

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME...



# GROUNDED

A ROMANTIC COMEDY



KRISTIN MULLIGAN





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*To everyone who isn't where they thought  
they'd be. And to anyone who had to start  
over. I hope you know your happy ending is  
waiting for you.*







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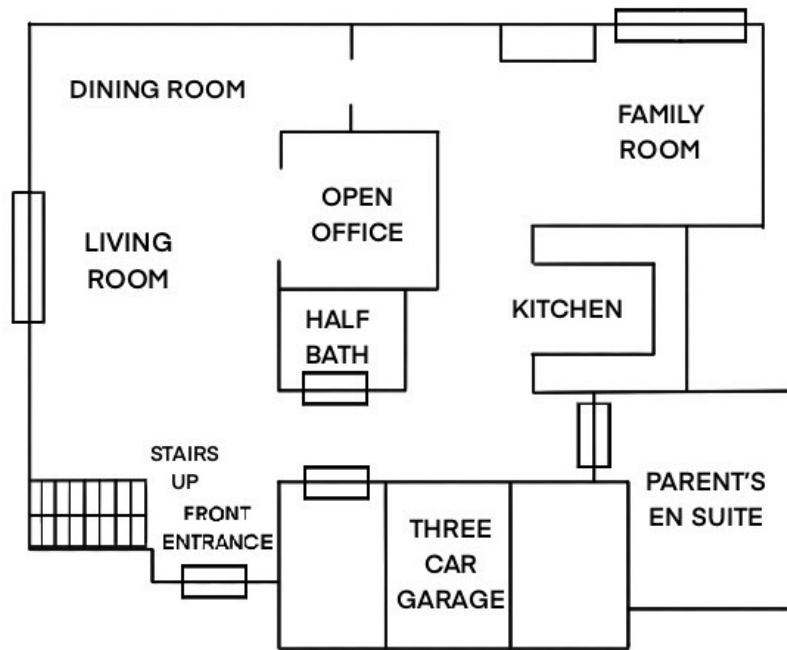




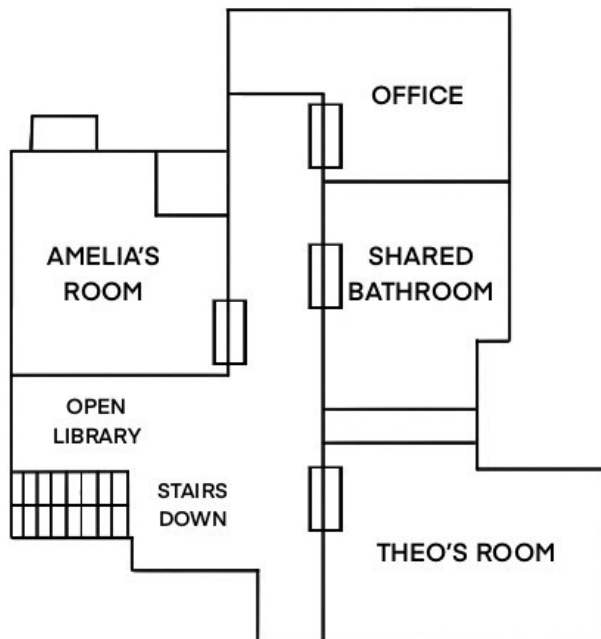
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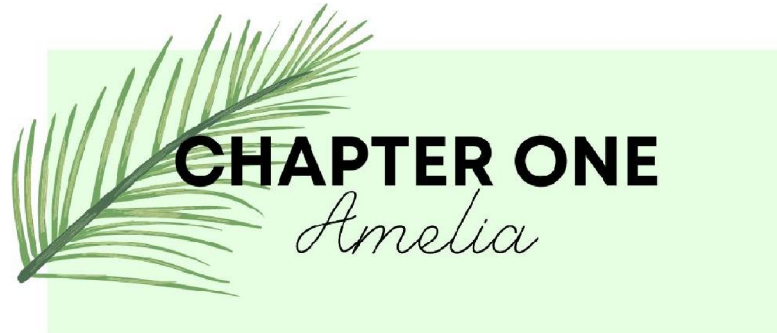
## FIRST FLOOR



## SECOND FLOOR







# CHAPTER ONE

*Amelia*

The interior light dims and blinks out, plunging me into darkness.

I've been sitting in the empty parking garage of my office building for what feels like hours, but according to my car, it's only been a couple of minutes.

My annual review with the CEO is today, so I'm rehearsing my presentation to ensure it's perfect.

My closing bit could use some work, so I recite it one final time, hoping the passion in my tone will convey the commitment I have to this industry.

“And finally, Mr. Robinson, I think the YouTube views speak for themselves. I have the highest number of most-watched trailers among our team, and the comments clearly display enthusiasm for my work. I'm ready to take the next step, and I hope all the data I've given throughout this presentation proves I can make this company a top contender in Hollywood. Thank you.”

It's not my best. Certainly nothing like the famous speeches in award-winning films like *Gladiator* and *Independence Day*—hell, not even *Braveheart*. My boss would have no choice but to grant me this promotion in the face of that level of brilliance.

But I can't rely on movie quotes as a fallback for everything.

I inhale and exhale dramatically, the top button on my blouse straining at the swell of my chest.

I'm ready. I'm ready to kill this presentation like Arnold Schwarzenegger killed the predator, minus all that blood and dirt.

I grab my laptop bag and lunch and head up to our office.

I'm one of those freaks who is always first to arrive and last to leave because I want to prove my loyalty. It's a difficult industry to get into, the movie trailer business, so I am determined to show my worth.

Even though the films we receive are awful—as in Lifetime network quality—I still give 110 percent.

Part of my job is to watch these movies, some completed projects, some not, and create a two-minute trailer to highlight all the intriguing scenes while leaving enough behind to surprise the viewers.

It's like Amanda Woods in *The Holiday*, except I'm not getting action movies with James Franco and Lindsay Lohan. I'm getting D-list celebrities who will most likely be in rehab

by the time the movie premieres. And we're not even talking red carpet premiere. Probably straight to the bargain DVD bin at Walmart.

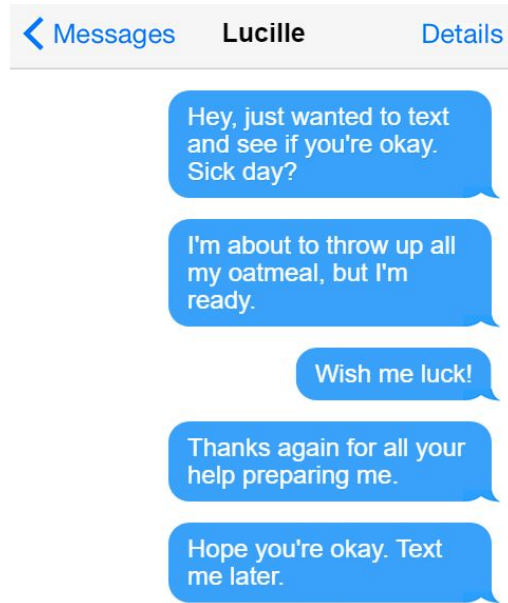
And even though I wish I had projects with quality, I have worked my ass off these two years. The next step in my career is upon me.

"Where's Lucille?" I ask Damian, another member of our team, as I drop my stuff on my desk.

"I-um... I don't know," he stutters.

You know how people have a work husband or a work wife? I have a work grandmother, Lucille, who is the spitting image of Maggie Smith from *Hook*. She's older, wiser, and has been in the industry longer than I've been alive. She took me under her wing when I started two years ago, and we formed a bond. She's also our team leader.

Honestly, it's rare she even takes a sick day. She's in her mid-70s and kicking ass when it comes to her health. Of course, the most upsetting thought imaginable pops into my head. Because I'm me. I pull out my phone and text her.



But fifteen minutes later, Lucille hasn't responded.

And sadly, I don't have time to worry about it because it's showtime.

Once I'm done killing this review and getting that promotion, I'm taking the rest of the day off and showing up at her place with champagne.

Grabbing my binder with all my notes, and my laptop with the PowerPoint presentation, I head toward the CEO's office.

"He's ready for you," his secretary informs me with a look of empathy. That's a little alarming.

"Great." I force some pep in my tone despite the red flag.

My blouse sticks to my back as I open his door.

*Where did all that sweat come from?*

Mr. Robinson ushers me in from behind his desk as I sashay into the room.

"Amelia, thanks so much for coming in," he begins.

“Of course!” I chirp, the excitement in my voice palpable. *Reel it in, Ame, this isn't a maid of honor speech.* “I’m so thankful you have the time to meet with me.”

There’s a strange look on his face when I hand him the one-inch binder I prepared for him, full of all the accolades and accomplishments I’ve collected in my two years here.

“What’s this?” he asks.

“Oh, I figured we could begin at page one, and I’d show clips of the corresponding trailer—”

“You made a presentation?”

The confusion on his face is making my heart race for different reasons.

“Isn’t this my annual review? You set up this meeting last week, and I assumed...”

“Oh, Amelia...” He drags out my name like he’s in agony.

Oh my God, am I getting written up?

I do a quick mental check of my performance and if there might have been any complaints against me.

No, I’ve been an exemplary employee. I’m always on time, I’m finally taking my mandatory lunch breaks, and I turn in my assignments before or at deadlines.

I’ve turned some terrible movies into Oscar-worthy gold. It was almost unfair how amazing the trailers looked, given the films were actual garbage. Most didn’t even make a profit. But

damn, for those two minutes, even *I* wanted to pay money to see it.

Mr. Robinson is looking at me like I'm withholding the punch line to this obvious joke.

"I thought this was my chance to show you—"

"Amelia, the company is going under."

*Oh no.*

"By next week there won't even be a team for you to manage."

"What? No team at all?"

"We're not even the fifth choice when it comes to top trailer companies. The *second* choice is barely getting A-level films."

A pit the size of the Grand Canyon forms in my stomach.

"You, along with most of your team, will be laid off."

He shuffles papers together and places one in front of me.

"This is an NDA. We need you to sign it. You cannot let anyone else on the team know. The layoffs are happening gradually. If you don't sign it, you forfeit your PTO, of which you have quite a bit. You never took a vacation in the two years you worked here?"

"No, I wanted to prove my loyalty," I say with a sigh, still mortified that I brought this man a PowerPoint presentation.

I'm not sure if what he's offering is even legal. I never read our employee handbook. I sign anyway, realizing I'm going to need that money as a safety net.

“I can’t believe this.” I also can’t believe the tears forming in my eyes. I never cry in front of others, let alone my superior.

“I’m sorry; I know how much you wanted to manage your own team. Lucille sang your praises for the last few weeks.”

And then it dawns on me.

“Is that why Lucille isn’t here? Did you fire her, too?” I question.

“As you just signed the NDA, I can confirm yes, she was let go last night. She signed one as well.”

I’m relieved to know she’s not at the bottom of a staircase with a broken spine. I told you I went for the most upsetting thought imaginable.

“So, that’s it? Can I clean out my desk?”

“Yes, but make it quick. Do it while everyone is in the morning meeting, which you obviously won’t be going to.”

Will my legs be able to hold me up when I exit the chair? I feel unsteady, like my lower half forgot how to function.

“You can’t discuss who is buying out our contracts or where this company is headed. We take NDA’s seriously,” Mr. Robinson tells me.

Why is he being so stern? We’ve worked together for two years. I know about his daughter’s sports schedule, for fuck’s sake! I know he and his wife have been having issues but are seeing a therapist. I even know he’s very regular for an older



guy—always goes for the long bathroom break right after his 12:30 p.m. lunch.

Yet I very curtly, very professionally, shake his hand and thank him for giving me the opportunity to work for him. He assures me he'll give me a great recommendation.

When I'm in my car, with a small box of my belongings, I let out an angry, high-pitched wail akin to Ron Burgundy in the phone booth.



**M**y boyfriend is not answering his phone. Technically it's going straight to voicemail, so he's not even registering my calls.

*Where the hell are you, Beckett?*

The thought of seeing Beckett makes my heart swell. He works from home, so I know he will be there when I return. I'm holding back the tears until I can see him. He will have the perfect thing to say to make this seem less life-shattering.

Parking next to his Lexus, I take out both binders that showcased all my hard work and heave them in the dumpster.

When I unlock our apartment door, the tears are there. They are pooling at the corners of my eyelids, politely waiting for their chance to make a scene.

“Beckett?” I call out.

I release my hair from my tight bun and let my blondish-brown locks cascade over my face and down my back in a

messy tangle. I don't bother taming it because I don't care if I look like a rumpled disaster. I even throw my purse to the ground like a scorned woman.

I call out for Beckett again. Why isn't he coming out to greet me?

The worst-case scenario runs through my head, again, and I picture home invaders sneaking into our place and stabbing him.

This is why I never got assigned the slasher movie trailers—because I have the imagination of Hannibal Lecter.

Beckett is probably wearing the noise-canceling headphones I got him for Christmas. It was a great gift idea, except for the fact that I later worried: what if I'm getting murdered in the next room and he can't even hear my screams?

