother’s home.

Clawdia looks out of the window curiously at all the sights passing her by.

“We’re going to find someplace better,” I tell her softly. “I don’t know where yet, but I promise, we’ll find an awesome place and be happy.”

“Meoowww?” Claudia says skeptically, with worry.

“We just broke out of prison together, little kitty,” I inform her proudly. “We’re free now. Willow and Robbie and the Wintergreen family can’t control anymore. Or keep us locked up in that house, all alone, when we want to go outside and play, and chase birds and rabbits. Right? We should be outside, living our lives and having fun. Hunting mice and stuff!”

“Meow!” she says, definitely on board with this plan.

CHAPTER 15



When I get to my mother's rundown apartment complex, I study the exterior of the building. It looks like a drab, lifeless steel box. There is definitely no color on that cold, grey rectangle. The windows are so tiny. It's worn by weather, and falling apart, and missing large chunks of the exterior.

It looks like a prison. Literally looks exactly like a prison.

Why did I never see that before?

I take a few deep breaths to gather my composure before picking up Clawdia and going inside. When I reach the front door and enter, I see a familiar sight before me. My mother is passed out on the couch in her work clothes, in front of the television. She must have been so exhausted and spent after another long shift of watching people die at the hospice. She didn't even get a chance to shower or eat something when she got home.

I look around, at the state of the horrible little apartment I grew up in. My mother tries to keep it clean, as much as she can, but it's still a disaster. There are large water stains on the walls and ceilings from damage that the building managers were slow to fix, and never really properly cared to fix.

I bet there's mold in those wet walls.

Clawdia starts struggling against me, wanting to go explore and smell everything, so I set her down. I move into the kitchen, and see that most of the food here are the leftovers from the restaurant that I brought home. Everything extra that

we cooked and didn't need, I would bring home to my mother to save on some money, or try to get her some better quality food and nutrition than simply cheap mac and cheese, or ramen noodles, or cheap white bread with lunchmeat.

But still, all she ever eats are leftovers.

When's the last time the two of us could sit down in a restaurant together and eat food that was prepared *just* for us? Almost never, because it's been years of needing to scrimp and save every penny so that I could go to college, years of *just getting by*. Years of barely making ends meet.

Then I decided to invest all of my savings into the new business with Willow, instead of getting my mother out of this hellhole like I originally planned.

I can see it all now, almost like an out-of-body experience. How much we are trapped by socioeconomic factors. How much we are held down, unable to thrive.

How much has my life has been impacted by systemic racism, without me even realizing it?

How much of *our* lives has been stolen from us?

How much have we suffered and waited? How much joy could we have been experiencing instead?

If we chose not to play by their rules. To play this game, in this place, in these parameters.

If we chose to just say *fuck it* and leave and be free?

Could we just be happy? Right now?

Leave all this shit behind?

"Oh my goodness," my mother is saying as she wakes up with surprise to Clawdia licking her nose. Then she looks up at me and laughs. "What the heck are you doing, child? You know we can't have cats here."

She rubs her eyes tiredly and begins to pet Clawdia. I study her wrinkles and leathery skin. She looks so worn out and weathered by life. She looks so weary.

“Mom,” I say gently, going to her side, and crouching down beside the couch. “You always say you hate your job, right?”

“Yes,” she answers. “I became a nurse to help people, but I never get a chance to do that anymore. In the hospice, we just give morphine to make people ‘comfortable’ while they die. But the thing is... I really wonder if some of those patients could recover if their families didn’t give up? Most of the time, their families don’t even visit.”

I pet Clawdia also, as I listen to her speak.

“They just send their sick parents there to die so they can get their inheritance faster,” she says bitterly. “It’s not like back home, where people live with their parents and care for them until they die. No, here, they toss their elderly away in the trash. The hospice may look beautiful, but it’s just a fancy trash can, Destiny. We don’t give people an IV drip, no food or water, we literally starve them to death and call it a humane and natural way of letting people go. I have to follow the protocols, but I hate the protocols. It makes no sense, and it doesn’t feel like medicine. It just feels like giving up. Some of those people fight to hold on, but I make it so that they have to die. There’s no way out, once you get into hospice. It’s just over. But what if they could recover? What if we could help them get better? We’re just not even allowed to try. I hate my job so much.”

I stare at her for a moment. “How do you feel about getting away from here? You’ve been talking about wanting to go somewhere warm for a while now. You’ve been missing the Carribean. Let’s just pack up and go.”

“We can’t afford that, honey,” she says softly. “It would be nice... but your restaurant is only just getting up and running. You’re only just starting to make good money. We need to keep working hard and saving and sacrificing a bit longer, and then maybe we can buy a house...”

“I’m sick of sacrificing everything!” I say bitterly, as tears sting the back of my eyes. “I’m sick of being miserable here, Mom. We’ve lost so much of our lives in struggling and

struggling and not getting anywhere. I want this to stop. I want us to be happy *now*. I want you to retire from that shitty job.”

“But sweetie, things are getting better,” she says, touching my face. “We’ve worked so hard to get to a better place, and we’re almost there. Maybe just a few more years...”

“We’re never going to get there, Mom.” I shake my head brokenly. “There are people in this town who threatened to do harm to you. They can hurt us and take everything away so easily... I just don’t feel safe here anymore. I want you to go into retirement.”

My mother sits up then, frowning. “Are you talking about the shooting, honey? Is that what’s bothering you? They got the killer and he’s in custody. I know that it was really scary, but these things are so random, it shouldn’t happen again...”

“Not that, Mom,” I say hoarsely. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Anything, honey.”

I bite my lip, trying to think of how to say this without getting emotional. But before I can speak, the tears start streaming down my face. “Do you remember Douglas Wintergreen?” I ask her softly.

“Yes,” she responds slowly. “That boy you had a crush on in high school?”

“It was more than that,” I explain, as I wipe my sleeve across my eyes, trying to hold back the waterworks and keep it together so that I don’t end up sobbing for hours.

But when Clawdia lovingly rubs her little body against my face, brushing away some of my tears with her fur, I lose my composure completely and my shoulders shake violently with the tears.

“I have to tell you something, Mom. It’s real bad. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She wraps her arms around me with concern, and Clawdia also stays close to us for comfort.

“I told you those people were trouble,” she whispers. “I told you from day one. People with that much money? They can’t resist playing God. You can’t trust them. None of them. Not even Willow. I know you love her, but in the end, she will only use you.”

“I know,” I say, crying. “I know that now. That’s why we have to go.”

CHAPTER 16



DOUGLAS

Lying on Robbie's bed, with my arms folded behind my head, I stare up at the ceiling with worry.

Dez hasn't come home for days.

Willow brought me here, and helped me get settled in, and then has mostly been busy with her restaurant or her fiancé. I waited all night, pacing the house, hoping that Dez would come home so that we could talk... but she never did.

I've been worried since the first day, but everyone else said it was probably nothing. She was probably just staying with her mom. But I drove over to her mother's apartment the second day I was here, and knocked on their door, and there was no answer. I got her number, and called and texted her endlessly, because we have so much unfinished business.

And because I just want to *see* her again.

But she's disappeared, like a ghost.

I wonder if this the way I made her feel, when I left. Like the rug has been pulled out from under your feet. Honestly, it's worse than I imagined.

It's hard to breathe.

I can't stop wondering about her safety. Imagining a thousand things going wrong. Wondering if I'll ever see her again.

And I can't seem to sleep, either. Not after I experienced what it was like to sleep beside her... and hoping all day,

every day that I'll get a chance to hold her like that again.

I just lie awake waiting.

I know I deserve this. I know I've made her feel the same, or worse.

I never knew just how much it can kill a person inside to be constantly *waiting*.

Now, Willow and Robbie are also starting to worry. Dez hasn't been in to work, and she's never missed a day since they opened their restaurant.

Willow finally agreed that we should call the police and make a report.

When the cops came to the house and questioned us about all the details, and I had to admit in front of my sister that I'd had some personal issues with Dez, and she could be upset at me, and that would be enough reason for her to leave. We found out, after the police investigated her room, that most of her clothes were gone.

The expression of betrayal on my sister's face was like a stab to the gut.

I told the police more in private, but the damage was done.

My little sister, who idolized me for my entire life, was now looking at me like an enemy.

"What did you do to her? What did you say to her? How could you make her so upset that she would just leave? You know I'm getting married in a few days, right? I need Dez! There's so much to do? I can't survive this without her! How am I supposed to get married without my maid of honor?"

But Willow freaking out about her unexpected departure has made me question whether or not Dez was actually right to leave. It almost sounds like the number of tasks that Willow dumped on Dez for this wedding planning situation was insane.

It's no wonder that the poor girl felt like she was drowning under the weight of those duties. I can understand why she

made comparisons to feeling like a slave.

I'm not trying to shift blame from my own wrongdoing, which I know is probably the greatest harm that anyone has ever done to Destiny in her life. I knew that her father walked out on her, and how much harm that caused her. I promised her I would never do the same thing to her, and I did.

It's unforgiveable. Totally unforgiveable.

But I can't help wondering if there's some blame to share, here.