Now, he can't even hear me calling for him.

That's okay. I'll surprise him in our room... with a tear-soaked face and snarled hair. That's not the bombshell I would want to be surprised with, but he will manage.

As I make my way closer to our closed bedroom, I hear... moaning.

Oh my.

But it's his voice I hear, not a woman's.

Is he...*masturbating*? I'm not sure what the etiquette is here. This has never happened in the four years we've been together.

Do I wait by the door until he's done?

My tears have receded back into my eye sockets as he moans again.

I'm not in the mood, so it's not like if I walk in I'll want to join him. Do I let him finish? This is kind of fascinating. He never makes sounds when we have sex, so I'm somewhat intrigued.

But I hear something else.

“You like making me this crazy? Tell me how bad you want me.”

My eyes widen in horror.

“You're the only woman who can make me come this hard.”

I'm standing frozen in front of our bedroom door as Beckett has phone sex—fucking phone sex—with someone.

Uncertainty floods me as I quickly evaluate the options. Did he call a service? Is this one of his fantasies? Does he do this all the time? Am I okay with this?

“I'm coming for you, goddamn it. Oooh!” he groans as he, assumedly, comes on our bed sheets.

Right as I'm about to burst through the room and ruin his orgasm, Beckett adds, “I miss you too, baby. I'll see you this weekend. I love you, too. Bye.”



## CHAPTER TWO

*Amelia*

I kick open the door like a fireman ready to extinguish some flames.

Beckett is satisfyingly startled, flinging himself halfway up in the bed, naked from the waist down, noise-canceling headphones wrapped around his ears.

“Amelia!” he yells, removing them, ejaculation stains on the stomach of his shirt.

“What in the actual fuck are you doing?” I shriek.

“I was jerking off. What happened to your hair?”

“Do not deflect. I heard every filthy word you said. Who the hell were you talking to? You said you loved her!”

“I—I don’t know what to say.”

If this were happening in a movie, I would find it comical: his limp dick flopping around as he chases me out into the kitchen. But this is my life and there’s nothing remotely funny about this.

*Violence is never the answer.*

Which is why I feel an ounce of shame when my open palm connects to his cheek.

“How could you do this? You’ve been cheating on me?” I shout as my hands shake when I tear his iPhone out of his trembling fingers.

“Amelia,” Beckett heaves, his freckled cheek turning pink. “Can you calm down for a second and let me think?”

“Time to come up with a lie? I heard you. You love someone else. What’s there to think about?”

“What are you even doing home so early?” The tone is accusatory, and I see red.

*Violence is never the answer.*

But in this moment, I feel justified when I hurl his iPhone through the air and it hits him dead on the nose.



I ‘m parked outside the emergency room, waiting in my car for Beckett to get his cartilage fracture mended.

At least he had the decency to allow me to drive him to the hospital instead of the police station. Because undoubtedly my actions warrant some type of discipline.

Maybe he can forgive me one day for this. Maybe once his nose has healed. But I will never forgive him for what he’s done.

An hour later, Beckett walks out with white bandages on his face and the beginnings of two black eyes.

I should feel bad, but I don't. At least not right now. I'm sure I will soon, but all I can think about is how our relationship is over.

He opens the door and plops onto the passenger seat. He's sitting in dried blood, and instead of worrying about his well-being, I'm praying the stains come out.

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"It'll heal, but will look a lot worse tomorrow."

Everything will look worse tomorrow. His nose, my life, the future.

We're both staring out my front windshield at a homeless man peeing on the side of the ER entrance.

This isn't the best part of town, but it was the closest hospital, and I figured it would look obvious if I took my time letting him sit in pain as I drove to the one thirty minutes in the opposite direction.

"I'm sorry, Amelia."

"Okay."

"I am. I never meant for this to happen."

"Why didn't you break up with me?"

"I don't know. I hate myself for it, but I was so used to our routine. I still love you."

“No, you don’t. If you loved me, you wouldn’t be doing this to me right now.”

The homeless man has now proceeded with pulling his pants down and squatting to take a shit.

I want to laugh and cry at the same time. How did I end up here? Fired and on the verge of being single. This was not how my day was supposed to end.

“How long have you been with her?” I ask.

“Please, can we go home?”

“How long?”

“Six months.”

A dejected laugh escapes my lips. A lonely tear falls down my cheek and I wipe it away with my knuckle.

“I’m moving out,” I decide.

“Please, can we figure this out?”

“There’s nothing to figure out. I hate you. I can’t even look at you. You threw away four years of my life.”

Beckett reaches for me, to console me, to show he has some empathy for me? But I’m not believing it.

“Stop!” I explode, the events of today catching up to me. “This has been the worst day of my entire life. I’m going home to pack up my stuff. I want to get out, away from you, away from everything.”

I start my car and drive us home.



I've never lived with a man until now, so I'm unfamiliar with the protocol of breakups when they involve combined assets.

Does he keep the furniture and pay me back?

Do we split it up evenly?

How does this work?

I'm filled with a yearning to leave everything we ever shared together.

"I don't want anything," I tell him as he sits at the table.

"Nothing?"

"You can have it all. The furniture. The dishes. Everything."

"Where are you even going to go? You should stay here until you find a place."

"Are you crazy? How do you think your *girlfriend* would feel about that? Does she even know about me?"

He shakes his head like a sad little puppy who knows shitting on the carpet is wrong but continues to do it.

In the past twenty-four hours, since we came home from the hospital, Beckett has treated me like a priest at confession, giving me details I never asked for like he wants my blessing.

He's been with this girl for six months. She grew up "south of LA" but lives in Arizona now. They connected at a



conference when he traveled there on business and they hit it off. It's been quite a successful long-distance relationship.

I can't get out of here fast enough. The shock is still at the forefront of my brain and will eventually wear off, and I want to be nowhere near him when it does. I'm functioning on adrenaline and soon I'll crash.

Aside from my massive DVD and Blu-Ray collection, and my clothes and small personal items, I don't want anything that will remind me of him.

"Keep it all. I won't need it where I'm going."

"Are you going to look for a job around here? Will you go home to your dad and stepmom?"

"That's none of your business."

"I feel gutted." Beckett actually begins to tear up. "Can I have a kiss goodbye?"

*Violence is never the answer.* Yet all I want to do is re-break his nose. But I think I've pushed my luck enough.

"Maybe you can salvage one of your relationships, but it won't be ours."



## CHAPTER THREE

*Amelia*

I feel like Elle Woods right after Warner Huntington III dumped her. But instead of a box of chocolate truffles on my lap, I have a pack of Double Stuf Oreos.

It's my third night in a hotel, and I'm too lazy to leave the room to get better toiletries. The complimentary two-in-one shampoo/conditioner is like washing my hair with bacon grease, and I guarantee my split ends will be separated to the root on my next wash. Why didn't I grab the shampoo for my color-treated hair?

DoorDash has been a lifesaver, but the delivery charges are burning a hole in my wallet.

When I'm not sleeping the entire day, I'm crying. It hurts knowing the man I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with didn't feel the same. And on top of that, he was cheating behind my back, and I didn't have a clue.

He has texted me every morning and every night to make sure I'm okay, but I refuse to respond.

My phone rings and I curse under my breath, hoping it's not Beckett.

When I look at the caller ID, I see it's Lucille.

"Lucille!" I shout, on the verge of tears again. "I was fired!"

"Oh, Amelia. I figured as much. Why didn't you call me sooner?"

"A lot has happened these last couple of days."

"Good or bad?"

"Bad!" I wail as an impressive amount of tears drop from my eyelids. "Beckett was cheating on me, and we broke up."

"Oh no, Amelia." Lucille sounds just as heartbroken as I feel.

"I moved out."

"Where are you staying?"

"A hotel." My voice quavers again and I don't have to hide the embarrassment from her.

"Why haven't you called me?"

"I didn't want to bother you. Plus I've had a lot on my mind. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I just wish I had known."

"I don't know what to do."

"Can you afford an apartment on your own?"

"No." I wipe my nose, leaving a snail trail of snot along my dirty cardigan sleeve. "My credit is good, but when they ask

for a recent pay stub, I can't show them the one with all my PTO paid out. They'll know. I have a little bit in my savings, but I don't want to use that all up."

"Have you called your father?"

"I've been avoiding it."

"Call your father."

"I don't want him to know yet."

Compassion and concern fill her voice. "Why?"

"I don't *want* to go home."

"Is this your only option?"

I *want* to dig my heels into the ground and deny that moving home is my only option. I could find the homeless man outside the ER and ask if he has any room in his cardboard box. I could buy a tent and live on Skid Row.

"What's so bad about home?"

"Did you know my mom passed away?"

"Oh my darling, no, I didn't. Recently?"

"No, I was sixteen. She had an aggressive form of cancer that took her from us four months after her diagnosis. It was awful. She was here one day, gone the next. We were devastated. I have no other siblings, so it was just my dad and me."

"I'm so sorry. Your dad lives alone?"

“No, a year after my mom passed, I suggested he join a support group. I found a widow/widower one with members his age. I figured it would help him talk openly with other people dealing with the same loss.”

“That’s so sweet of you.”

“I never would have done it had I known he’d find his next wife there.”

“He remarried?”

“Yes, he met Molly there. Her husband was killed in Afghanistan. They shared their stories and sympathized together. She has a son my age named Theo.”

Theo.

I haven’t said his name aloud in years.

“I didn’t know you had a stepmom, let alone a stepbrother.”

“I barely know him. The timing of it all was...a hard situation to grasp. It was a tiny wedding ceremony followed by these two strangers moving into my childhood home with us. Theo and I only had to live together for the summer before we moved out and went to college.”

“Where did Theo end up going?”

*Fuck if I know.*

“From what I can remember,” I begin. “He ended up dropping out of college within the first month and went overseas to backpack and volunteer for Habitat for Humanity.”

“You weren’t happy your dad remarried?”

A shiver creeps up my spine and settles there like a backpack.

“My dad remarried too soon. It was hard seeing him move on and begin a new life while I was left behind. Theo and I were young adults about to graduate from high school, but neither of us was excited about their nuptials. I think we took out our resentment on each other.”

“Does he still live at home?”

“I honestly have no idea. I haven’t talked to him in almost ten years.”

“Why? How?” Lucille shrieks.

“Well, I stopped coming home for a while when I went to college. Theo didn’t even come back to the States for a few years. I only came down for Christmas or times when Theo couldn’t get a flight home. He’d show up randomly throughout the last five years, but I made sure I was busy. Then he stopped coming at all. I’m sure it was hard to see his mom with someone new. That’s also why I kept my distance. He’s a stranger to me.”

“You have no idea what he’s up to now?”

“Last time I was home, I heard he was building houses in South America. Molly printed a photo of him on the fridge with a big group of guys. I couldn’t even tell which one was him.”

I’m reminded of the last time I saw him as a teenager: the pudgy that clung to his skin like baby fat he never outgrew, the

glasses, his acne problem.

The photo on our fridge had a group of men with beards, covered in filth. But they were all smiling in front of the small home they built together. I wouldn't be able to spot Theo out of a crowd anymore.

"I'm sure he's happy where he's at," I say. "I don't need the rumor circulating that I came home. I'm still trying to figure out another way."

"I wish you could stay with me, but I'm in a 55+ community, and they are strict, even about short-term guests. Want me to see if they'd make an exception for a couple of weeks?"

"You're so sweet, but no. I don't want you getting into trouble. I'll figure something out."

"You could move home and immediately find a job. It might not be so bad. You can see your father."

"And Molly..." I grumble.

"You don't like her?"

"She's actually okay. Better than okay. She's never forced anything and let me come around on my own time."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

Except it is. Ten years and we barely have a relationship? That's not an honorable fact to confess.

"I'm resentful because Theo couldn't even reciprocate the gestures to my dad. Theo was so rude to him and my dad tried

way too hard. It was a mess. Theo was a nightmare.”

I omit the parts where I was a total bitch to him while he lived across the hall from me. How I’d purposely eat all his Pop-Tarts but leave the empty box in the cupboard, or leave my makeup all over our shared bathroom counters.

“Let me know how the next few days go and if you change your mind about staying with me. My nosy neighbors won’t tell management unless you’ve been parked there a few nights.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll figure this out.”

“Call me later, honey.”

“Will do. Bye.”

We disconnect, and I’m left staring at my blank phone for over ten minutes.

I haven’t been home in two years for a reason. It became harder and harder to see my dad spend his life loving someone else. I’m glad he’s not alone, and I’m supportive of his second marriage, but that doesn’t mean I have to love being around it and all the changes they’ve made together.

First, they gutted and remodeled the kitchen. Then they remodeled my mom’s office to accommodate Molly’s floral company. All the floors have been replaced, new paint, new furniture. I understand they are making it their own, but each time they remove something, I feel like another memory of my mom is gone.



Swallowing the lump of apprehension, I pull up my dad's contact info and wait for him to answer.

He's retired, so the only significant thing I might be interrupting is *The Price Is Right*.

"Ames, how are you, honey?"

"Hey, Dad. I'm okay."

"What's wrong?"

The fact he can sense something is up, even though I'm doing my best to disguise the hurt in my voice, makes my eyes well with tears.

"I'm having a rough time right now. I just got fired."

"Oh, Ames. Want me to come up and see you? Would Beckett mind?"

These sandpaper tissues are going to give me a rash below my nostrils.

"Beckett was cheating on me, and we broke up."

"That son of a bitch—" He mumbles the last part. "Where are you?"

"In a hotel room."

"Why haven't you come home?"

"I can't do that to you, Dad. I'm almost thirty. I'm an adult. I'll figure this out."

"No, come home. Just for a little while."

“Dad, I can’t. You have your life with Molly and it’s...” My words disintegrate into the quiet vacancy. I can’t tell him that I’m scared to see what else they’ve erased from my childhood.

“I insist,” he pushes.

“If I did, it wouldn’t be for a long time. Would Molly care?”

“She’d love it. Theo is coming home next month, so I’m sure she’d be ecstatic to have you both here.”

My heart collapses in on itself while my blood drains from my body.

“Theo’s coming home, too?”

“Yeah, I guess he can’t find much work, and he’s running low on funds. We think he’ll be home by the end of June.”

I open my calendar app and realize that’s five weeks from now.

Five weeks to find a job and an apartment before he comes home. This might be doable.

“I’d hope to be employed and on my own by the time he returns.”

“I know you don’t want to see him,” he says quietly. “But it might be nice. You’re both adults, and so much time has passed.”

I want to make a sarcastic comment about there not being enough time in the world to get that manchild to grow up. But that’d show just how immature I still am.

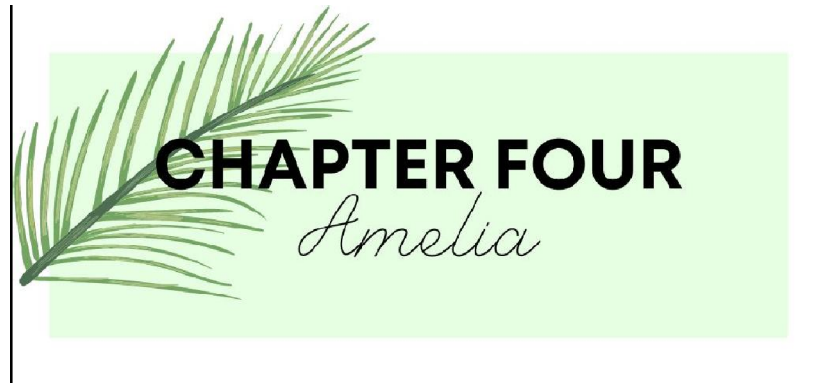
“Let me think about it. I might try and apply to a few places in LA, but I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Okay, I love you. Please take care of yourself. Make sure the doors are locked. Use the chain. Wedge a chair under the door handle.”

“I’m pretty sure that doesn’t work, but I’ll do it anyway.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, Dad.”



**I**t's been a week of hotel living, and the only positive thing from all of this is I've been sleeping so much I almost forgot about my predicament. Every day, I frantically apply for any position I'm qualified for, yet I hear nothing. Not a peep. It's discouraging, to say the least.

My dad has checked in for the past four days to find out if I'm coming home. And each time his text comes through, I tell him: "I need another day."

But each day that passes and no interview email materializes in my inbox, I begin to sweat.

Aren't companies bleeding staff right now? I thought this was the time when the unemployed had the upper hand in selecting a job. Or maybe I'm thinking of the housing market. I honestly don't know, but I really thought this was to my advantage.

I need to apply for unemployment, but I don't have a current residence to provide an ongoing address.

All signs are pointing to returning home, and I need to do it sooner than later so Theo's path doesn't cross mine.

I pull out my phone and text my dad.



Except when Friday night rolls around, I'm handed a raging case of insomnia.

I'm exhausted, but I can't fall asleep. My mind is a film reel looping over and over with random memories from my summer with Theo.

FLASH.

Me *accidentally* using Theo's razor to shave my legs.

FLASH.

Theo *accidentally* leaving the toilet seat up.

FLASH.

Me deleting the newest recording of his stupid TV show.

FLASH.

Theo adding bleach to my laundry.

FLASH.

Me blasting my pop music to distract him from his video games.

FLASH.

Theo trying to kiss me.

The movie reel halts to an abrupt stop and fades to white.

I can't go back. A cardboard box sounds like a better option, and I think I may have one big enough in my trunk.

But is moving home really the end of the world?

Matthew McConaughey lived at home with his parents in the movie *Failure to Launch*. It might be nice having my dad and Molly around to cook my meals, tidy up after me...

By 6:00 a.m., I forfeit the chance of getting any actual sleep.

I can't waste anymore time while my window of living at home without Theo is closing in. I pack up what little I came in with and check out.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Amelia

I'm an hour away from my dad's so I send him a text.



Panic creeps in, and I white knuckle the steering wheel.

What kind of a surprise? Did they renovate my bedroom even though my dad promised they wouldn't touch it?

A sickening feeling turns my empty stomach inside out.

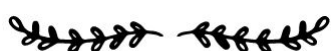
Oh shit, they can't be pregnant, can they?

No way. This is not a *Father of the Bride II* moment. Molly is in her sixties and has to be in menopause. There's absolutely no way. But weren't George and Nina the same age?

As I talk myself out of it, I pass Buy Buy Baby along the freeway like it's a big fat omen.

I chuckle to myself and pretend I'm not on the verge of spiraling out of control. I'm too old to have a sibling, and I don't count Theo, stepbrother or not.

So thanks to Bruce, whom I only call by his first name when I'm upset with him, I barely remember the rest of the commute because I'm in an anxiety haze.



I'm parked outside the house that sheltered me from the day I was brought home from the hospital. My parents were the original owners, and over time, it's been through a lot.

One time a storm swept through and nearly leveled it when a huge tree fell onto the roof.

Or when my parents decided to redo the entire backyard, complete with a new pool and stone waterslide.

And when my dad had to clean out the third-car garage to make way for my brand-new car when I turned sixteen.

Or when we had to convert their downstairs master bedroom into a hospital room when things got serious.

And eventually, when my car took my mom's place when we sold hers after she passed away.

And now, seeing it for the first time in two years, the exterior paint is different, with flowers blooming in planter boxes outside the windows.



Even a lungful of fresh air can't settle the sinking feeling in my chest.

How did it get to this? Moving back home when I'm an adult?

I know I'm lucky to have a supportive parent willing to accept me back. Some are not as fortunate and would be jumping at an opportunity like this if their circumstances were the same.

Keeping that fact at the forefront of my mind, I step out of my car right as my dad and Molly come careening out the front door.

I feel like I've returned home from active duty.

Molly is holding flowers and my dad has his arms open for a giant bear hug as they bum rush me.

"It's so great to see you, kiddo!" My dad wraps his arms around me and leans backward to lift my feet off the ground.

Aside from the belly he's had for years, my dad is as healthy as can be. He's taller than me, but we've never had an exceptionally statuesque family. I'm 5'5 and he's 5'10.

Molly has a petite frame and is shorter than me by a couple of inches. She reaches her arms around my neck and gives me a tight squeeze.

I reciprocate the gesture, keeping my body flush against hers in case a baby bump is prominent. But I feel nothing.

*Okay, so far, so good.*

“How was the drive?” my dad asks.

“Wasn’t too bad. Hope you don’t mind I’m here sooner.”

“Of course not.” Molly beams. “We’ve been looking forward to this since your dad told me you might be moving home.”

“It’s not permanent,” I remind her. “I’m hoping I’ll be gone within the month.”

Molly displays a heartfelt yet offbeat smile, as she can read between the lines.

*One month before your pain-in-the-ass son comes home and I’m out of here.*

“Want me to bring in your stuff?” my dad offers.

“Sure, most of my stuff is in the trunk or backseat.”

My dad opens the trunk and a large exhale comes from his end of the car.

“Look at all these.” He reaches inside.

I’ve collected hundreds of DVDs and Blu-Rays over the years; most of them owned by my mom first. We were such movie fans, and I owe my obsession to her..

My dad has tears in his eyes as he picks up a random one.

*The Goonies.*

“Your mom loved this movie.” He swipes at his eye to remove a tear.

“It’s a classic.”

“You tried to talk us into booby-trapping the front yard so no one could come to the door unless we let them through.”

He grabs another movie.

*Clueless.*

I groan at the reminder that Cher and Josh were also stepsiblings who lived together. And gross, didn't they end up together in the end?

Molly watches my dad riffle through my collection, and I'm unsure of my next move. Should we include her in our memories?

Did my dad or Molly ever get uncomfortable or envious when their late spouse was brought up? If so, they hide it well. Because Molly is respectful and gives us this moment to reminisce.

“I haven't seen these in years, honey. Not since you moved out.”

“Don't worry, I'll keep them all in the box. Maybe they can stay in the garage?”

Molly opens the doors and I see an old Mustang sitting in the spot that once was my own.

“Wow, you still kept her husband's car?” I mutter.

“Yes, Molly doesn't want to get rid of it. Theo claims he doesn't want it, but we think he'll change his mind. Look at it. It's a classic.”

Molly's husband left behind a 1966 Ford Mustang. That's all I know because I am not a car person. It's not one of those cars that'll sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars, but it's valuable to Molly and Theo. Theo and his dad supposedly worked on it together. I can see why it would be a difficult decision to make.

"I cleared off a space on the shelves for your movies," Molly yells from inside the garage.

"Thanks." I watch her collect a heavy box from my trunk.

If she was pregnant, she couldn't be lifting heavy things, right? Especially for her age?

"Come on inside." My dad's attempt at getting all my belongings in one trip is almost successful. I carry a tower of boxes and leave them at the entrance.

I packed like our apartment was on fire with no organization. Everything I own sits in the foyer, and it isn't much to show for almost thirty years of life. How depressing.

I take a deep breath and exhale as I prepare my psyche for the changes made to the house. So far, nothing screams at me, which is a relief. It's quite peculiar coming back home and not remembering it the way it used to be.

"Are you hungry?" Molly—the typical mom who wants to make sure her child, even if it's a stepchild, is taken care of.

"I'm okay, thank you. I may go lie down upstairs if you don't mind."

“You’ll need the Wi-Fi password. I’ll text it to you,” my dad offers.

“Thanks, I’ll start my job search immediately.”

My dad and Molly nod their heads, and I wait for the other shoe to drop.

“What was the surprise you had to tell me?”

“Oh, it was nothing. I was excited is all,” my dad reveals.

“Nothing? Oh, okay. I’ll come back downstairs in a little bit.”

I turn on my feet and ascend the steps, fearful there’s a marching band and parade waiting to burst out of my room to welcome me home.

But when I turn the knob, I’m met with welcomed silence.

My room is as I left it, an unspoken promise my dad and Molly would preserve it as best they could. It’s not like a time warp back to the 90s with band posters taped to my walls and a floral pink bedspread.

When I moved out for college, I cleaned it up and left it mature enough to return to when I visited overnight for holidays.

The design of the house is unique, not only because it sits in the curve of a cul-de-sac, but because of the expansive side yards where the pool, Jacuzzi, and waterslide were installed.

The master bedroom is downstairs, while three other rooms are upstairs. Mine, an office, and the guest room Theo took

over for the three long months we lived together.

There's one full bathroom on the second floor that's rarely used since my dad isn't in his office as much since he retired. It will now be mine for the time being.

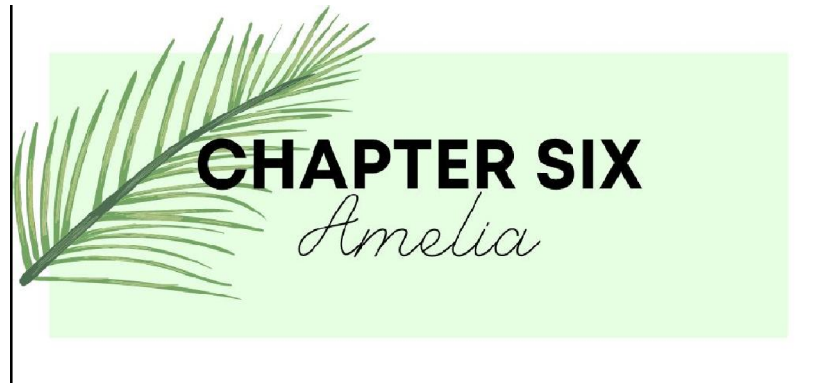
I have a small balcony off the side of my room that overlooks the backyard. It's the best room in the house, in my opinion.

I fall backward onto my bed and stare at my ceiling.

*Remember, Amelia, it could be so much worse.*

I could be crammed underneath a staircase on a cot. Or Molly could force me to live in the nonexistent attic like *Cinderella*, where I'd be stuck talking to rats.

One month. You can do this.



**W**hen I come downstairs for breakfast, I'm greeted by my dad reading a newspaper.

"They still have those?" I joke.

"Yeah, turns out Twitter isn't the only viable news outlet nowadays."

"You're living in the old days, Dad. Twitter gets breaking news down to the minute."