If there's even 1% of blame to place on Willow and Robbie for also being hurtful and taking her for granted, then that would ease my chest a tiny bit from the crushing guilt that is barely allowing me to breathe.

I reach for my pocket, where I still have the wine-stained invitation that Destiny gave me. Somehow, this little piece of pearly cardstock, covered in elegant calligraphy cursing me and wishing for me to rot in hell, or die of archaic diseases, has become my most prized possession.

The moment the invitation arrived in the mail, and I saw her handwriting... it almost didn't matter what it said. It was already the most precious thing I owned.

But when I saw the words? When I let my fingertips drift over those passionate, hateful, angry sentences...

I knew she still loved me.

I cried with the beauty of those words. No one can feel so much passion toward someone they still don't care for, deeply. The opposite of love is not hate—It's indifference.

And she did not feel indifferent toward me. I have never felt so *blessed* to have someone's most vicious, unadulterated hatred.

Sitting up, I throw my legs off the side of Robbie's bed, and head toward Dez's bedroom. I can't do this anymore. I can't pretend that we didn't happen.

I need to feel close to her.

So I sit on her bed, and clutch her pillow against my chest, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her hair. I sit like this for several minutes, until Willow bursts into the room.

“The police got in touch with her!” Willow says in a panic. Her face is red, and she’s hyperventilating, and I think she’s going to need to take some of her pills to calm down. “She’s gone. She’s gone, Doug. She left of her own free will, and she just doesn’t want to talk to us. Why would she do that? Why would she leave?”

She is struggling to breathe when she suddenly notices the item in my arms.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asks in horror. “Are you sniffing her pillow? What the fuck, Douglas?”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I say to her softly. I pat the bed beside me, but I do not let go of the pillow. “Come and sit.”

“Doug!” she shouts desperately. “She’s my best friend. Please. What did you do?”

“Sit,” I instruct her again.

Willow sighs and follows my instructions, but sitting allows her breathing to slow slightly.

“Before I left, Destiny and I were together,” I inform her gently. “For a long time. Secretly.”

She stares at me with shock and horror in her eyes. “But how? She never once mentioned it to me. Never. Surely she would have told me?”

I reach into my pocket for the wedding invitation, and hand it to my sister wordlessly.

She takes it and reads it. Then she reads it again, in shock.

“Oh, god...” Willow whispers, as realization dawns on her. “She *did* tell me. Not that it was you. She told me she had fallen in love with someone, some rich older guy. She said she lost her virginity to someone, and he left suddenly and broke

her heart. She was depressed for months, maybe years. *THAT WAS YOU?*”

Willow turns to the side and punches me in the arm. “You did this to her?”

“Yes,” I answer softly.

“How *could* you?” she asks, crying now, and continuing to punch my arm. “She was so young. How could you be such a dick? She was only ever good to anyone. She’s the best person I know. I always knew she loved you, I just didn’t know how much.”

“Will,” I say softly, shutting my eyes. “It gets worse. Way worse. I have to tell you the reason I left. What our mother did. I don’t want to do this, but I have to tell you. Especially since you’re about to marry a person of color... but I guess it’s different because his parents are billionaires...”

“What did she do?” Willow asks.

I hug the pillow tightly against my chest. Then I begin to tell her. And she puts her head in her hands, and cries and cries.

CHAPTER 17



DESTINY

Three months later...

STANDING in my new kitchen in my Caribbean home, I do the dishes as I look out at the water. My mother had a cousin living on a small impoverished island, who agreed to take us in if we could help out with the finances and chores.

Our money goes a long way here, compared to Vermont.

It's a simpler life.

It did not take much convincing to get my mother to come with me, once I decided to tell her everything. I explained it all, holding nothing back, and she cried and held me.

We both agreed that we could no longer stay in a town that was owned by our enemies, powerful people who could do us such great harm on a whim.

I liquidated my bank account and sold my car. I texted our accountant that I was selling my stake in our restaurant. I blocked Robbie and Willow, and even Douglas who must have gotten my phone number from someone, and kept trying to call me.

I bailed on my maid of honor duties. I don't care about Willow and her damn wedding anymore. I'm sure they'll live happily ever after.

Oh, yeah. And I fucking took her cat.

Clawdia just seemed to want to come with me, and I couldn't leave her behind. My loyal feline companion. The only creature who could never betray me. Not in a million years.

So, I guess this is retirement. Finishing up with drying the dishes, I walk out of our home and onto the milky white sand of the island. It's peaceful. And perfect. And it's everything that I didn't know I needed.

The craziest thing: I have begun sleeping in until 9 AM every day. I don't have to wake up to bake shit for hungry masses of rich people. I go at my own pace. Slowed down and relaxed. Sometimes I even wake up at noon.

Island time.

Sitting in a little porch swing, I watch my mother and her cousin sit and chat with the neighbors and their kids, who are running around and playing barefoot. Sometimes, Clawdia and I play with the kids, and walk along the beach, hunting for sea glass or sea shells. Examining little crabs and turtles, and all the wonders of this new environment.

I feel at ease. That rock that was sitting on my heart for so long seems to have disappeared. I am so grateful that Douglas told me the truth about why he left.

At least now, I finally know what happened. Every day, I still sit here, looking out at the water and thinking about it. Processing it. I wonder if I'll always think about it, for the rest of my life. And wonder what could have happened.

I guess I've decided that it's less painful to know that he was blackmailed and threatened and manipulated into leaving, than believing that the person I loved was my enemy. We had the odds stacked against us from the start. We came from different worlds.

He was weak. But I do believe he loved me, as much as he could manage to. In his own way. Maybe it's better to let go. Safer.

Maybe if we had tried to fight to be together, we would have both ended up dead, like Romeo and Juliet.

Like Othello and Desdemona.

Another poor, unlucky ill-fated Dez in a bi-racial relationship that nasty-hearted people simply would not allow.

But at least I experienced love. And at least I got to spend one last night in his arms, and feel how much he still cared. How strong our connection was—how not even time could diminish it a tiny bit, even after years and years. How his hand still fit so perfectly in mine. How his eyes still looked so deeply into mine, and saw me for who I am, more than anyone else ever could.

Tears stream down my cheeks as I sit here, staring out at the water. But I'm happy. I'm finally able to let go.

When Clawdia comes over to me, running across the sand to jump into my lap, I hug her close and laugh. "What have you been up to, silly kitty?" She meows in response.

Even Clawdia seems happier here, as she dozes off in my lap. We sit here for a while, comfortably.

"Hey, you bitch," says a female voice from the side. "You stole my freaking cat."

I turn to see Willow standing there, with tears in her eyes.

Clawdia jumps off my lap and runs to greet Willow, rubbing up against her legs. I rise to my feet anxiously. "How did you find me?"

"We tracked the GPS on Clawdia's collar," says a male voice from the side, and I turn to see Robbie standing there. "We weren't going to let you leave us, you maniac. Friends for life, remember? Also, everyone at the restaurant is complaining that the bakery has sucked since you left."

"I'm not going back," I tell them both firmly, as I fight back tears. "I can't go back. I'm sure you both understand."

"I'm so sorry," Willow says, stepping closer to take my hand. "I'm so sorry if I ever treated you badly or made you feel like you weren't appreciated. I never knew about you and Doug. Or my mother..."

“It’s okay,” I tell her with a shrug.

“God, Dez, I’m so sorry. You’re my best friend, and I love you so much. You’re the most important person to me in the world. I would choose you over anyone. My own family. My husband. That jerk over there, Roberto.”

There are tears streaming down her face. And soon, mine too. Robbie is grumbling in annoyance, but he gets over it quickly.

“Yeah, I’m a bit of a jerk. I shouldn’t have betrayed your trust,” Robbie says softly, coming forward to take my other hand. “I really had only good intentions. I swear, Dez. I just wanted you to heal. I’m sorry for all the pain I caused.”

“You did help,” I tell him softly, squeezing his hand. “You helped a lot. I love both of you so much, I just can’t go home.”

“You don’t have to,” says another voice, a deep man’s voice. He walks forward to join us, smiling at me with pure love in his eyes, and my heart aches for him.

Douglas is still the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.

I don’t really understand what is happening when he lowers himself to one knee, and pulls out a ring.

“Destiny Adams, will you please forgive me, and be my wife? I will never let anything come between us again. As long as I’m alive and breathing, I want to be near you. And I’ll do anything to make that happen, fight anyone who gets in our way. I’ll go anywhere you want to be in the world. I don’t care what country you want to live in.”

I stare at him for a long moment. “Douglas, are you sure? Maybe we should talk about this a bit more...”

“We can talk about anything you want, for as long as you want. But I know this for sure. I’m not leaving your side again, Dezzie. I can’t live away from you anymore—I just need you. I need to be with you, or else I’m not whole. I’m not complete. And I’m not comfortable with wasting any more years living only half-alive! Do you understand me?”

I nod slowly. I steal furtive glances at Willow and Robbie, whose faces are covered in emotion and pain.

“We spoke to our mother and she apologized,” Willow explains hoarsely. “I am sorry that she said those things, Dez. I had no idea. I can’t imagine how that made you feel.”