"I'll stick to my dinosaur ways and rely on good ol' black-and-white print."

"Suit yourself. That's where I got most of my traction for my movie trailers..."

My sentence falls flat as I relive the firing all over again.

How embarrassing that was. I came in ready to conquer the world, only to be met with an NDA.

I've gone through bouts of rage and denial this past week.

Anger because I finally had a foot in the door. This wasn't my dream company, but it was definitely a stepping stone. I

loved creating two-minute masterpieces that had you running to the theaters.

The self-pity is hitting me in full force. My appetite comes and goes. I'm finally hungry, yet the only interesting thing in the pantry is Cheerios. Not frosted Cheerios, not even Honey Nut Cheerios, but the plain, "I'm watching my cholesterol" kind.

I pour myself a bowl anyway and take a seat on the barstool next to my dad.

I thought I'd wake up to a ton of emails reaching out for an interview. The five I applied to last night, plus the dozens earlier in the week, haven't produced any hits.

My bites must be aggressive because my dad asks, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lie, cranky, groggy, and moody—a bad combination.

Molly enters the kitchen and pours herself some coffee.

"Good morning, Amelia. How did you sleep?"

"Fine, thank you."

Even though I'm not looking at them, I can sense their silent exchange. How they're having an entire conversation behind my back with their expressive eye contact.

"What are you doing today?" *This small talk is going to be the death of me.*

"Not sure. I might drown myself in the pool."



My dad slams down his newspaper. “Amelia, that’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Do you need any help unpacking?” Molly offers.

“No thanks. I’m okay—”

And out of nowhere, as if he appeared in a puff of smoke, a shirtless male model staggers into our kitchen.

Instead of calling 9-1-1, because this half-naked assailant is most definitely about to rob us of our belongings, Molly gives him a pat on the back and sings, “Good morning.”

“Morning.” My dad raises his coffee as a greeting, not even slightly worried this intruder may hogtie us.

Did they adopt someone while I was away? Host a foreign exchange student? Because this can’t be—

My spoon clatters in the cereal bowl. “Theo?”

My gaze falls right to his bare stomach, which now features well-defined abdominal muscles. I can’t tell if he’s flexing on purpose or if he’s naturally chiseled even at rest, but *wow*.

My eyes gradually wander up his torso, and for fuck’s sake, I’ve never seen such a flawless chest in all my life. His perfectly formed pecs are blessed with a light covering of golden-brown hair that mirrors the happy trail beginning at his belly button and disappearing beneath his boxer shorts, which are hanging dangerously low. The coveted V near his hips is on full display, and I’m starstruck at seeing it up close.

I'm terrified to get a good look at his upper half, because if it's anything like his southern region, I'm fucked.

And goddamn it, he's perfect. No more Coke-bottle glasses. The baby fat that clung to his face has melted away, revealing cheekbones you'd show a plastic surgeon to replicate. And the acne problem? What acne problem? A week's worth of stubble looks mighty fine on him, and I have to close my mouth in case I start drooling. I don't know if his blue eyes have always been that intoxicating or if his glasses did a good job of hiding them, but I'm enamored. They've already cast a spell. I see the Pacific Ocean in his gaze, white-capped waves bursting from his irises outward. I want to swim in them and drown.

He was a boy when we left, and now I'm looking at a man—a goddamn Avenger with taut muscles in places I didn't even know existed. Like near his ribs. Why am I willing to give up my movie collection so I can run my fingers along his obliques?

I'm looking at Chris Hemsworth, circa *Thor: Ragnarok*.

And when we left for college, he was Thor, circa *Avengers: Endgame*, a loner who played video games and didn't give a shit about his appearance.

He probably built houses with his bare hands and cleaned the village's clothes on those washboard abs. The gleam in his white teeth could have been the spark to ignite campfires. He has a healthy tan, and I cannot stop looking at the freckles on his shoulders. He's melting the panties off my ass, and I

desperately need those to stay on right now. Don't I hate his guts? Yes, yes I do.

"Amelia," Molly begins. "Has it really been that long?"

"Umm, yeah." Ten years, if anyone's counting.

Theo seems to be looking right through me, obviously not sizing me up as I did to him. I must repulse him with my unwashed hair and bare face.

"My baby has grown up! But honey, put some clothes on. I know you're used to working outside in the heat, but you need to cover up."

"Yeah," my dad agrees, cradling his belly with his hands. "You're making me look bad."

I want to die of embarrassment.

But then I remember Theo is my stepbrother, so it shouldn't matter. Who cares if my dad embarrasses me?

Theo leaves the room and returns with a shirt so tight he might as well still be without one. I can see the narrow line separating each side of his abdominal muscles through the white, threadbare fabric. I bet he's solid without flexing. I bet he gets off when he sees how jacked he is in the mirror.

He pours himself some coffee, and he must have tendons and muscles the rest of us don't have. I've never been so fascinated by someone's forearm and so distracted by skin. What the hell is wrong with me?

I'm a horny teenager, and Theo is a soldier for King Leonidas from the film *300*. I'm unable to contain my hormones as I ogle his Spartan physique.

Theo navigates the kitchen like he's used to living here, and I watch him like Sherlock Holmes, trying to figure out how he's so nonchalant about our unexpected reunion. It's been, give or take, ten years since we've been in the same room together, and he's aloof. *Aloof!* I've never used that word in my life but right now is the perfect example.

"I thought you weren't coming home for another month?" I scowl to ensure I'm not drooling.

"I got in last night," he states without making eye contact with me.

*Well, no shit.*

I bite my tongue, because I'm hoping the bad terms we left on won't follow us into adulthood.

"Was that all your shit near the front door?" Theo asks. "Still messy. Looks like nothing has changed."

Oh, okay, it's going to be like that.

"Yes, that's *my shit* near the front door. And wow, nothing has changed for you, too. Still don't know how to talk to women."

"Amelia!" my dad gasps in absolute horror, like I called Theo a son of a bitch, insulting him and Molly simultaneously.

“Sorry.” I clear my throat and prepare for war. “What I meant to say was, welcome home. Will we be seeing you around or are you going to hide out in your room and triple the electricity bill by playing video games all day every day?”

“Oh, Amelia. Still the ballbuster you’ve always been—”

“Theo, stop antagonizing Amelia,” Molly requests. “And you better be wearing clothes more often. You have a lady in the house now.”

Theo choke-laughes on his coffee and spits some out onto the countertops. “A lady in the house? Where?”

“That’s exactly what I said ten years ago when I wondered if you were capable of accomplishing such a deed,” I jab.

“No one is bringing anyone back to the house!” my dad shouts. “Christ Almighty, can’t you two get along for a couple of minutes?”

“This was all him!” I don’t feel the least bit mature placing blame on Theo, but he started it when he brought up how messy I am.

Theo finally decides to keep his perfectly shaped mouth shut. Gosh, his lips are so plump and... Is he *sneering* at me? He’s giving me this creepy yet sexual smile I am interpreting as smug. Is he trying to get out of this with a flash of his flawless face? It’s not...it’s not going to work.

“Please don’t say *he* was the surprise,” I plead to my dad.

“I’m sorry, Amelia,” Molly says, almost like she’s embarrassed. “It was my idea to keep his return a surprise.”

My cereal is soggy, and I've lost my appetite.

While I was packing my suitcase in the hotel, Theo was booking an early flight home. And my dad didn't bother telling me? Traitor.

"Speaking of surprises, what are *you* doing here? Where's that boyfriend of yours?" Theo asks.

I'm taken aback for two reasons.

One: How did he know I even *had* a boyfriend?

Two: What the hell do I say? I'm not about to admit he broke up with me to be with his new girlfriend.

"That bastard cheated on her!" my dad exclaims. "Can you believe it?"

I slowly twist my neck his way like in the *Exorcist* and he can see all over my face he did the wrong thing.

"Sorry, sweetheart, was I not supposed to tell anyone? Are you embarrassed?"

How is this getting worse? How? Next thing you know, he'll inform Theo of my unemployment benefits.

"She was fired the *same day* she found out he was cheating," my dad adds. "Poor thing."

"Oh my God." I bring my fingertips to the base of my skull, right at the hairline, hoping the pressure will alleviate the pounding in my brain.

I jump to my feet. "I'm going to my room."

As I put my bowl in the sink, my father clears his throat. He gestures to the dishwasher.

Theo gives me a look like I'm a disgusting slob and I grit my teeth as I yank open the dishwasher and slot the bowl on the bottom rack. Theo reaches for something in the cupboards above me, and as I'm bending slightly, my ass brushes up against his groin.

"Ahhh!" I shriek, garnering a glance from my dad and Molly.

Theo must not be as self-aware as I am, because he finally looks me in the eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

Drowning. I'm drowning in those Pacific blue eyes, that's what's wrong.

"Nothing."



When I was in high school, my first job was at a coffee shop called Roasted. It's a bougie place right on the beach that left me with plenty of tips at the end of my shift, especially in summer. At the time, it was brand new, and I was one of the first hires who eventually became assistant manager.

Thankfully, Roasted is still in business. It's kind of dead inside, but I order coffee and a muffin. Yes, I'm spending frivolously considering my emergency savings is pretty paltry, but I can't pretend we are all a happy family right now.

“Amelia? Is that you, Amelia?” a voice calls out.

“Yes?”

The owner of Roasted drops a sack of coffee beans, steps out of the back, and runs to me.

“Oh my gosh, Benny?”

He gives me a Hollywood spin at the entrance of his store.

“Why did I assume you sold this place for millions and retired to Hawaii?”

“If that ain’t wishful thinking, I don’t know what is. Come here and let me see you.”

Benny holds my hand out and gives me a dramatic once-over.

“Girl, you look amazing.”

“I don’t feel amazing. I feel old.”

”*You* feel old? I was twice your age when I hired you!”

“Not anymore,” I laugh.

He points to his hair, which is gray but looks so perfect with his skin tone. “Well, I probably look older, huh? I figured dye it all the same color and be done with it.”

Benny always had a smart eye and has been ahead of the fashion curve, wearing styles before they became trendy. He rocks whatever he wears, and had I known I’d be reuniting with my fashionable former boss, I definitely would have washed my hair.



I'm older now and have gained some weight. I'm not as energetic and confident as I was back when he was my boss, and I feel it as I look down and see my distressed jeans and loose-fitting top.

"Who's this?" the woman behind the counter asks. She wasn't rude when she took my order, but she was nowhere near as welcoming as I used to be back in the day.

"This is Amelia, the first person I hired to help me when Roasted was just a baby. She was the best thing that ever happened to me. Became my assistant manager within a couple of months. She even thought of fun events and ways to promote this place, and she was a sophomore in high school."

I graciously accept his compliment because I could use the self-esteem boost, even if he embellished my history here.

"What are you up to? It's been too long." Benny grabs my hands in his and wiggles them.

"Would you believe me if I told you I had to move back home?"

He blanches. "Please tell me your dad is okay?"

The trepidation in his voice reminds me of the emotional time when I told him about my mom's diagnosis and the months following. How Benny gave me all the time off I needed when she inevitably passed away. He even hosted an event where all the proceeds helped pay for her funeral service. The memories come back in waves, and I am flooded with an overwhelming surge of grief. Why didn't I stay in

contact with Benny? Maybe because he was a reminder of my past, and when I eventually went off to college, I wanted to leave it all behind me.

“My dad is doing fine,” I begin. “It’s me. I am going through a quarter-life crisis.”

“Girl, spill. Hey, Tawny, can you bring her coffee to my office when it’s ready?”

“Of course,” she says with a smile.

We sit in his comfy chairs, and I catch him up on the last two weeks of my miserable existence.

“Cheated on, fired, and dumped all in the same day? Honey, you should visit the nearest church and pray to Jesus because you have angered someone,” he jokes.

“I’m applying everywhere. I would have started donating plasma had I known Theo would be home sooner than they told me.”

“I need to see a photo of him. There’s no way that little twerp traded glasses for cheekbones.”

“I have no photos. None.”

“It feels like yesterday when he’d come in here and drool over you.”

“He was drooling over his diabetes in a cup. He would always order the grossest, most unhealthy thing we had on the menu.”

“He drove out of his way to visit. He had a crush on you. Did you block that part out of your memory?”

The jingle of the front doorbell echoes throughout the coffee shop, and Tawny greets the next customer.

Even though I don't know the voice well, I know it well enough.

“Hi, may I get a medium coffee, black, please?”

Theo.

I'm still in the back, out of sight, but I duck as if someone threw something at me.

“What's going on?” Benny looks around, waiting for an ambush.

“Theo is here!” I whisper-yell.

“No!”

I throw my head back and stare at the ceiling. “Why?”

Benny springs from his chair. “I'm going out there. I need to see this Adonis.”

My eyes widen in alarm. “Please don't tell him I'm here.”

“Never.” Benny presses his index finger to his closed lips and virtually skips out of his office.

There's a CCTV screen with four camera angles throughout the store, and I watch the one Theo is currently on.

Summer weather hasn't hit us hard yet, but Theo is wearing black shorts, a plain, dark gray T-shirt, and checkered Vans.

Why does he look so casual and so fucking attractive? His stubble is visible, and why am I focusing so much on his facial hair? Maybe because when we were younger he had the face of a chubby little pipsqueak who couldn't grow a mustache to save his life. Now he's a man with bone structure Hollywood stars aspire to have.

Benny enters the frame, and he's stealthy in the way he restocks some napkins. I see him do a not so subtle double take and I silently yell, "I know" at the screen.

Their voices are low and I can only see their body language through the monitor, but Tawny looks like she's about to melt into a puddle right at Theo's feet.

He looks uninterested, but it's hard to tell when I can't hear what they're saying. Tawny's head flies backward, and her exaggerated laugh is loud enough that I can hear it in the office. I go into defensive mode as my body senses a threat.

Blonde. A couple of years younger than me. Perky. Looks like she was the head cheerleader in high school. Fine, she's cute. Super cute. Like Theo could throw her over his shoulder and carry her off into the sunset.

But why do I give a shit who Theo is talking to? I don't, I remind myself. I don't care at all. I don't even *like* him.

Benny returns with a cup of ice.

"I need to cool down. You are in trouble. He is *Fine*, with a capital F."

"He's okay," I lie.

“Okay? He could be an Abercrombie model, Amelia. And you have to *live* with him?”

“Abercrombie doesn’t even have those kinds of models anymore!”

“Don’t deflect. You had posters of men just like him on your walls in high school. Admit it.”

“I’m trying to get out of this situation. My dad neglected to inform me we’d both be home together. In fact, he outright lied.”

“You never hooked up with him?” Benny points to the screen as Theo exits the front door. He is disappointed in my lack of gossip and fishing for more.

It’s comical yet peculiar sitting here years later discussing my dating life. I spent two years at Roasted, from sixteen years old to when I left for college. Benny was mid-thirties and dealt with my flustered teenage years like a champ. He’d encourage me to talk to the cute boys who came in despite neither of us being able to find a boyfriend. But he always had the best advice for me.

Now that we’re older, I can be more open and honest since the age difference isn’t as polarizing.

“Never,” I answer. “He tried to kiss me, though.”

Right as I’m about to explain more, Tawny comes back.

“A huge group came in. Mind helping?” she pleads.

“Yes, I’ll be right out.”

“Sorry, let me get out of here. I didn’t mean to keep you.”

“No, don’t worry. Gimme your number. If you plan on staying, I want to see you as often as I can.”

I write down my cell phone number, which has remained the same since high school. Crazy how some things never change.

But Theo sure has.



**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
*Amelia*

**O**n the way home, I stop for a bottle of Pinot Grigio at the grocery store. I'm still unsure how this works, being home again. Do they expect us to have family dinners every night? All four of us sitting down together and sharing how our day went? No thank you.

I decide not to find out and turn on the Jacuzzi in the backyard.

While I wait for it to heat up, I hide out in my room.

I feel like an outsider staying at my friend's parent's house instead of my own dad's.

Can I come and go as I please? I mean, I would imagine so. I'm a grown woman, and I don't have a curfew. But why do I feel like tiptoeing around the house?

Oh yeah, because Theo could be lurking around the corner at any given moment.

Now that it's dark, I change into my two-piece and head downstairs.

Theo must be secluded in his dark dungeon of a room, and I can drink my bottle of wine—yes, the whole bottle—in peace.

I have my essentials: a towel, the wine, and a big plastic cup. Opening the sliding glass door, I step out into the darkness and close it quietly.

It's only 8 p.m., and I should have actual food instead of fermented grapes, but when you're at rock bottom, wine is always the answer.

Walking over to the corner of the large backyard, I stop abruptly and yelp in surprise.

Because there, sitting in the hot water I turned on for myself, is a half-naked Theo.

“What are *you* doing in there?” I ask in a hushed tone.

“It's a Jacuzzi. Aren't people supposed to enjoy it?”

“Yes, but I turned it on for myself. Did you think it magically warmed up?”

“Honestly, Amelia, I didn't think about it. The idea of a Jacuzzi sounded nice right after my workout.”

“I hope you showered off first,” I grumble under my breath, approaching slowly.

I'm suddenly aware of my bikini line, which has been neglected for the past week. Shit. Maybe it's dark enough that he can't see.

I weigh my options and conclude this moment was bound to happen sooner or later. I wish I had more clothes on, but I'll



make do.

Setting the bottle of wine and cup on the stone edge of the spa, I move carefully to the edge of the water, feeling painfully self-conscious.

I'm a size ten and acutely aware I'm not supermodel skinny, thanks to the media highlighting what makes you a contender for prime womanhood: a thigh gap, a flat stomach, and long, smooth legs, free of cellulite and stretch marks.

When I was younger, I was that lucky bitch who left their junior year with minimal assets and returned that September with an enviable rack on display. In hindsight, this didn't help my case with Theo, but it was the only quality I possessed.

I generally accept my curves and love them, but Theo's flawless, perfect physique, with zero body fat, would make any woman question her adequacy.

So instead of inching in slowly, as I always do with such high temperatures, I practically cannonball my ass onto the step, submerging my lower half into the water so Theo doesn't get a glimpse at my imperfections.

I'm not prepared to sit in uncomfortable silence, so I pour some wine into my cup and offer it to Theo, the metaphorical olive branch.

"I planned on finishing this bottle by myself, but a drinking problem is not high on my priority list, so would you like some?"

“Sure.” He reaches out, and despite sitting in 100 degrees of heat, I shiver when his fingers touch mine.

*They’re fingers, Amelia. Just fingers.*

He takes a big sip. “I still have cooties, though.”

When he hands the cup back to me, I make sure to avoid his touch this time around. “Ha, ha. I’m sure that’s not the only disease you’ve caught since I last saw you.”

This gets him to smile, and he wipes at the smirk forming on his lips.

Note to self: try not to be funny in his presence because seeing his face brighten like that makes me feel like I’ve been brought back to life. Butterflies swarm deep in my stomach as I realize I’m able to elicit a reaction from him with a simple joke. And fuck him for having the nicest smile I’ve ever seen.

“I’ve been cleared from *all* diseases, thank you very much. I had to get tested before I came back to the States,” he tells me.

“Who did you pay off to get that clearance?”

He smiles again, and what the actual hell? Is he trying to play nice? I’m not familiar with this kindness, and it’s oddly making me uncomfortable.

“Ya know what, I may just go to bed,” I tell him.

“Are you going to avoid me until you find a job and move out?”

“I’m not avoiding you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not!” *I totally am.*

He looks right through me.

“Are you incapable of having a civil conversation?”

“Are you?” I repeat.

His intense stare is pushing against my diaphragm.

“We barely know each other anymore.”

“So, we’re keeping it that way?” he questions.

“Wouldn’t you prefer that?”

“I can play nice for the night.”

“Oh, can you?”

“Only for an hour.” He has the audacity to wink at me, and I feel my insides dissolve into the hot water.

This smug bastard knows exactly what he’s doing, and I have my work cut out for me. I no longer have the upper hand. Theo’s abs and chiseled face have all the leverage, and I’m fucked.

“So, fired and dumped on the same day?”

“I think you misunderstood how nice works.”

“I’m kidding. But also curious.”

“My company let me go, and when I got home, I discovered my boyfriend having phone sex with his *other* girlfriend.”

I tip the cup to the sky as a salute and down the rest of it. I pour us some more.

“Phone sex, huh? You don’t hear about that every day.”

“Yep, apparently he was seeing someone else during the time we were living together.”

“So, you’re single?” he confirms.

“Not for long. This stoner kid outside the grocery store told me I was beautiful today, so I do have *that* going for me.”

“Do you always deflect with a joke when you’re uncomfortable?”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” *I totally am.*

I can’t stop staring at his outstretched arms that surround the exterior of the Jacuzzi. His wingspan is wide, and all I can think about is his grip strength and how easy it would be for him to support my entire body weight...

### *WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?*

I’m turning into a horny teenage boy, my innocent thoughts x-rated and unsavory. This is Theo, my stepmother’s son, I’m about to fantasize about.

He suspects nothing as my eyes focus on his golden brown hair which is a shade darker because he keeps brushing water through his strands. His eyes are so blue they are practically visible even at night.

The water is ribcage level, and I’m homed in on the veins snaking through his chest and arms. I’m so glad I can’t see his abdomen, because I am a sucker for a six-pack, something Beckett was never able to acquire.

“You’re staring,” Theo announces.

*Shit.*

“I’m not staring, I’m spacing out.” The lie sounds somewhat believable.

“I see you went to Roasted today, huh?”

“How do you know?”

“I saw your coffee cup in the trash when I threw mine away.”

“Oh yeah. See, I’m capable of picking up after myself.”

“It’s a start.”

He winks at me for a second time and I ask, “Do you have something in your eye?”

“Nope, it’s funny to me you can’t accept me being nice to you right now.”

“Yes, I can!” Okay, maybe it’s the wine talking, but that’s a total lie. He’s being civil, and no, I’m not used to that. “How was your coffee?”

“It was good—not as good as old times, though.”

“Well, that’s because you probably got a boring iced coffee instead of your usual large coffee shake with extra chocolate.”

I immediately berate myself for bringing up this tidbit because it’s opening the door to a conversation I don’t want to have.

And yet, Theo steps right on through.

“Oh yes, how could I forget ‘pudgy loser’ written on my cup?”

I cringe. “I’m—I’m sorry.”

We don’t apologize, never have, but I feel the need to ask for forgiveness.

“It’s okay, it was a million years ago,” he says with a shrug.

The memory flashes through my mind like it was yesterday.

During the time our parents dated, Theo liked to come into Roasted with one of his closest friends. To antagonize me? Probably.

One day, I overheard their conversation, though I’m sure Theo was purposely keeping his voice loud. Seth—I think it was—commented on how hot I was. Theo said looks didn’t matter with someone as stupid as I was. I didn’t have the brains behind my pretty face, and there was no way a guy would stick around when he found out how dumb I was.

To get back at him, I wrote “pudgy loser” on his cup. And when his drink was ready, my coworker called it out and immediately recognized the harsh prank. The damage was done.

He attacked me for feeling inadequate and unintelligent. I saw how touchy he was with his looks and shined a light on it. We saw each other’s most fragile insecurities and exploited them to retaliate.

We were cruel to each other, and there are a handful of other stories I’d rather not mention tonight, so I reiterate my

apology.

“No, that was unacceptable, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I said some mean things about you also. Would you like an apology for when I called you a bitch?”

His voice is low and sexy, and he must not have hit puberty ten years ago because I don’t know how I lived with him for three months if his voice sounded like this. Even the word “bitch” out of his mouth is a turn-on.

“Actually, yes. An apology would be fair, considering we are playing nice, and we have thirty minutes left in our hour. I may never get it again.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice is rough, like rocks against concrete, and I confirm no, he never had this voice when we were living together.

I gulp another mouthful of wine and pass the rest to Theo.

“Do you still think I’m a pudgy loser?” Our hands brush against each other.

I don’t even bother holding back my laugh.

“Theo, I think anyone with eyeballs can see you’re no longer pudgy. But a loser? I need a day or two with you to determine that.”

Our hands are both on the cup, and when I go to bring it back to my side, he’s still holding on.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

He releases it, and I eye him warily.

“This is good wine. I haven’t had alcohol in a while.”

Instead of admitting I’ve become dependent on a glass or two every night, I take another sip.

Theo changes positions, no longer sitting chest deep. He stands up and sits on the exterior ledge so his legs dangle in the water.

As he emerges, his board shorts stick to his lower half like glue. He pulls on them to release the heat and trapped air. When this happens, I get a tiny glimpse of the base of his dick. I don’t know what else to call it, the neck? Whatever it is, the briefest appearance has my mouth gaping open.

My body aches in places hidden from view, and I squeeze my eyes shut because I know I’ll be replaying this moment many times tonight while I’m in bed.

I hate how I’m aroused by his presence. How quickly things have changed from when we were teenagers. I used to be the confident one and advertised it in my string bikinis. Now all Theo has to do is smile and I’m wondering which sexual position he’s best at.

“You okay? You look flustered.”

“Honestly, Theo, your six-pack stomach looks fake, and I’m trying to figure out how this happened.”

He looks down at his torso and laughs. “Trust me, they’re real.”



And to tease me even further, he rubs his hand across his stomach to prove they're not drawn on.

“Would you like to check for yourself?” He hunches his face closer into the Jacuzzi and I try to conceal the attraction when I swallow.

The wine is long gone. We destroyed that bottle. I could use some water, but I'm not taking the chance to get out of this Jacuzzi and ruin my good view.

“I don't want to get too close. The cooties and diseases, ya know.”

“The hour isn't up. You can feel if you don't believe me.”

I do my best impression of someone who didn't exhale out their entire body's worth of tension in a single breath. If I don't move, he won't notice how badly my hand wants to betray me and slide over his wet, jacked body.

Instead, I adjust the bikini straps that are failing to support me. Had I known Theo would be out here, I would have chosen a more appropriate suit, like my one-piece.