I look over to my mother, who has noticed our visitors. She has gotten up from where she was sitting with her cousin and looking over at us with concern. But she is also somewhat smiling, because I know she understands how much my friends mean to me. And how much Doug means to me.

“Are you going to make me stay down here on my knees forever, Dezzie?” Douglas asks softly. “Or are you going to answer the question: Will you marry me? I don’t care about anything, as long as I’m with you. I want us to finally start to create the life we always dreamed of. What do you say?”

The tears have begun flowing again, and my body moves without permission to dive forward to throw my arms around his neck. “Yes,” I whisper. “Yes, yes, yes. A thousand times yes.”

Willow and Robbie cheer behind me, as Douglas kisses me deeply, with his hands in my hair. He is also crying, and our salty tears are mingling together on our skin, tasting like the salty ocean waves that kiss the sandy beach.

Feeling his strong arms around me, I feel better than just safe—I feel complete. The one missing piece of me is here, and I don’t have to think about it or wonder where he is, or yearn for him across thousands of miles.

He’s *here*. Holding me close. Committing to me.

Fighting for us.

The grass is starting to look greener all around me. The water and sky are looking bluer again. The color and beauty is returning to my world.

And I know, for maybe the first time in my entire life, that everything is going to be okay.

* * *

Don't miss the story of Dez's best friend Willow trying to save
her restaurant:

THE PRINCESS AND THE NERD

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Food is her passion, but he has the power to destroy her dreams...

Willow's restaurant has been trashed by a nasty review from an influential food critic. A handsome, nerdy, condescending celebrity chef who could crush her career with one sarcastic swipe of his pen.

When Mr. Bigshot's visit goes horribly and hilariously wrong, he calls Willow a spoiled rotten Princess, and calls her food much, much worse. Comparisons to mouse droppings have been made.

Business starts to die, and Willow knows she must find a way to change the critic's mind—or become the pitiful embarrassment of her successful family, and worse... risk letting down her closest friends and business partners. She invites the critic to her brother's wedding so that he can sample her catering. But the London-born, Indian chef is the most uptight, frustrating, grumpy, and impossibly hot man that Willow has ever met.

The two drive each other insane every time they meet. Every word exchanged between them seems to be a snarky insult. There's only one way this can end: in a ferocious food fight, or with someone getting taken on the dining table.

A small-town, enemies-to-lovers romantic comedy with a guaranteed HEA.

Sweet and steamy, over the top, lots of laughs.

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The story of how Spruce Wintergreen met his wife:

They call me Junebug and I'm the artist in the family. Which means I'm always dirt broke.

When my mom's hospital bills start piling up, I take every odd job I can find in Silver Mountain. Eventually that leads to a nanny position at the biggest mansion in town, belonging to a wealthy businessman. His kids are cute as stuffed animals.

Only one problem: their dad might be the hot mystery man I've been making out with in a hospital broom closet. Oops.

Mystery Man

Hiring June was a bad idea.

She's as sweet as apple pie, always smiling in her polka dots. She makes my heart warm, and makes my little demon children behave like perfect angels. I have never seen them smile so much.

I know I should be professional, but I can't keep my hands off her.

She has no idea that my secret plan is to make her more than just their nanny.

I want her to be their mother.

[Read June's Story](#)

PREVIEW

PLEASE ENJOY A PREVIEW OF

THE PRINCESS AND THE NERD

THE STORY OF DESTINY'S BEST FRIEND, WILLOW

CHAPTER 1

WILLOW

Crisp white tablecloths? Check. Sparkling wine glasses? Check.

A team of incredibly talented professionals, including two of my closest friends? Check.

Everything is going perfectly well tonight. Absolutely nothing can go wrong.

I walk briskly through the dining room, checking and double checking that everything is set up correctly. My slight OCD forces me to adjust and readjust a few positions of the centerpieces until they are perfectly aligned. Candles and fresh flowers in vases are a necessary touch for the romantic ambience of our upscale, fine-dining experience. It's going to be a perfect night.

My fingertips nudge the roses a bit to the left. Then to the right. After a few more probably-unnecessary adjustments, I take a deep breath.

You got this, Willow. You got this.

Walking back into the kitchen confidently, I gather the troops for a pep talk.

“Okay, team!” I say, clapping my hands to get their attention. “As you all know, we are expecting an important food critic tonight. I need you all to be at the top of your game.”

“Who’s the critic?” a sous-chef asks. “Maybe we can cater to their special tastes.”

“It’s probably *that* woman from *that* magazine,” whispers a waiter. “I forget the name.”

“The Vermont Kitchen one?” asks another chef.

“No, the New England travel guide.”

“You’re all wrong,” says the sommelier, checking his phone. “I have insider information that it’s H.D. McGuinty from Wine and Food International.”

“Oh, shit,” says my best friend, Destiny. “I need to retouch my makeup. Isn’t that the guy who put a three Michelin-starred restaurant in New York out of business?”

“The very same.”

“Well, the pressure’s on.”

When everyone starts exchanging worried looks and chatter, I step forward. “Relax, guys! No need to stress—it’s just an ordinary day. We just do what we always do—maybe with a pinch more pizzazz! We’ll sprinkle a little more greatness on the food tonight.”

But some of the waitresses look anxious. “Is he a McGuinty like the loaded Silver Mountain family? Maybe we could flirt with him. What do you think he’ll order?”

“Probably a steak or lobster. He’s probably old, so something basic. What do you think H.D. stands for anyway?”

“High Definition?” someone whispers.

“Heavy Duty,” another woman says with a giggle.

“Okay,” I say, clapping my hands together again briskly. “Let’s continue with prep. Everyone to their stations. It’s Friday night, and we are booked solid with reservations. Gonna be a busy one!”

Everyone stops gossiping about the mystery man and heads back to work. Except for Destiny, who takes my arm and pulls me aside.

“Girl, did you even sleep last night?” she asks, as she reaches into her giant purse and pulls out a wand of concealer. She adds three dots underneath both my eyes, evenly spaced, then begins to pat and blend the makeup out gently with her fingertips.

“I got at least one hour,” I tell her. Then I frown. “Dez, why do you even have concealer in my skin tone?”

“Because I hate seeing puffy dark circles under your eyes. And you never sleep.”

“That’s really kind of you,” I tell her with a thankful smile.

“Also, I must have accidentally grabbed it off the bathroom countertop when I stole your lipstick,” she admits.

I chuckle softly. “With friends like you, who needs a sister?”

“Your lipstick is just crazy good, and you never even use it,” she complains. Reaching into her purse, she pulls out the slender, elegant golden tube. She removes the cap and twists it, before adding a touch of color to my mouth. “Press your lips together,” she instructs. I do, and she nods. “There we go. It’s a big night, Will, I can’t have you walking around here looking like a pale, white ghost.”

“Much appreciated,” I tell her with a sigh, and a little roll of my eyes.

She grins, and spans my ass, before moving away. “You got this, girl.”

And I think I do. I move around the kitchen, supervising everything as the specials of the day are being prepared. Our famous clam chowder is simmering. Destiny’s strawberry rhubarb pie is almost finished being freshly baked, and it smells divine. That pie is so good that she usually has to bake extra for the restaurant staff to take home—and sometimes people come in for just the pie.

Dez is so friendly and cheerful that she greets everyone entering the restaurant, performing the task of a hostess, even though she really doesn’t need to. She is just the warmest, loveliest girl with the sweetest smile, and I am blessed to have her as the face of my business. She’s my secret weapon.

I continue to walk through the kitchen, examining everyone’s workstation with pride.

Nodding with approval, feeling proud of my team.

We’re a well-oiled machine, and everyone is doing what they do best. I am feeling totally pumped, psyched-up, and positive that things are going to go well.

Until I see it. The one hitch in my plan.

The one, chaotic, unexpected element that could threaten to send everything spiraling out of control.

My head chef is crying directly onto the food.

CHAPTER 2

With his shoulders shaking, my childhood friend Roberto stands hunched over the crab cake appetizers. Tears are sliding down his cheeks and into the little cylinders of seafood.

“Hey!” I say as panic floods my chest. I rush over to his side, touching his arm gently. He is sobbing so hard that he doesn’t seem to hear me.

“Rob. Robbers. Hey. RobRob. Berto. *Robbie!* What’s going on?”

He finally seems to snap out of his trance. “Oh... Don’t mind me, Will.”

“You’re blubbering all over the food and I think something is burning... so I have to worry.”

“Sorry,” he says, wiping his face and grabbing the cried-on-crab-cakes to toss them into the trash. “I forgot to add salt. And crab. I’ll fix it.”

“Honey...what’s going on?” I press again, trying not to get caught up in wondering how he forgot to add the *crab* to the freaking crab cakes.

“It’s Alejandro. He left me.”

Shit.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell him. “What happened?”

“He—he said I’m just a—a silly boytoy. That I’m not—not husband material.”

“Oh, honey,” I say softly, stepping closer to give him an awkward hug. “Don’t listen to that asshole. We should have known he was trouble. Isn’t there a Lady Gaga song warning us about impossibly hot men named Alejandro?”

“That song is my anthem,” Robbie whispers through his tears. “She’s so iconic.”

“Exactly. So from now on, we listen to Lady Gaga and date better men.”

“She mentions my name in the song too,” Robbie says brokenly, removing his chef’s hat. “Maybe I’m the problem. There must be something wrong with *me*, Will. Why does this always happen when things are getting serious?”

I watch as he struggles to keep it together, accidentally splashing melted butter all over his workstation. Poor boy is a hot mess.

“Shhh,” I tell him soothingly, rubbing his back. “Okay, Robbers. You should probably take the night off.”

He wipes his sleeve across his eyes.

“No. This is a big night for you. I won’t let you down. You need me.”

“I mostly need you to go home and eat some peanut butter ice cream, and listen to Lady Gaga, and have a good cry,” I tell him. “Deal?”

“I do love peanut butter ice cream,” he says with a sniffle.

“We can try our best to manage without you tonight. You can come back when you’re feeling better.”

“And let the sous-chef cook for the critic? Hell, no,” Robbie says, wiping his nose and putting his hat back on. “I guarantee he screws it all up.”

“Well... maybe I could try to cook?” I suggest anxiously. I don’t have all of Robbie’s world-class education and awards but I do have some. I’m definitely more skilled than the sous-chef.

“No way, Will,” he says with concern. “You’ll have a full-on meltdown panic attack again. You’ve been doing so much better lately.”

“True,” I say softly.

“You just focus on running the business,” he says, squeezing my arm. “We can eat ice cream together later and I’ll tell you all about how that pig Alejandro done me wrong. But I don’t want to see you freak out and start washing your hands for half an hour until they are raw and bleeding.”

“That was *one time*, Robbie,” I whisper. “And I had just shaken hands with a customer who was clearly sick and coughing every few seconds into their hands. I didn’t want to get the whole kitchen sick.”

“Whatever you say, girl—but we both know that once you start cooking, you’ll go on a crazy cleaning, scrubbing, disinfecting rampage. Just let me do my thing. I’m good. I promise.”

“Okay,” I say hesitantly, pointing. “But you’re burning the mushroom caps.”

“Crap. I just need a drink, maybe? To help me focus.” Robbie takes a deep breath and stretches out his arms. “Maybe a bit of rosé?”

“I’ll bring some over right away,” I tell him.

“Rosé, right away, for Robbé,” he sings cheerfully. “I’m down for that. Anyday!”

I smile, glad to see him back to his old self.

“Miss Willow, we need you over here,” calls out one of the waitresses. “Customers are arriving.”

“Coming,” I call out, patting Robbie on the back for support, one last time. “You’ll get through this.”

“I don’t know, girl. But once I get a little bit of wine in me, I’m sure that I’ll cook you up a storm.”

CHAPTER 3

I exhale to center myself as I move out of the kitchen. Dez immediately moves to my side.

“Two families with kids arrived,” she whispers. “Two couples, and two single men. Neither gave their names, but one of them must be the critic.”

“Does anyone know what this H.D. McGuinty looks like?” I ask her.

“No. But that’s a Scottish name, right? So probably the old, heavyset, white dude in the suit, with the gigantic, fluffy Santa-beard.”

“Hmmm. Who’s the other single man?”

“Over there,” Destiny says, pointing. “Kind of nerdy-looking, tall Indian dude with glasses and the preppy, purple, argyle sweater vest. Kind of sexy in a weird way?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t seem like a McGuinty,” I say with a nod. “Crap. Why did you guys not give the old dude one of our best tables, with the view?”

“Sorry, Will. Just a habit of saving those for families—everyone has been overwhelmed today. I’ll go move him right now.”

“No,” I tell her. “I’ll handle it. You go get a bottle of rosé for Robbie. He’s losing it. Alejandro dumped him.”

“Shit,” she whispers. “That’s going to take a lot of rosé.”

“And probably a few buckets of ice cream later,” I inform her. “Jerk told Robbie he was just a boytoy.”

“Are you *fucking* kidding me?” she curses under her breath. “We might have to key Asshole-landro’s car. Or at least grab a baseball bat and smash the headlights.”

“Okay, Carrie Underwood. We’ll discuss revenge for Robbie later. Let’s just get through this night.”

“Yes, boss,” Destiny says with a darkened scowl as she walks away. She has always been extremely defensive of our

Robbie. Since we were teens.

Smoothing my hands down over my pencil skirt, I walk briskly through the dining room, past the families with kids. I smile at the little ones who are clearly having a blast being out to dinner, and enjoying the view of the river outside the windows. They exclaim with excitement whenever they see a little animal poke its head out and scurry around the landscape. We are blessed with plenty of squirrels and chipmunks who never cease to entertain.

I also walk past one of the couples, who are holding hands across the table, illuminated by the candlelight and flowers. They are staring adoringly into each other's eyes, and it makes my stomach twist. They look so happy. I wonder what it's like to be out on a date. I haven't had the time in years. I bet *she* doesn't own her own business. It looks like she had the time to do a full face of makeup—and to get a proper night's rest.

Finally, I walk past the preppy looking Indian guy in the sweater vest. He looks up at me from under his thick-rimmed glasses, and I notice that the elegant manscaping of his facial hair—with a stylish little line shaved into his temple. Damn. His thick, longish dark hair is delicately gelled back, and he's wearing a little stainless steel earring in one ear. Dez wasn't kidding, he is kind of strangely sexy, in a geeky, uptight computer-nerd way. It's probably just the purple and black, criss-crossing pattern of his argyle sweater. It really compliments his skin tone.

I force myself to look away from his hypnotic hazel eyes, and clear my throat. Tall, dark, and handsome usually means trouble to be avoided at all costs. Like Robbie's Alejandro.

I'm walking away now.

Focusing back on the task at hand, I head over to the older gentleman.

“Hello, sir, thank you for joining us this evening. We actually just had a reservation cancelled, and can offer you a better table near the window with a view of the waterfall. What do you say?”

“Why, that’s splendid,” he says with a warm smile. “My wife and I used to come here all the time when we were younger.”

“So did my parents,” I tell him happily as I guide him to the better table. “That’s what led me to buying the restaurant and renovating it recently.”

“You’ve done a bang-up job, young lady,” he says with an approving nod as he follows me to the better seat. “The waterfall looks stunning through these new glass windows. And the mountains in the distance! I wish my wife could see it. It’s her birthday today.”

“Oh, will she be joining us?” I ask him.

“No, sadly she’s not with us any longer,” he says with a sad smile. “But I like to go out to the places she used to love, and remember her. Pretend she’s still with me, and enjoy these things on her behalf.”

“Then we’ll make sure you have a wonderful meal, sir,” I tell him gently. “And feel free to pick any dessert on the house. A present for your wife’s birthday.”

“Thank you, my dear. That is very kind,” he says warmly.

I am feeling extremely cheerful after this sweet interaction. It was a good start to a great dining experience, and will surely help us get a positive review. I walk back to the kitchen, trying not to make eye contact with the gorgeous, tanned man in the glasses who seems to be staring at me intently.

But when I open the doors to the cooking area, I see that something on the stovetop has just caught on fire. Dez is trying desperately to put it out. Robbie is sitting in a corner and crying into his chef’s hat, with the bottle of rosé on the floor beside him.

“What the hell is going on?” I whisper to my staff in horror.

“Ale-asshole posted a picture on Instagram,” Dez is explaining, as she runs over to the oven, where something else has mysteriously caught on fire. “With another man.”

Why are so many things on fire? Did Robbie just pour lighter fluid all over my kitchen? Did he try to flambé someone's face? I am vaguely reminded of trying to become a chef in the Sims game, as a child, where things would randomly catch on fire in the kitchen.

Is this real life? Or some kind of alternate reality where everything goes wrong?

I sigh deeply as Robbie sobs. I stare for a moment at the disaster before me, then I roll up my sleeves.

“Okay. I guess I’m cooking.”

CHAPTER 4

My tired eyes are burning from lack of sleep, and unable to handle even the faintest, first rays of morning sun. I squint and drag the blankets back over my face, feeling a bit cramped up from falling asleep on the couch. Dez is sleeping on the other side of the sofa where I am, lying on her side with her legs folded up, wearing pink fuzzy socks on her feet. It was a long night at work, and an even longer night after work, taking care of our heartbroken Robbie.

Drinks were had. Many, many drinks.

Bottles and lipstick-stained glasses are scattered around the coffee table, and it feels a bit like college. I'll clean it up later.

When my phone rings, I groan at the piercing sound that seems to echo inside my head like a freight train. Dez also makes whimpering noises of complaint. Who could be calling me at this ungodly hour?

Fumbling around for my phone, just to stop the shrill, infernal cacophony of beeping, I peel one eye open to check the caller ID:

ANNOYING BROTHER

No. I am not in the mood to deal with Ash right now. I silence the call and put my phone away, pulling the blankets back over my head.

But it starts ringing immediately. *Again.*

What could be so important? I sit up and smash the answer button.

“*WHAT?*” I nearly shout into the phone.