When my eyes return to his face, he does his best impression of someone who wasn't provocatively staring at a woman's tits.

We decide not to acknowledge the awkwardness because I'm sure he's caught me staring, too.

It's difficult sitting across from someone so pleasing to the eye. Have I never been this attracted to someone in my life? I didn't even have this visceral reaction to Beckett when we

started dating. Maybe a diluted version, but never anything so physical.

Our time is winding down, and I'm unsure if we'll ever get an opportunity for me to ask where it all went wrong and if anything is salvageable, but I decide that's a conversation for another day.

"I need to go to bed." I fake a yawn.

"Yeah, me too. Our hour is almost up."

I stand up and wobble a bit from the wine. My feet are on the bottom floor, my lower half in the water. I foolishly think I can skip a step and trust my one leg to support my body weight. Big mistake.

Not only am I unstable and buzzed, but I also don't have a grab bar to break my fall. I can feel my equilibrium shift as my balance skews completely.

Theo reaches out and tries to prevent me from hitting the water, but it's too late. I slip, the right side of my body submerging underwater.

His catch is clumsy and his huge hand rubs against my chest as I fall sideways, maybe even upside down. I have no clue which way is up, I just know gravity is nonexistent right now.

Theo fumbles me like a football as I rub the water out of my eyes.

My hair is sopping wet, and I say, "Shit," right as Theo curses, "Fuck, sorry."

“I have to—”

“Amelia, uh—”

“No,” I interrupt, putting my hand up, realizing how cold it is outside. “It’s fine, don’t worry.”

“But—”

“Nope, apology accepted and—”

“Amelia, will you shut up? Your left tit is showing!”

I look down to confirm that yep, the left bathing suit triangle is tucked to the side and my bare breast is exposed.

Theo accidentally shifted my bikini top as I fell, and he got a nice handful *and* eyeful.

I readjust myself quickly, a feeling of mortification and arousal hitting me simultaneously. Theo looks like he saw inside Pandora’s box, a glimpse of gratification emitting from those icy blue eyes. I don’t know if it’s the cool temperature or the fact that Theo’s eyes are locked on me, but my nipple hardens, as if giving him the blessing to keep staring.

“Well, this is awkward.” I’m dripping everywhere as I exit the Jacuzzi.

“Amelia, it was an accident.”

“I know, don’t worry.”

Wrapping the towel around me as tight as it can go without cutting off circulation, I gather the empty wine bottle and cup and practically leave a trail of steam behind me as my hot body meets the cool night air.

I'm unable to even say goodnight as I sprint for the house. I immediately run up to my room and flop on the bed, cursing.

An ex-boyfriend said my breasts were "porn star worthy," and while these girls have never let me down, I don't use them as bait. Even though they are the only weapon in my feminine wiles department, I never pull them out.

Until tonight. On accident. When Theo looked like all his teenage fantasies came true.

The sexual tension I imagined was bad enough for me. Then I had to go and flash him my chest? I'll be haunted by this till the day I move out.

Seeing him practically naked, his hair disheveled, his ab muscles contracting as he laughed, the gleam in his eyes when I caught him staring at me...it's too much.

And on top of all this, Theo has been resurrected from the dead and come back as Captain America.

"Fuck," I groan.

I cannot be attracted to my stepbrother.



Once Amelia is safely inside, I get back into the Jacuzzi and slowly sink into the water until it reaches my ears.

*What are you doing in there?*

What did she think I was doing in here? I'm reluctant to admit this, but I wanted to see what became of my wicked stepsister in the last ten years.

My mom and I exchanged many emails over the last decade, some filled with updates on Amelia as they became relevant. Last I heard, she moved in with her boyfriend and lived happily ever after.

This morning, when Bruce put her situation in black-and-white terms, I rejoiced. Why else would she be home? I was baiting her earlier when I said her crap was near the front door, and she took it willingly.

Who knew she'd be so witty at this age? It's kind of fun arguing with her now that I'm older. Back then, I was usually too meek to say what I really wanted. She won every disagreement.

She definitely won't now.

Seeing her this morning was quite a shock. She was always cute when we were teenagers. I don't think people at her high school appreciated how unique and adorable she was. Maybe because I had the brief pleasure of living alongside her, so I got to see her quirky personality with her father.

But I had to leave the room to put a shirt on *and* adjust my dick so I wasn't giving off the impression she made me hard seeing her in her barely-there pajamas. What a reunion it was.

The temptation is going to be difficult. But she'll find a job as soon as possible and leave like she was never even home. I won't see her again for another ten years, and by then, she'll be happily married with two or three babies.

As for me, I still need to figure out what the hell I'm going to do.

When my mom told me Amelia was coming back, I booked the fastest flight I could so I had the opportunity to see her. Just a little white lie.

For the past decade, Amelia has been avoiding me. Anytime I said I wasn't coming home for the holidays, she would. And when my mom told me she wasn't, I came anyway, hoping I'd catch her in a lie. Every time she purposely avoided me, I wanted to see her even more.

Things weren't great the last time we saw each other. Hell, they weren't great for the three months we lived together and before that.

My mom and Bruce getting married was a shock to both of us, and I know neither was ready to replace the parent we lost. I'm *still* mourning my dad and losing him the way we did.

I spent a lot of time in South America soul searching and trying to devote my time to helping others since I was completely lost. But I'd be lying if I didn't think about Amelia while I was away.

Amelia was my first real crush, and it hurt, knowing she was my stepsister and off-limits.

No one understood what it was like to lose their parent at my age. I thought we could have been friends or maybe a support system for each other. But that was out of the question the minute we met.

I'm still harboring some untouched emotions that manifest into new anxieties, and one day, I will address them. But not right now.

Because Amelia and I are back under the same roof. And I'm not the pudgy loser anymore.

She is still as gorgeous as ever. She's older, but in a good way. Her curves are more refined and fit our age now. She's not the scrawny, well-endowed goody-goody she used to be. She's voluptuous, enticing, and still manages to make me hold my breath when she's near.

Amelia grew into her hips and breasts. When she approached in her beige bikini, I had to clench my fists, because I thought at first glance she was naked. Being in such

close proximity to such a beautiful woman who hates me was torture.

I've had my share of women over the years, but the one I want most is the one I'll never have. First crushes hit hard, and I'm feeling the residual emotions of my adolescence.

Exiting the Jacuzzi, I grab my towel and wrap it around my waist, then peel off my shorts and let them sit out to dry in the sun tomorrow.

Walking back to the house, I peer up at Amelia's bedroom window and balcony. Her light is on, but I can't see what she's doing. Probably booking a hotel, if I knew her well enough. Which I don't. Not before and definitely not now.

I lock up the rest of the house and head to my room.

I'm tempted to knock on her door, but I am wrapped in a towel, practically naked, and I don't want to make her more uncomfortable. I already apologized for feeling her up.

The image of her creamy white breast and light pink nipple will be burned into my core memories.

"Stop," I tell myself as I'm at the top of the stairs.

Suddenly, Amelia's door bursts open. "Who's out there?"

She's obviously not used to sharing the second floor.

I take in her wet hair and simple pajamas.

While I was outside pretending I didn't cop a feel and secretly celebrating the happy accident, she was washing off any metaphorical trace I left on her.



“Sorry, it’s just me,” I whisper, clutching the knot of the towel right at the base of my dick. The last thing she needs is me flashing my goods to level the playing field, so I hold onto my only form of coverage like my life depends on it.

“Oh, sorry. I thought you were already back inside.”

“No, headed to bed now,” I tell her.

It’s dark in the hallway, and I’m not even close enough to touch her. Gripping the towel with one hand, my other resting at my side, her eyes widen when my grasp loosens and the towel releases some slack.

I didn’t mean to do it, but seeing her acknowledge my accident with a heaving chest makes me realize she has that same carnal reaction I did to her exposed breast.

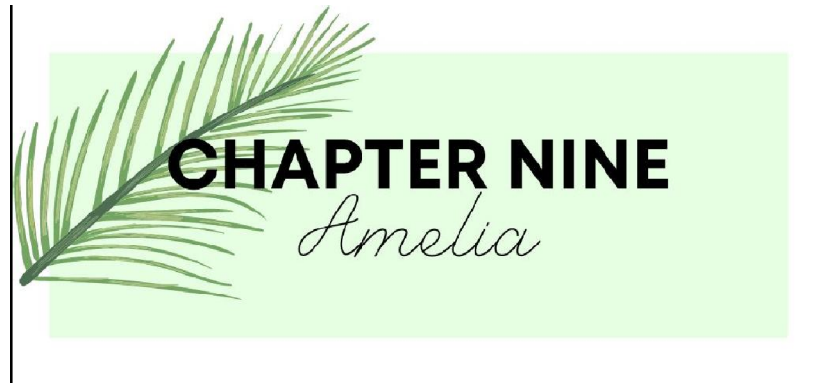
Her cheeks turn red, and as if lust could radiate off your skin, she emits a heat I can feel from where I stand.

“I—I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

And with that, she shuts her door and leaves me half naked and semi hard in the hallway.

She may not like me, but I can tell she’s attracted to me. Good.

That’s all I need to work with for now.



**W**hat the actual hell was that?

I could tell Theo didn't have his shorts on. I could *tell* by the way he was holding onto the towel like he was trying to hide his goods.

Has he completely forgotten what tact is? Common sense? Manners?

We aren't kids anymore.

We are grown-ass adults with needs and desires. When we were barely old enough to vote, Theo wasn't even a contender on my dating ballot. We had nothing in common. We were opposites in every aspect you could imagine.

But now? Fantasizing about my stepbrother, even if we didn't grow up as kids, is not what my broken heart needs right now. I'm wary of any man and his intentions, so consider me extra cautious because my teenage adversary might want to be friends.

I'm unable to sleep, and my cloudy judgment is failing me, because I keep obsessing over Theo's stomach and those V-

shaped muscles right near his hips.

Fuck, he looks good. Who the hell knew all he needed was puberty and another continent to discover his inner gladiator?

I squirm under my duvet, suddenly too hot for layers.

Smacking both hands to my sides, I blow a few pieces of my hair out of my face. I need a freaking release.

It's been two weeks since I walked in on Beckett having phone sex with someone else, and it's been even longer since we were physical.

Was that my warning sign? He never wanted to touch me?

Either way, I'm feeling insecure and aroused all at the same time.

When I packed up my things, I made sure to take my vibrator. I wasn't about to leave it for Beckett to discover.

Beckett was traditional in bed. He didn't like using toys and would only do missionary. Which was fine. I see now he was bored with me, but I bought a vibrator either way because a woman still had needs when he traveled out of state.

And right now, I grab it from my suitcase. I've never checked to see how discreet it is, but I power it on anyway and hope for the best.



I can't sleep.

I was never used to this house, let alone this room. I'm disoriented and uncomfortable. Everything here doesn't feel like they belong. Probably because I don't belong.

My mouth is dry, and I realize how dehydrated I am after drinking half that bottle of wine. The heat didn't help, and I remove my top sheet to prepare for my exit downstairs.

My movements are slow and quiet. I don't want to give my mom any inkling I'm having a difficult time settling down here. And if she knew I suffered from insomnia sometimes, she'd worry herself to death.

I grab a water bottle from the kitchen and bring it back with me.

When I'm at the top of the stairs, the faintest noise rings in my ears.

Did we forget to turn off the Jacuzzi?

I approach the window that oversees Amelia's balcony and the backyard. The Jacuzzi is dark but unmoving.

Huh.

What the hell is that? It's almost like a bee buzzing or humming sound.

I walk past Amelia's door again and it's louder. I put my ear to the door ever so slightly, and the sound is definitely coming from her room.

Oh my God. Is she using a vibrator?

It's well past midnight! What the hell else would she be doing?

And then I hear a faint moan.

She's pleasuring herself. *Holy fuck.*

I feel like a pervert as I stand in the hallway while heat grabs me at my ankles and attacks the rest of my body.

Even though my brain is telling me this is crossing a line and I need to get the fuck back to my side of the hallway, I can't move.

When she climaxes, I nearly fall to the floor.



**T**hat orgasm was just what I needed to take on the day. For once, I wake up feeling refreshed.

I didn't plan on using Theo as fodder for my fantasies. In fact, after my orgasm, I was mortified it happened at all. But it's hard not to when I couldn't get his body out of my mind.

It won't be happening again—fantasizing about Theo, I mean. I won't let his gorgeous face prevent me from reaching my goal of finding a new job and getting the hell out of here.

When I get out of bed, I realize I'm going to have to rethink every clothing option from here on out. I can't go downstairs in my tiny pajama shorts and no bra like yesterday. I'm no longer living with my boyfriend, and I need to cover up.

Slipping on some frayed jean shorts and a black top knotted in the front, I nod at my image in the mirror and go downstairs.

It's Monday morning, and Molly and my dad are nowhere to be seen.

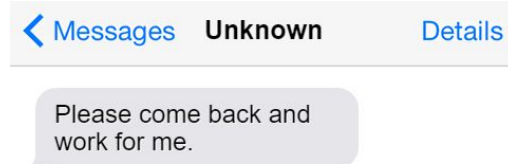
This isn't a *Home Alone* "I made my family disappear" situation where I can finally get some peace and eat ice cream while watching terrible TV.