“Good morning to you, too, my beloved little sister,” Ash responds cheerfully. “I forgot what an angel you are at sunrise. How I’ve missed your pleasant demeanor.”

He sounds way too chipper and sarcastic. Something must be going on.

I frown, rubbing my head. “What’s up? Why would you call me at the very buttercrack of dawn?”

“Because, my sweet little Will, I have a very important question to ask you.”

“Spit it out,” I grumble.

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“*Ash!*” I snap.

“How does it feel to officially become the new fuck up of the family?”

The question causes my blood to run cold. Almost instantly, I sit up straight and the blanket falls off my torso. “What are you talking about?” I ask hoarsely. “What could I possibly have done that would compete with you accidentally pouring hot sauce into a woman’s vagina and nearly destroying the family business?”

“Ouch. Thank you for the reminder of my failings—it’s not like Father and Mother aren’t shoving the scandal in my face every five minutes and forcing me to jump through hoops to atone for my sins. Anyway, somehow, you may have actually gotten worse press than the hot sauce.”

“What the hell did I do?” I ask again, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I didn’t stick anyone’s dick in a jar of hot sauce, so there’s no way I’m more interesting to the tabloids than you are.”

“Ha, ha. It seems like you could actually use a little hot sauce over there, sis. Just take a look at the headlines. I’ll give you a minute to process this—maybe spend some time screaming at the top of your lungs. Maybe run around your house tearing out your hair. Maybe pop open a bottle of whiskey. Right now, you gotta do whatever you gotta do to get past this. And when you’re done reacting, call me back and I will set you up with my PR team to help you manage this crisis.”

“PR team?” I whisper in response. “How bad could it be?”

“You’ll see. Love you, girlie. Say hello to Dez and Robbers for me.”

When Ash hangs up, I sit here frowning for a moment, frozen with fear and anxiety. I glance over at Dez who is still peacefully sleeping in her fuzzy socks, and Robbie who is curled up in the armchair. My cat Clawdia is also snuggled up cozily beside Robbie, because that is her favorite chair and blanket. She'll tolerate sharing it with him for the moment because she can sense his sadness.

My friends have always helped me and supported me through every goal and challenge and setback. We almost designed our careers around each other, so that we could work in the same industry, and eventually open a business together. I have given all my effort to this dream of ours—I can't let them down. I refuse to let them down, when they have also given everything. All their time and energy and passion.

Heading to the internet browser on my phone, I type in the name of my restaurant. The first few hits cause my eyes to go wide. This is not good.

*RACIST WINTERGREEN PRINCESS SERVES UP
DISAPPOINTMENT AND DISCRIMINATION AT
HER IDYLIC RESTAURANT IN THE VERMONT
MOUNTAINS*

Fuck.

I put my head in my hands, taking a deep breath, uncertain if I can handle reading anymore. But my curiosity is somehow greater than my need to avoid pain.

It is truly rare that I am so deeply surprised by the mediocrity of the food at such a fine establishment. But it is even rarer that I am so deeply offended by the selective service. What really shocked and appalled me more than the bland and lifeless meals, was the way that I was dismissed and ignored by all the staff at The Willow (arrogantly named after its heiress owner.)

The food was dreadful. But the experience was worse. Miss Wintergreen completely avoided me all night, refusing to even make eye contact with me. When she walked by my table, she acted like I was invisible. One glance at me, and my skin color, and she decided I wasn't worthy of even a basic hello or welcome.

Now this would be fine—maybe she's just not super friendly. But she then proceeded to shower an immense amount of personal attention on a rich, white, older gentleman. Catering to his every whim and fancy. Sitting and chatting with him for several minutes at a time.

If you are a person of color, this may not be the restaurant for you to dine at. They will make you sit at the inferior tables. Make you wait for hours longer for your food than the prioritized individuals with less melanin in their skin. But if you're comfortable with feeling like a second-rate citizen, and would enjoy the historically authentic experience of segregation—definitely make a reservation. Maybe you'll get a kick out of imagining you're in the Civil War era or American

revolution—like a little restaurant-Renaissance fair. Better yet, if you have unresolved daddy issues and low self-esteem, and feel like you're not worthy of respect, equality, and good service, this may be just the restaurant for you.

But now let's discuss the food...

Fuck.

I'm ruined. I might as well apply for bankruptcy right now. He utterly destroyed me. My business has been totally and irrevocably annihilated.

CHAPTER 5

I can't bear to read beyond the first section of the article before I'm calling Ash back frantically. There are tears in my eyes. "Help me." I say brokenly. "It's not true. It's a misunderstanding."

"So, you didn't ignore him and avoid making eye contact when walking by?" he asks.

I pause, taking a deep breath to control my tears. "Yes, I did, but it was only because he was making *bedroom eyes* at me. Underneath these big, thick, glasses—just piercing eyes like he was judging me—which I guess he was. And he had this sexy bedroom hair, with a stylish haircut. And this cute, colorful sweater. He was too handsome to look at directly. He just seemed like trouble. And after what just happened to Robbie..."

"What happened to Robbie?" Ash asks.

I glance over at my friend who still seems totally passed out, blackout drunk. "His boyfriend of two years dumped him," I whisper. "And instantly moved onto another man. Alejandro was a similar type—the nerdy-sexy, intelligent, arrogant player who seems like a good, stable guy but is actually just dressed up like one. He's just a jerk who's full of himself on the inside."

"Don't you think that you might have judged your customer a little harshly?" Ash asks. "Just because he happened to remind you of someone who was a jerk on the inside, doesn't mean you should treat him with prejudice. That other person who he resembles physically has nothing to do with who he is. It's unfair of you to assume, treat him differently, and make him feel inferior."

I pause, and consider this for a moment. "I suppose you're right. I guess I'm just suspicious of anyone who's that good-looking and well-put-together. Like you, Ash. You're always so well-dressed and impeccably groomed, but I would say a prayer for the sanity of any woman who has the misfortune of going near you."

“Thanks,” he says with a sigh. “But you shouldn’t judge me either, Will. You grew up with me and you know who I am, but you still let the media influence your opinion so heavily. I know, I haven’t always been amazing—but I’m working on it. The hot sauce thing was a fluke, but it seems like I’ll never live it down.”

“And will I ever live this down?” I ask him softly. “Or am I done for?”

He takes a moment to answer. “I don’t know, Will. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll make some phone calls, okay? But in the meantime... I think you need to contact H.D. McGuinty and apologize and explain what happened that day.”

“Okay,” I whisper, looking at my best friends. “I’ll try.”

“Don’t stress yourself out too much. It’s just one restaurant. At least you don’t have a multinational corporation that’s going to suffer because of your mistakes.”

“But I have Destiny and Robbie,” I remind him. “They invested so much in this.”

“I know. I’ll talk to some people. Call you later.”

Ash hangs up, leaving me alone in the silence of the early morning.

I take a deep breath. And then another.

I don’t know how I’m going to fix this. I don’t know how I’m going to even tell my friends. They’ll both be crushed. I’m the one from a wealthy family, and I can afford to fail. Even though I haven’t taken any money from my family in order to start this restaurant, I had the right connections to find investors. If I lost every cent to my name, I would still have a nice house to go home to, and could crash with my parents. Or with one of my wealthy, successful brothers. Although I might prefer to live under a bridge, or in a dark, wet, smelly mountain cave, than to crash on Ash’s couch...

Anyway. My friends don’t have parents with money or extra space. They were working so hard to try to *help* their families out. They have nothing to fall back on. As strong as Robbie is physically from spending way too much time in the

gym, his heart is quite fragile, like a tiny newborn kitten whose eyes are not yet open. Which is why we stayed with him all night to cheer him up, and drown our sorrows by drinking and watching RuPaul's Drag Race.

This news could devastate him worse than the breakup.

He'll feel responsible, especially since he wasn't able to bring his A-game in the kitchen last night.

I take a deep breath and slowly get up from the couch, feeling defeated. I begin to gather the empty bottles and glasses, filling my arms with as many as I can. I try to be quiet and not clink the glasses together, but I mess up a little bit anyway. Destiny groans, and tries to stick out her foot and kick me in her sleep.

I smile lightly at this. She looks adorable in the pink fuzzy socks.

Sighing as I move towards the sink, I deposit the dishes, and toss away the trash. Finally, I head back to the kitchen and grab some dish soap. I begin to rinse and scrub.

After a while, I get lost in doing the dishes.

"What is that noise?" I hear someone asking from the living room. "Is she doing dishes?"

"She better not be."

I suddenly feel Destiny's hand clamped around my wrist. "Girl," she says gently. "What the heck? How long have you been polishing that glass?"

"Oh," I say softly. I realize that I have been standing here for a little while, and although all the dishes are done, I have been transfixed on this final wine glass. Scrubbing and scrubbing, even though it is already sparkling clear. My skin is a bit red and burning from the dish soap.

Destiny turns off the water and takes the glass away, leading me over to the kitchen island. She takes a seat and guides me to sit in front of her on a stool. "What's going on? Talk to me."

"It's bad, Dez. It's really bad."

CHAPTER 6

“Keep going,” Robbie says with a frown, as we sit around the kitchen island together. “I want to hear all of it.”

I swallow, as I continue reading the article: “Her so-called famous seafood chowder... had a texture reminiscent of my little nephew barfing up his rice cereal and applesauce. I am uncertain whether it tasted any better.”

“That’s harsh,” Destiny says with a frown.

“Doesn’t all chowder look a bit like barf?” Robbie asks. “Keep going.”

“I don’t have to read all of this,” I tell them. “It’s brutal. He brutalized us. That brutish brute has brutalized us brutally.”

“He was pretty cute for a brute,” Destiny responds. When I glare at her, she clears her throat. “Sorry. This is all my fault. I told you the critic was probably the other dude. We could have given the correct person the royal treatment.”

“We should have given everyone the royal treatment,” Robbie says softly. “We usually do—it’s my fault that everything was such a mess last night. Now finish reading!”

“Yes, sir,” I say with a deep sigh.

Miss Wintergreen’s restaurant and cuisine suffers from the same uptight, severe, strict adherence to the rules that her fashion sense does. It’s an almost neurotic restriction and obsession with perfection that stifles creativity. An impeccable dish that comes directly out of a textbook has no personality, no soul. No maturity. No place in the modern kitchen.

Food needs passion to be great. Something that Miss Wintergreen clearly does not understand. With a whole world of exotic spices available to tantalize the tongue, each meal should be an adventure that transports you away to the farthest corners of the earth. Each and every bite should be an opportunity to learn, and be delighted. Your tastebuds should be guided through generations of culture, history, and the traditions of the people who used those ingredients and invented those techniques.

But all I got was butter.

Butter in every bite.

Butter and salt.

Butter, butter, and MORE BUTTER! Everything inundated, soaked, drowning and soggy in butter. The poor lobster was screaming for help as it lay in a buttery grave. The vegetables were flooded. Now more than ever, with fusion cuisines taking the world by storm it's a regrettable travesty that Willow and her crew seem only to have heard of the absolute basics. I left the restaurant DYING for a sprinkle of pepper. A splash of hot sauce. The texture of cumin or anise seed. A fucking Thai basil leaf. Any flavor at all!

I wonder if Miss Wintergreen bathes in butter? Is that her secret to having flawless princess-like skin? Does she cry butter? Does she put a stick of it in her coffee? Nevertheless, even if she is obsessed with the yellow stuff, she should learn some moderation and not subject all of her guests to an overdose.

“He called your skin flawless,” Destiny comments. “That’s a positive thing.”

“I wonder if I could pull an Ash and spin this scandal into a springboard for success,” I grumble softly to myself. “Maybe selling some sort of butter-enriched bath products. Is butter even good for skin?”

“Of course, girl. Shea butter, cocoa butter, hemp butter,” Robbie says. “We’ll figure out how to spin this later. Keep reading!”

“Okay,” I mutter glumly.

The Willow is aptly named after its owner, showcasing her self-aggrandizing attitude. Which is exactly what you would expect from the heiress to the Wintergreen fortune. She’s a spoiled rotten princess, in every classic sense of that description. She is too afraid to get her hands dirty. Too high and mighty to interact with us commoners. Too full of herself to improve on lackluster, bare bones, rudimentary recipes. There is absolutely no need for this young woman to be good

in business or good in the kitchen. Not with a rich daddy like hers.

As for the atmosphere, much like Willow's dreary outfit, the restaurant was plain and sterile, with military-like hospital corners to each tablecloth. The décor was as drab and lifeless as the restaurant owner's hair, which was so aggressively flat-ironed and held perfectly in place, tightly wound into a boring, schoolmarmy-esque bun with so much hairspray that a tornado couldn't have caused a single flyaway strand. This made me think that she must not allow her kitchen staff to breathe. I imagine that she would surely freak out if anything was ever out of order, and there was a single grain of rice not under her stringent, tyrannical, dictatorial control.

"Did he just insult your hair? Oh, hell no, he didn't," Robbie says.

"I believe he has insulted every inch of my person, my personality, my body, my brain, and my heart and soul," I respond dryly, too exhausted by the emotional onslaught to feel anything anymore.

"Well," Destiny says lightly. "You *could* maybe use a new hairdo, girl. And at least he complimented your skin..."

I groan, reaching up to touch my hair. "Is it really that bad?"

"Yes," my two friends respond in unison.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I ask them.

"We know how much you hate change," Destiny says.

"So you let me walk around at work looking like a *schoolmarm*?"

"Let's try to take the positives from this criticism," Robbie says. "And there are so many positives to take away! What I'm feeling is that this is a golden opportunity for personal growth... and more importantly, opportunity for a makeover. Now keep reading, Will."

"Shit," I whisper.

*It's hard to feel depressed in the gorgeous mountains of Vermont. I was expecting a whimsical experience similar to **Ratatouille**, since I grew up in this area, and wanted to be overcome with nostalgic memories of pleasant childhood meals. But instead I left wishing my food had been cooked by a rat. The chef's generous use of capers in everything did lead me to feel like I was eating leftovers that had been shat in by a rat, or mouse, or similar rodent not nearly as cute as the ones in Disney/Pixar. Did it taste much better than mouse droppings? I'm not certain.*

I will say that the restaurant benefited from capitalizing on waterfall scenery, with massive glass window paneling that allowed an unfettered view of the natural landscape. Which is great, if you can get a seat next to the glass window. Your chances are high if you're an old, rich, white man in a suit and tie.

*Unfortunately, I was condemned to the cheap seats and stuck in steerage. If we had been on the Titanic, I would have been shoved below deck in third class and left to drown. Luckily, I was able to escape the sinking ship that is **The Willow** before being sucked deep down into an oblivion of abysmal food.*

Verdict: Tasteless. Utterly tasteless—both the food and people. 0 stars. Do NOT recommend.

We all sit quietly at the island, having a moment of silence for all the hopes and dreams that used to be our careers. I am too shattered to even cry.

Destiny exhales heavily, digging her fingers into her temples.

“I need a drink,” Robbie announces finally.

“You drank all night,” Dez scolds him.

“Exactly. It's wearing off, and I need to lubricate my brain so that I can think about this properly and find a solution.”

“I don't think drinking is going to help anything,” I inform him.

“If anything, drinking tons of rosé is what got us into this mess,” Dez adds.

“Not accurate,” Robbie interjects. “I have done some of my best cooking while sipping on good wine. Maybe you just selected the wrong bottle of rosé—did you ever think of that?”

“Guys,” I tell them. “Stop. But I do think it’s a cautionary tale about the dangers of dating unreliable men. And staying in shitty relationships with endless drama and red flags, long after we’ve all determined that it’s toxic. It affects us all.”

“So you are blaming me for all this,” Robbie grumbles. “I told you, it’s my fault. I’m the one who was thinking with my dick, and clinging to a dude who was being a dick. While he was also off getting other dick. So... it’s on me. I dropped the ball, and now the whole restaurant is going to suffer.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him softly. “We can’t blame each other right now. We need to band together.”

“And do what?” Destiny asks. “This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and we blew it.”

“My brother is working on getting us some PR management. He also said that I should contact Mr. McGuinty and apologize. Maybe I can also inform him about some of the inaccuracies in his article. At least the stuff about the restaurant name—which was really upsetting. He should have done more research. Maybe he can print a retraction about... something.”

“Yes!” Robbie says. “But first of all, before we do anything, you need a makeover. I suggest we correct some of the issues he was accurate about—like your hair. We need to change that drab brown mane to something that glistens.”

I reach up to touch my head awkwardly. “Are you sure?”

“Girl, you are way overdue for a good cut and color and blowout,” Robbie affirms.

Dez nods. “You have been working yourself to the bone lately, and we need to take care of Willow first, before we take care of the restaurant.”

Tears touch my eyes. Even with their careers on the line, they still manage to care about me so much. “You guys,” I say softly, a bit choked up.

“Don’t think we’re being *too* nice, sister. You are the face of the restaurant, after all. We could be just using you—trying to exploit your beauty and boobs to rescue our jobs, and save our pathetic little lives. Did you ever think of that?” Robbie asks.

“Nah. You guys are just nice,” I respond.

“We are nice,” Destiny says. “You guys can go do the makeover stuff, and meanwhile, I’ll head to work and start baking some bread. Who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky and many people won’t even read the article. My coping mechanism will be to almost ignore this entirely.”

“A valid strategy,” I inform her.

“Yeah,” she muses, but then she leans closer to Robbie. “Just in case, maybe bleach her hair platinum blond and dress her up as a hooker and send her to this McGuinty fellow as a peace offering. With some butter on top. Good plan?”

“Perfecto,” he responds, kissing his fingers.

CHAPTER 7

HARDEEP DEVI-MCGUINITY

I stretch blissfully into the first rays of the morning sun. My muscles feel taut and tired from my previous sessions in the gym. I will have to spend some time in the sauna today. Maybe I'll go soon, and just sit in a towel and relax while reading the thousands of comments on my article.

My lips curl up in a satisfied smile.