I'm still going to go about my day with or without them around. I make some fresh coffee and run back upstairs to grab my laptop to look for new job postings.

Theo's room is quiet, and his door is shut. Is he still sleeping? It's 8:00 a.m. but maybe he's not used to the time difference yet.

I push him to the back of my mind and head downstairs to job search.

Just as I'm about to open my email, I get a text from an unsaved number.



A tightness in my eyes occurs, and I blink hard to read it again.

Mr. Robinson? Did he have a change of heart? Is this nightmare about to end?

I immediately call the number, a huge faux pas, I know, but I am so giddy and anxious at the prospect I can't just text back.

When the voice answers, it's not Mr. Robinson.

"Hey, girl," Benny says over the line.

“Oh, hey! Did you mean to send me that text?”

“Yes, I know you’re overqualified to work at a glorified Starbucks, but I could use some help right now.”

“Why, what’s up?”

“I need someone temporarily who will show up for their shifts while I organize and get everything ready for the summer. Tawny is training a lot of new hires, but I need someone dependable in the morning. The moment you get a job offer, you can quit on the spot. Surely you can use some extra cash...”

His voice is pleading, and I don’t even know how much minimum wage is right now or if it’s worth my time.

“You can have all the free coffee you want.”

“Well, that’s a given,” I joke, weighing my options.

Do I really want to go back to the job I had when I was in high school?

Theo enters the kitchen and gives me a head nod. He’s in a white shirt and black sweatpants that he cut above his knee. Damn he has some nice legs. This man is incapable of looking bad. His hair is wavy and messy, yet he still looks stylish.

I take in his exquisite backside when he opens the fridge. Round yet muscular. The nicest ass I’ve ever seen.

“Yes, I’ll help you.” My voice is breathy and urgent. “When do you need me to start?”



Benny goes over a few details, but he'll need to text me the information because I'm currently preoccupied with objectifying my stepbrother.

We disconnect, and I set my phone on the counter.

"Find a job already?"

"Kind of. I'm going back to Roasted."

"Will it be worth your time?"

"Umm, I don't know. My old boss needs extra help in the mornings and said it can be part-time for now. Six-hour shifts. I still need to apply for jobs and be open for interviews."

"Have you ever thought of applying for jobs down here?"

"I don't know. I feel like my relationship with my dad is better when we have a bit of distance between us."

"Understandable. Why do you think I went to another country?"

"I was actually wondering, but I didn't want to ask you last night."

The strained relationship between Theo and I is something I'm not ready to talk about yet, but the messy, unspoken one between our parents is a subject I'm willing to breach.

"How often did you come home? I mean, in the ten years we've been away."

"Not often," he begins, sitting next to me on the barstool. "I think it took me three to four years to come back. And it was only because my mom was begging me."

I throw out a feeler to see how he reacts. “Is it still hard seeing your mom with my dad?”

But right as he’s about to answer, the door to the garage bursts open, and our parents enter.

“Oh hey, you’re up!” my dad says to us. “Definitely thought I wouldn’t see your faces till noon.”

“I’m not eighteen anymore, Dad,” I roll my eyes like a teenager and the irony washes over me. “My internal clock has me waking up at 6:00 a.m. anyway.”

“How was your night, Theo?” Molly asks as she and my dad set bags of groceries on the counter.

“It was fine, thanks.”

“Here, I’ll help you unload those,” I offer, just so I don’t have to sit next to Theo. Being so close to him will remind me of the peep show he got last night.

When I remove items from the bags, I see they got all my favorite snacks I ate when I was younger—basically junk food and crap I can’t eat at my age without getting a major stomachache or a fat ass.

“Wow, Gushers are still around?” I don’t even want to see the grams of sugar in those.

“Oh yeah, I got all your favorites. Cherry Dr Pepper, Nutella, Bagel Bites...” My dad lists off each item as I pull it from the bag.

“Theo, I also got some of your favorites. Cool Ranch Doritos, Pop-Tarts, Fudgsicles.” Molly beams.

“I don’t eat that stuff anymore, Mom.”

“Oh, I figured you might want some snacks handy.” She unloads more bags.

“Well, I’m definitely eating those Pop-Tarts,” I confess, opening the box and deciding this breakfast of champions will be worth the bloating. “All my fat tends to go to my chest anyway...”

My brainless, stupid comment goes ignored by the parents, bless their hearts, but Theo’s bulging eyes are fixated on my breasts and I want to curl up and die.

He cocks an eyebrow at me and I mouth, “Don’t you dare.”

“What’s going on?” Molly asks, realizing it’s been a solid minute and we’re not at each other’s throats.

“Oh, nothing, Amelia and I hung out in the Jacuzzi last night.”

A frenzied look slips over my father’s face, and I can see the concern in his eyes that two nearly naked adults hanging out after hours might not be a great idea.

To squash their worries, I say, “We’re going to try to be nice to each other for at least an hour a day.”

I gush this out like it was an agreed-upon term with no objections from Theo.

“Wonderful.” Molly chirps.

“Oh, Amelia I forgot to tell you, something came for you in the mail a couple of weeks back.” My dad looks in the junk drawer and grabs an envelope.

An influx of nausea falls over me like a tidal wave when I see the return address.

I knew this day was coming. I’ve been dreading it and hoping it’d pass by me like it never happened.

“Theo, you got one, too.” Molly hands him something similar.

Our ten-year high school reunion.

Theo and I attended rival high schools; if that wasn’t a harbinger, I don’t know what is. We graduated the same year, so it makes perfect sense we got invites around the same time.

We open our envelopes and read the details.

“I’m not going,” I pronounce, balling mine into a wad of garbage and refusing to look at the date. “Besides, none of my friends from high school have reached out and told me. I’ll pretend I never got this.”

I let it slide that I don’t even talk to any of my high school friends anymore.

“Will you go?” Molly asks Theo.

Why *wouldn’t* he go? He’d be voted most changed, most gorgeous, and most likely to make all the married women cheat on their husbands.

“I really don’t want to. High school sucked,” he confesses.

I can only imagine how difficult high school was for Theo. Not exactly the most attractive or popular kid there. Lost his father in a horrible accident in Afghanistan and had to finish out his senior year with friends who abandoned him.

I'm sure our experiences were completely different. Theo had his own club of fellow nerds that tapered off into a party of one. I was among the attractive bunch of alpha males and pageant queens who ditched classes and went to every football game.

Apparently, growing boobs over the summer makes you more popular your senior year. Which felt invalidating since my personality alone never got me in that crowd.

They were all surface-level friends. I felt like an outsider who never belonged and was only useful for my car. When we went our separate ways after graduation, I didn't keep in contact with anyone. The friendships never felt genuine.

"You should go," Molly encourages us. "It could be fun to see how everyone is ten years later."

"No offense, Molly, but Theo and I live at home temporarily. And we're jobless. I'm pretty sure we won't be wowing anyone with our accomplishments. I can't show up and claim I invented Post-Its."

"Post-Its?" Molly echoes.

She's clearly never seen *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*. "Never mind. Either way, I'm not going to mine."

"I'll think about it," Theo admits.

Because, of course! Why wouldn't he make his grand debut and reveal the smoke show he turned into?

He could point to the women he wanted to take home, and they'd drop everything—their drink, their husband, their panties—and walk out the door with him.

I have nothing to show for myself if I go to my reunion.

I'm living with my parents and about to go back to the same job I had as a senior. No thanks.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Theo*

**M**y ten-year high school reunion?

Sure, I could attend and show them how much I grew up. No one would even recognize me. But like Amelia said: I'm living at home, I have no job, and no girlfriend.

No one will care I helped build ten houses for families in need. They'd want to know how much weight I lost and what my workout routine is. The superficial tendencies from our high school days will no doubt be as obvious as my transformation.

And yet, I want to see the faces of everyone who avoided me my senior year.

No one knew how to deal with someone whose father was killed in the war. And while I understand they had no idea what to do at our young age, I can't help but feel the tiniest bit of resentment. They should have been there for me even when I pushed them away.

"We're barbecuing tonight," Bruce tells us. "We'd like it if you'd join us for dinner on the patio."

Amelia doesn't commit right away, so I'm unsure if I'm supposed to, too. We were about to discuss our parents and how precarious it is living back home with them.

I wonder if my mom is as hopeful as I imagine her to be that the four of us will get along. That's doubtful. I tolerate Bruce because she loves him, but he is not my father, and will never be my father.

"I'll try to be there." Amelia crumples her invitation into an even smaller wad of paper.

"We bought a ton of food and wanted to celebrate you both being back home," Bruce adds, jumping at any opportunity to point out our current living arrangements.

"Temporarily," Amelia reminds him.

Her constant need to remind us she's only here for a small amount of time is already driving me nuts.

Del Mar, a coastal town north of San Diego, is known for its beaches, not the film industry. She's dreaming if she thinks she can find something down here.

Is she judging me because I don't know how long I plan on staying here? The discernment and unspoken truth are evident in the way she's constantly defending her position.

"Okay, we get it. You don't want to be here," I say with an eye roll.

"No, I don't. I wish I was back at my old job, in my old apartment, living my giant lie of a life."



I can't fault her for that. I'd also be beside myself if my life turned upside down within a couple of hours. But she's acting like this is the end of the world.

"Could you please both be there?" my mom pleads.

"Yes, I will be there. What time?" Amelia replies.

"I'll start cooking around 5:30 p.m." Bruce opens a pack of Pop-Tarts and takes a giant bite out of both pastries at the same time.

"Great, I'm going to go surf the internet again and see who else might be hiring right now. I can't work at Roasted for the rest of my life."

My eyes follow her body as she leaves the room, her dad shaking his head like he will never understand his own daughter.

"Roasted?" Bruce looks to me like I have answers. I shrug him off instead.

"What do you think you'll do for a job? Have you looked?" my mom asks.

"I might look into some construction jobs. I'm sure my experience, even if it was mostly volunteer, will help. I'm not in any rush."

My mom isn't aware of my finances. I wasn't receiving a weekly paycheck while backpacking in South America, but I also didn't need much to survive on.

The bit of money my mom gave me from my dad's inheritance for college has been sitting in investments and accruing a profit. I could live off it for a year and be comfortable. But I also don't want to spend it frivolously because I know once it's gone, it's gone.

"I was thinking of fixing Dad's car."

My mom's cheeks turn pink, and I can't tell if she's about to cry or cheer in excitement.

The Mustang was what brought my parents together.

My mom worked the concession stand at the local drive-in when she was seventeen. My dad would show up every week and he'd always come alone; no date or friends in his trunk to sneak them in.

Aside from his usual order of popcorn and a Coke, they didn't exchange many words. She'd watch him go back to his beautiful car and wait until next week to hopefully see him again.

Then one day, he ordered two Cokes and two popcorns. She wasn't aware he brought a date. It was bound to happen, but she smiled and prepared his order anyway. When my mom handed over the two drinks and popcorn, my dad asked, "Mind skipping your shift tonight to watch *Caddyshack* with me?"

She practically threw off her apron and jumped over the counter. And it was true love ever since.

I'm sure I was conceived in the back of that Mustang, which would normally gross me out, but any happy memory of my

parents together is welcomed.

They got married a year later, right out of high school, and just legal to do so.

He joined the military because he had no clue what to do with his life after they graduated. He was stationed at Camp Pendleton, which was what brought them to Southern California.

My mom spent her time on the beach or in the tiny house they rented, brainstorming ideas and possible career choices. It was there when she settled on the floral company that is still successful to this day.

They didn't have kids right away for multiple reasons. My dad was working his way up the Marine Corps, and my mom wanted to establish herself as a florist before things got serious.

And when they finally did try, they were unsuccessful for years. Eventually, I came along like a miracle and remained their only child.

Like many, our lives changed when 9/11 happened. I was only six years old and barely knew what was going on in the world, unsure why my dad would be home and then disappear for weeks at a time.

But it became our new normal, and for the following decade, my mom and I thrived when my dad was around. Life was always better when he was home.

The Mustang was a project we worked on when he was in between deployments. Sometimes he went a year without leaving, sometimes only a few months between missions.

I got my hands dirty and fell in love with repairing that classic car. We fixed it up and replaced things that had too much wear and tear, updated the interior dash when CD players became popular, and modernized it as best we could.

But now, I have no idea what it needs. I think it still runs. I'll have to take an inventory of what needs to be done. I'm sure the battery has corroded and an oil change is necessary. The body itself is in amazing shape, but what's under the hood is another story.

*Just like me.*

"It's been sitting in the garage. I don't have the heart to start the engine," my mom admits.

I look at Bruce to see if he gets territorial over my mother, which he doesn't, and shouldn't. They both lost their first love. They spent more time than not living with their high school sweethearts. It's not like Bruce has replaced my dad and vice versa. They both have to come to terms with the fact they had separate lives before they remarried.

But Bruce looks apologetic as I discuss my dad's car. I bet he sees it as a bunch of junk he's had to keep in *his* garage all these years.