After a long night of furiously beating away at my keyboard, typing out my frustrations as eloquently and cleverly as possible, I am completely content with the end result. I think my article is both educating and entertaining, and I have already received glowingly positive feedback from my publisher.

They found it brutal. But the internet *loves* a ruthless evisceration.

That's how we'll get millions of views, tons of new subscribers trying to get beyond our paywall to read more of my provocative work, and also crazy build hype for selling the gorgeous paper edition of the magazine when it comes out next week.

I am a bit startled when my phone rings, as it is quite early. The very ass crack of dawn, one might say. But I am even more surprised when I see that it is my mother. She's currently in the UK, so it's a normal hour for her. But she doesn't usually ever call me. Not unless it's *super* important. She runs a global chain of Indian fast-food restaurants scattered across the USA, U.K., Canada, Australia, and always expanding.

Clearing my throat, I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed, pulling on a pair of sweatpants hastily before answering the phone. As though she might be able to tell that I'm naked? I don't know.

"Hello, Mum," I say cheerfully into the phone. "How are you this morning?"

"I am not very good, Hardeep. I woke up to some horrible news."

“Oh, no. What’s wrong?” I ask her with concern.

“My son is an asshole,” she responds. “He was such a good, sweet boy as a child, but somehow he’s grown up into this nasty, cruel dickish bag of dicks who makes his money off destroying others instead of building them up.”

I am too stunned to respond for a moment. Did my mother just call me a dickish bag of dicks?

“He was such a good little boy—sweet and smart, a little nerdy, and so innocent in his little glasses. I don’t know what happened.”

“Mum...” I say slowly, anticipating that she is about to chew me out. I gulp.

“First of all,” she begins. “The restaurant was called *The Willow* before that girl was born, due to the beautiful trees all around the property. Your father and I used to take weekend drives out there, when you were too young to remember. Before he died. Before I moved back to London with my ungrateful children. It was actually a quaint bed and breakfast—one of the top romantic destinations of the region in the 80s and 90s. I am quite certain that the girl is named *after* the restaurant, you idiot, and not the other way around. Don’t you do any research?”

“Crap,” I whisper softly, rubbing my hand through my hair.

“She saved the property from demolition to preserve and renovate a historic piece of Vermont—why didn’t you mention that?” my mother asks. “The restaurant would be bulldozed if not for her. And why didn’t you mention how much her cooking respects the local culinary traditions and New England heritage?”

“I’m sorry, Mum, but I—”

“Wait, I’m not finished,” she says. “Do you know how difficult it is to be a female business owner? To be a woman running a restaurant, in an industry that is still very male-dominated. It’s incredibly hard to succeed. Actually, it’s hard to just keep your head above water. If I hadn’t met your step-

father when I did, I probably would have given up. I never would have been able to open so many more restaurants and expand globally. That man supported me and guided me and built me up. A rich, old, white man. Who also loved and provided for *you*, Hardeep, like you were his own flesh and blood.”

“I know, I know, Mum...”

“And what the hell is wrong with butter? You *loved* butter chicken as a child. Then I guess you grew up and went to that fancy school, and got that fancy haircut, and now you’re too refined for the basics. Listen, young man. I’ve made millions from selling butter chicken. With garlic butter rice. And garlic butter naan! Butter basically paid for your education! Only for you to grow up and insult it? Why are you acting too high and mighty for one of the greatest foods known to humanity?”

“Mum, it’s just that—”

“Don’t ‘mum’ me. Did you know that butter has been around for *over 9000* years? Did you know that it was used to help mummify the Pharaohs? Did you know that when butter was demonized and replaced with margarine, it led to people having worse health, more obesity and *more* heart disease?”

“Yes, Mum, but...”

“You better apologize to that young woman. I can’t believe I raised such a mean, bullying, nasty son.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did. You wanted to tear her apart, and I bet you felt smug and satisfied about it too. That’s why I had to call, to wipe that stupid grin off your face.”

I can’t even respond to this. She knows me too well. I was grinning. Maybe I am a dickish bag of dicks.

“By the way, have you actually looked at the diversity profile of her business?” my mother asks. “You think you’re some righteous warrior, championing the little guy, and taking down the privileged, rich white woman. But her business partners are actually a gay man from Mexico, and a Black woman. Their profiles are all available online, and it seems

like they've worked very hard for the opportunity to run this restaurant. Do you actually care to even look behind the curtain and see who else you're hurting?"

Shit. I guess I didn't do much research, or even step into the kitchen to talk to the chefs. I usually do, but I was so angry about the terrible service that I didn't really investigate as much as I normally would.

"You like her, don't you?" my mother asks with a sigh.

"Who? What? What do you mean?" I respond with confusion.

"Willow. You have a crush on her. And you're so uncomfortable with feeling any sort of emotion or attraction that you decided to push her away and obliterate her so that you don't have to actually have a conversation with her and risk experiencing normal human feelings?"

"Wha—" I respond, somewhat speechless. "Why do you think—"

"Or is this your way of actually trying to get her attention? She ignored you in the restaurant, so you're flexing your influence and power for revenge, attacking her to show that you can casually destroy her on a whim if she doesn't fall at your feet and bend to your will?"

"N—no," I respond. "Mum, that's not—"

"I can't believe I raised you like this. All the comments on her appearance were totally unnecessary, heartless and vicious. If you want to flirt with a girl, just send flowers! Ganesh, help him. He's a lost cause." With that, my mother hangs up the phone.

I sit here for a moment in silence. Thinking. Then I slowly pick myself up and drag my sore body to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I still want to spend some time in the sauna, but I am not sure if it will help.

I feel totally eviscerated. Like I have been pummeled from head to toe by my mother's words, and my insides are bleeding. I guess it's a little taste of my own medicine.

Don't dish it out if you can't take it, right?

CHAPTER 8

WILLOW

I was having a wonderful day with Robbie, getting my hair done, until we came to work and saw that it was almost entirely dead. There were zero cars in the parking lot.

Even some of our staff has given up.

Now, Roberto and Destiny and I stand in the restaurant kitchen, staring at each other anxiously.

“Do you think we’ll get a single customer today?” Dez whispers.

“I have no idea,” Roberto says. “But I’m not cooking until we do.”

Destiny has been baking since the early morning, making artisanal sourdough bread with her fancy collection of extremely old bacterial cultures. The delicious scent fills the kitchen. It’s irresistible, and I literally want to eat it all. I have few greater pleasures in life than sampling her masterpieces.

My best friend, despite looking like an incredibly gorgeous diva, is actually a serious brainiac on the inside. She’s brilliant and talented. In so many ways.

People often didn’t understand why we gravitated to each other so much, since childhood. We came from extremely different backgrounds. We looked totally different—beyond the obvious differences of skin color. We were always complete opposites.

She was short, I was tall.

She was loud, I was shy.

She was bold, and I was gripped with anxiety and apprehension.

She was beautiful, and I was plain, drab, the textbook definition of a basic bitch.

She was wild and carefree, messy and artistic. I was structured, scheduled, an overly-organized neat-freak that had everything color coded and labeled with sticky notes.

Things haven't changed much. Well, I now prefer a label maker to sticky notes. But we're still just as different as night and day.

We still look like a funny pair beside each other.

But our friendship is just deeper than that, somehow. It's a soul-connection. Despite the fact that I was blessed to be born into a wealthy, upper class home, with siblings and parents to look up to and learn from—I've always felt a bit like an outsider, a bit out of place. A bit overwhelmed by all the big shoes I would have to fill, when I had rather tiny feet.

And all the big footprints left behind by those big shoes. It was overwhelming.

Destiny just cared to know who I actually was, beyond my last name. Not my so-called legacy.

While I was invisible to almost nearly everyone else on the planet, Destiny was the only one who actually saw *me*. And it felt really good, really special to be seen.

"Someone will come into the restaurant any minute now," Robbie says. "I did *not* marinate all that meat for days for no reason. I need to cook something. Plus, I have an amazing idea for a ceviche appetizer for the chef's special."

"I'll try some," Destiny says.

"No—it's not for you. You get microwaved mac and cheese because that's all I can afford after all the student loans I took out to study in France." Robbie sighs deeply. "Maybe that's why he dumped me. My student loan debt? Alejandhole was a few years older than me and much more financially stable. Maybe he just didn't want to wait for me to become a super successful celebrity chef... I guess he was right not to bet on me, because look at how I fucked this opportunity up for all of us. And you two are the people I care most about in this world, who have always been there for me."

"Shush," Destiny says, patting his hand. "You didn't mess anything up, Robster. This is just a moment, okay? It will pass."

"I hope so," he grumbles.

“Wait,” Dez says as a car pulls up outside our kitchen window. “Customers?”

We all perk up, and I straighten my outfit before heading to the door to greet whoever it is.

When the doors open, I put on my best smile.

“Hello, and welcome to *The Willow*—”

“I’m here to read the meter to determine your water usage for the bill,” says the man.

“Oh, okay,” I respond. “Yeah, go right ahead.”

Heading back to the kitchen, I sit down, crestfallen. Dez and Robbie look at me expectantly.

“Water meter guy,” I explain.

“Maybe we’ll have better luck tomorrow,” Robbie says gently.

* * *

The next day, it’s the same thing.

At the very least, I received a text from one of my brothers that cheered us up slightly.

WONDERFUL BROTHER

Hey Will—this is last minute, but feel like catering my upcoming wedding?

Our caterer cancelled. =(

It was totally a pity offer. I bet the caterer didn’t cancel at all. But Spruce is kind that way, and at this point, we’ll take anything we can get. At least it’s a paying job.

“Customers?” Robbie asks, after hours have passed and a car has finally pulled into our driveway.

An elderly couple walk up to the front door, and when I see that they aren’t holding any clipboards or wearing a service uniform, I rush to greet them. “Thanks for joining us

this evening. I know we've had some bad press, so we appreciate your loyalty."

"Of course, Miss Wintergreen. We actually loved your politics, and that's why we're here."

"My politics?" I ask them politely. "I don't think the article mentioned anything about my politics."

"We don't like to eat in establishments where there are people of color, either! It just brings such a nasty element into a nice atmosphere, don't you think?"

"Uhhhh," I respond, clearing my throat. "I'm not sure that's entirely accurate. I think you may have gotten the wrong impression about this place from the article."

"Nonsense, you're part of a respectable family, and you're a classy, sophisticated young lady of good breeding—like us. We are happy to support your cause and your selectiveness. You're one of us."

"Oh... no, no, no," I say quietly, feeling like these people think I had a cotillion or debutante ball in the South, about a hundred and fifty years ago. "This is a restaurant where we welcome all human beings. Of every color and ethnicity."

"I know you just have to say that to keep up appearances, but it's okay if it's not true," the old woman says with a sly smile and wink.

"No, it's true," I insist. "We serve everyone."

"But not disabled people right?" the old man whispers. "I saw that you didn't have a wheelchair ramp in the front. Good job. No one needs all this woke-culture accessibility ablism-crap."

"What the actual fuck," I whisper to myself hoarsely, letting my eyes drift up to the ceiling. They are our only customers so far today. I really shouldn't send them away. I really shouldn't. I shouldn't...

"We actually do have a wheelchair ramp, and it's in the back. Totally ADA compliant. You would probably feel more comfortable in a different establishment," I tell them.

“What do you mean, dear?” the old woman asks.

“I mean we aren’t actually racist bigots here like the article described. I’m sorry if that’s the experience you were looking for,” I tell her with a smile, guiding her back to the door.

The elderly couple seems confused. Until Robbie steps out.

“Why is there a Mexican here?” the old man whispers. “For shame! I thought this was an upscale, exclusive place.”

“Okay. Please leave now,” I tell them gently, almost physically pushing them out.

“Willow!” Robbie shouts. “Why are you getting rid of that sweet old couple?”

“Because they’re creepy?” I respond. “You heard what they said.”

“Honey, I don’t give a fuck what they say about me, as long as I have enough money to pay my bills and eat. Did you ever think it was racist toward me if you *didn’t* take their money so that this business stays alive and I can keep making some cash? Geez.”

Robbie throws up his arms and walks away.

I stare after him for a moment, feeling anger rise in my chest.

“I can’t do this!” I call out, walking after him. I follow him into the kitchen where I put my hands on my hips. “I can’t live like this. I don’t want us to be known as the new hotspot for Neo-Nazis! I’m going to find McGuinty and confront him about what he wrote. This is unfair bullshit and we should not have to suffer like this.”

“Agreed,” Destiny says. “You go girl, go tell him how it is.”

“He may have been right about your hair,” Robbie adds, “but he was way off base with everything else.”

CHAPTER 9

HARDEEP

Sweat drips down my chest as I bench press my last few reps. I can feel the familiar strain in my muscles as I push them to their limit.

I love the meditative focus of working out. It has always been my personal escape and therapy. Ever since I lost my father.

While he was sick, I began to overeat. With a restaurant-owning family, I had a nearly unlimited supply of all the truly delicious comfort food that I could possibly need. I definitely overindulged, to the point that I became quite chubby.

By the time my father passed, after dozens of hospital visits where I would eat for hours immediately upon returning home, I looked quite embarrassing. I was bursting out of my clothes, and not vertically.

I was a prime target.

A little, chubby, Indian kid in glasses. Dressed in the extremely nerdy clothes that my mother had bought for me. Sweater vests were my jam.

I was teased endlessly. Teased for being fat. Teased for being a brown nerd. Even though my accent was British, kids in America would tease me with mocking Indian accents inspired by Apu from the Simpsons. They would call me a FOB, call me a cab driver, or telemarketer, or duct cleaning salesman. They would gang up on me, and beat the shit out of me, and step on my glasses.

But it wasn't until they started teasing me about my dead father that I started fighting back.

I started working out to get out all of my anger. To transform myself from something weak and soft and pathetic into something hard, fierce, and unbreakable. Someone they would respect.

And it worked.

I never stopped going to the gym regularly, after that. Back in the UK, they made fun of me for my American accent. They called me names, too. But they quickly learned that it wasn't a smart idea. Bullies don't like a target who fights back.

And when my mother remarried, and I suddenly had step-siblings— my new strength served me well there too. I was a bit of a loner, but I commanded their respect.

I'll never be that weak, sad, soft little boy again. Face down on the asphalt with his shirt hiked up around his giant belly, and his glasses shattered. Crying for his mother.

I push for one final rep, when I'm already past the point where my body is screaming for me to stop. I dig deep inside to try to find a little more strength, and I grunt with the effort. That's the place where progress is made. When you push just a little farther than you think you can go. Just a little past your comfort zone. And you teach your body, no:

I can do more than you think. You're wrong to stop here. I'm stronger than that.

Carefully lowering the barbell, I exhale and inhale deeply, my muscles starved for oxygen. I then sit up slowly and grab my phone to track the workout. I use an app to record my reps, and make sure that I'm always making progress. I also measure out my protein intake carefully, along with other important nutrients, to make sure I'm feeding my body what it needs to be strong.

But as I'm trying to type in the workout data, my phone is blowing up.

I frown. It has made it so difficult to focus, having people bother me every few minutes since the article came out. I'm starting to realize the gravity and impact of what I wrote, as it reaches more people day by day.

Navigating to our official website, I check the views on the article. Yep. It's growing fast. Normally I would be psyched about this, but there's a tiny problem.

I sent a rewrite and a retraction of certain inaccurate comments I made to my editor, and he hasn't made the

changes. They seem to think that the article is perfectly provocative exactly as it is, and they don't want to change a single thing.

I frown as I read over my words, feeling a bit embarrassed. And then I check my email. There are so many human rights organizations informing me that they have blacklisted the restaurant. One of them even threatens to hold a protest in the parking lot, and spray paint the restaurant with nasty words.

Reading all this, I'm a bit concerned that I went too far. Maybe my mother is right. I didn't mean to do this much damage. I reach up and run a hand through my dark hair, which is slick with sweat.

I can't help wondering if I've become one of those bullies I hated.

When my phone rings, I see that it is my mother's sister, who lives nearby in Burlington. I want to decline, but I know I'll never hear the end of it from my family.

So I answer.

"Hello, Auntie B."

"Hello, Hardeep! Good news. I'm coming over for dinner this evening. With Uncle, and some other family."

"Did my mother ask you to do this?" I say with a groan.

"What? An aunt can't visit her favorite nephew in the world?"

"Did she?"

"Yes, yes, of course she said she's worried about you and asked me to check up on you. But also I would love to see my darling DeepDeep and taste his phenomenal cooking."

Oh, no. Not that nickname. I cringe.

"Alright, Auntie, but I will need some time to prepare. I wasn't expecting company."

"We'll be there in approximately two hours! See you soon."

I sigh when she hangs up the phone, reaching for a towel to wipe the sweat off my neck. I guess I've got to go handle this now.

* * *

When I get home from the gym, I don't bother to change before I begin cooking. I try to strategize what would be fastest to make for company, and what corners I can cut to get a decent traditional meal done before they arrive. I barely manage to put a few items on the low heat to simmer, and begin mixing some ingredients in a bowl when my doorbell rings.

I sigh deeply.

These past few days have been pure chaos, and it's all due to that article. I kind of wish I had never written it— or wish I had been a little less vicious with my words.

Taking my mixing bowl with me, I move to the front door quickly to answer it, intending to see who it is and get rid of them quickly so I can get back to cooking.

But then I see *her*.

What the fuck?

Why is there a blonde goddess standing on my front doorstep? Her bouncy, glistening curls are being tossed about in the wind, and concealing much of her face. All I can see are a pair of piercing green eyes, which look furious. Her pale blue dress is hugging her body, revealing her luscious breasts under a square neckline, and flowing around her hips madly in the wind.

She looks like Aphrodite herself, come to smite me for being a dick.

The sunset behind her casts a halo around her hair and skin, to the point where she is literally glowing.

My throat has gone very dry, and I feel like my limbs are frozen. I nearly drop the mixing bowl. Who the hell is this

beautiful woman, and what is she doing here in front of me, glaring bloody murder at me like she's about to tear my head off my body?

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