The house my parents eventually bought and lived in until we moved out was in Solana Beach, a town that neighbors Del

Mar. It was unintentional, but every time I was back in the States, I'd accidentally drive home to my childhood house. And each time I did that, it felt like I'd lose a piece of my soul.

Because the people who lived in that house aren't the same people now.

My dad isn't here, my mom is married to someone else, and I have a wildly attractive, pain-in-the-ass stepsister back in my life.



**I**t's nearing dinnertime, so I step out of my room and head downstairs.

I've pretty much been up there with my door shut for the entire day. I took a brief look at the car, but once my hands made contact with the hood, I was startled by too many hurtful memories. It was like I touched hot metal and the scars on my hands from the previous attempt were still too fresh. Maybe tomorrow I will try again.

I still haven't found a healthy way to deal with the grief. When I was in South America, I found women to keep me company on the nights I was lonely. But now, I want to be by myself. I don't want anyone in the house to suspect I haven't accepted my dad's passing. It's been twelve years. Surely I should have moved on by now.

I'm going to have to pretend really hard for the next hour.

Pretend I'm happy my mom is with Bruce and found love again.

Pretend I'm not still attracted to Amelia.

Pretend I even have an appetite right now.

I'm hoping Amelia can play nice for sixty minutes. I think I can.

She's been avoiding me. I don't know why one exposed breast is the cause for the silent treatment, especially when it was an accident.

But she's already reverted back to her old ways. She's been leaving her crap all over the bathroom counters, her towels never make the hook, or they do and they fall onto the floor anyway. I think she's already using my shaving cream, too. We've been home for twenty-four hours, and she's showing her true colors already.

I have no idea what's fashionable at the moment. In South America, I was shirtless in khaki shorts while I worked outside. I never had to think about what to wear that day because no one cared there. They worried about running water or having access to medical care. It's a culture shock being home.

I keep it simple since that's all I have anyway.

When I make my way downstairs, I see Amelia hasn't joined yet. I don't hate being alone with Bruce, but I prefer to have my mom there as a buffer.

"Hey, Theo. I'm so glad you're joining us," Bruce says.

I want to respond with “did I even have a choice,” but I refrain.

My mom returns from the garage with a large cooler.

“Need any help?”

“Oh no, I’m good. Go take a seat outside. Bruce started grilling, and it’ll be done soon. Everything else is ready and prepared.”

When I get outside, I see a huge spread of food that looks like it could feed a village. Most will be put back in Tupperware as leftovers, but their attempt at making it appear we are a happy family is endearing.

Before sitting, I turn around and glance up to Amelia’s room and catch her looking out her window at the same time.

She turns away, both of us caught, but at least I’m wearing clothes. I can tell from the window she’s in her bra, and I want to curse myself.

Actually, I want to curse Amelia because if she keeps accidentally putting herself in these peeping Tom moments, I’m going to need some sunglasses to hide my eyes and some thicker shorts to hide my arousal.

I’m sitting outside for about five minutes alone until Amelia joins me.

“Hey,” I say.

She takes the chair opposite mine, not wanting to sit next to me. Jokes on her, because now we have to stare at each other

the whole meal.

She is fresh-faced and looks beautiful. I've always preferred her this way to the loads of makeup she wore as a teenager. I actually haven't seen her wearing much makeup at all since we've been home. She used to slather on the dark eyeliner, something I made fun of her for back in the day.

Gosh, we were petty and immature—

“If you could try not to look up into my window, that'd be great.”

“Umm, how was I supposed to know you'd be in a bra with your blinds wide open?”

I want to tack on I saw more in the Jacuzzi last night, but I don't feel like causing a scene when our parents are about to come out.

“I'm already stressed out enough as it is. I can't be wondering if you are around the corner every time I come out of the shower.”

“Don't flatter yourself, Amelia. I'm not waiting around to catch you naked.”

“Well, I'm sorry if the past has a way of repeating itself.”

Okay, sure, back when I was a curious teenager, I would spy on Amelia when she went swimming outside. Yes, I was caught a few times. But that was kid stuff. I'm not actively trying to catch her masturbating. That was also an accident. Something she will never know about. I guarantee she enjoys the idea of being pined after.



“I’m an adult now,” I state. “We aren’t kids anymore, so let’s stop acting like it.”

“I’m not acting immature, you are.”

I don’t even dignify her childish retort with a response, instead, I glare at her.

“What?” she asks.

“You’re taking your frustrations out on me. Don’t. It’s not my fault you got fired and dumped.”

Gosh, it feels good to finally say how I feel. I can tell she doesn’t appreciate my honesty. I’m not the shy, soft-spoken kid I used to be. If I need to put Amelia in her place, I’m going to.

“And while you’re at it, can you pick up after yourself in the bathroom? I’m here, too, and we have to share the space.”

Now she looks as if I stomped all over her DVD collection.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Amelia drawls. “I forgot you’re perfect.”

“Well, that’s a nice compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant to be one.”

“And here I thought you were finally accepting me as your stepbrother.”

“You’re *not* my stepbrother.”

“I think the California County Clerk’s office would beg to differ, given the marriage certificate between our parents and all.”

“You’re giving me a headache.” She massages her temples to show how badly I’m getting under her skin. I’ve barely started. Is this all she can take?

“Are you always this high-strung?” I ask.

“Only around you.”

“Aww, I’m honored.”

“Pardon me for constantly having to be on the defense.”

“We have an hour to play nice,” I counter. “You’re the one accusing me of staring in your windows like a pervert.”

“History has a way of repeating itself.”

“You need to relax. Go get laid.”

“I’m so happy fucking your way through life helps *you* avoid real-world problems, but that’s not how I handle things.”

“You don’t have sex?” I ask with a quirked brow. “Is that why your boyfriend cheated?”

I want to sock myself right in the dick, because that was completely below the belt. Cruel. Mean.

“You are such an asshole.” Her words are audible to our parents who are now outside, and their eyes snap to the two of us.

So to double down—because apologizing is for pussies, apparently—I say, “It was a joke. Don’t get your panties in a knot.”

“Don’t talk about my panties!” she hisses.

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“No one is getting in anyone’s panties!” Bruce yells.

“Dad, that’s not what it means.”

“What happened?” my mom asks me.

“Nothing.”

“Can’t you two be civil for one meal?” Bruce growls, clearly fed up with the drama.

I want to apologize, but I know if I show the first sign of weakness, Amelia will be all over me like a tiger on a lamb. I want to have the upper hand, and once she sees me cave, it’ll be hers.

“I’m trying to be civil!” Amelia shouts. “But coming home sucks! Being around Theo sucks!”

“You think I want to be here?” I mirror her angry tone, realizing the same passion for attraction can translate into frustration. “You think I *like* staying in a room that might as well be in a friend’s house? A house that was never mine? Consider yourself lucky you actually feel like this is home.”

And with that, I skip dinner altogether and go back to my dungeon of a room.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Amelia*

I know in the back of my mind I'm being an immature bitch. *History has a way of repeating itself.*

My old tricks are returning now that I'm forced back into a situation I thought I escaped years ago.

I'm still trying to grasp the idea my dad is with someone else. Yes, it's been nearly a decade. Yes, he's happy, and I am glad he found someone. But that doesn't mean it doesn't feel like whiplash every time I return home.

Despite what Theo said outside last night, I think he's lucky he didn't grow up in this house as I did.

Because it's impossible to walk down the hall and not remember all the family photos that are now gone. Theo doesn't have old memories slowly fading into nothing. He's staying in the guest room that used to be my playroom when I was a child.

His mom took over *my* mom's downstairs office.

Theo is unaware how difficult it is to see the new wedding photos above the fireplace instead of the trips my dad, mom,

and I took over my summer breaks.

My mom is being erased, year by year, and it kills me.

Even though the catastrophic dinner ended on a bad note, I kept the morning breakfast cheerful to avoid the lecture on sibling etiquette. It was a bribe, because I had a Zoom interview at 8:30 a.m. and needed everyone's cooperation.

But what did Theo do during that time? Decides to try and start that fucking muscle car in the garage.

He did it on purpose, and I nearly had a panic attack. The constant stuttering and stalling of an old engine trying its damndest to come to life was the worst distraction.

I bombed the interview. But it wasn't anything promising. It was practice, and I failed.

I return to my bedroom, wiping off what little makeup I put on for the video call.

*Can you pick up after yourself in the bathroom?*

Can't believe Theo had the nuts to say that to me last night.

Just when I was about to assume he was only playing nice when my parents weren't around, he had to accuse me of being a prude.

Maybe he was joking, maybe not. But my sensitivity and insecurity are taking over. That wound is still raw and he made it sting.

If Theo wants to play dirty, I can do that. I almost forgot the rules, but the muscle memory is returning to me, and this is a

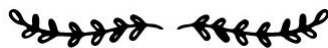
game I can play.

I'll even double down and make it worse. I might *accidentally* leave my bra and panties out to make *him* squirm and see how he likes it.

But it'll have to wait because I'm meeting Benny at Roasted for my first day.

I'll fill out some simple, new-hire paperwork, and Tawny will update me with all the changes in the store. I'm sure there are new drinks and food items to prepare, so I'll be sure to take notes.

Benny supplied the updated black-collared shirt with the Roasted logo on it, so I change into a pair of jeans and grab my comfiest shoes. It will be quite the change being on my feet all day.



**W**hen I get to Roasted, Benny greets me with a bouquet of flowers as Tawny stands beside him, eyeing me like competition.

I'm not gunning for her job. I don't want to be the manager, and I hope I'm not even here when summer ends.

Sure, she's young, but I will still be respectful.

"Welcome back." Benny gives me a hug and hands me a scalding hot beverage. "It's your favorite."

"Thank you."

“We are only allowed one comped drink a day,” Tawny pipes up.

“Amelia can have as many as she wants. I don’t think she can drink me dry.”

“I don’t know, I’m a lot older now and don’t have the energy I used to.”

“Tawny, did you know this girl would clean the grout on her hands and knees with a toothbrush?”

I laugh nervously because there is no way I have that commitment in me anymore. “I don’t think that’ll happen now, but I will do my best to not let you down.”

“You could never. I can’t thank you enough for helping me. I’m going to let Tawny show you a couple of things that have changed since you left. Our register is completely new. People rarely use cash anymore, but I’ll let her go over that. Do you still remember the main drink recipes?”

“I could make them in my sleep.”

Tawny adds, “We have a lot of new drinks you’ll need to learn.” I wouldn’t be surprised if she wanted to have a dick-measuring contest right here and now. “You might need to take home the recipes to memorize them.”

My closed smile doesn’t even shift my cheeks. *Be nice, she’s technically the manager.*

Roasted is known for its consistency. It’s not like Starbucks, where you never know what drink you’ll get: burned coffee,

decaf on accident, coffee grounds swimming at the bottom of your cup, or always a shortage of supplies and ingredients.

No, you will get the same quality drink no matter who makes it, whatever time of day. We pride ourselves on crafting delicious drinks every time. Benny's motto was and still is: "If you wouldn't drink it, make another."

I'll have to memorize some new menu items, but I guarantee this won't be rocket science. Most of the drinks have the same base: coffee, espresso, and cold brews.



**T**he end of my first shift leaves me with sore feet.

I don't know how I could survive an eight-hour day. We agreed to part-time and thank God for it.

I'll be taking over the morning shifts Thursday through Sunday because those are the busiest days. And now that school is about to end, business will pick up as the temperature increases. Even though we do have competition with Starbucks a couple of blocks away, Roasted is an influencer's dream, with cute, beachy decor and delicious beverages that are also pleasing to the eye.

Beverages I'm going to indeed have to remember making by creating flashcards tonight.

Benny is paying me more than he should, and even if it's money to pay what little bills remain, I'm thankful for it.



I'm sitting on my bed, massaging my feet, when someone knocks on my door.

Normally, I would yell come in, but it could be Theo, and I don't want him in here.

I've been lucky to avoid him. Well, lucky might be an overstatement. He hasn't left his room, and I haven't been seeking him out.

We've barely even locked eyes since we blew up at each other at the barbeque the other night.

Walking over to the door, I open it slightly and see my dad lingering in the hallway.

"Hey, Dad."

"May I come in?"

I back away and give him enough space to enter.

He swivels my desk chair around and takes a seat while I return to my bed.

"What's up?"

"Molly and I know you don't want to be here. You confided in me this was your last resort. But I would appreciate it if you'd do your best, okay? I can't imagine what it's like to have to start over, to think the man you were going to spend the rest of your life with turned out to be a cheating scumbag. But you dodged a bullet with that one. Consider this as a sign."

"A sign for?"

“I don’t know. To take this time to figure out what you want?”

“I still know what I want. My goals are the same. That hasn’t changed.”

“Well, this is a second chance for you to come around to Molly. I know how difficult it was to lose your mom. And I know you weren’t happy with me getting remarried.”

I’m hesitant to speak up because if I don’t agree, he won’t suspect how crushed I was by his quick decision to replace his old family.

“No one wants to be alone when they’re older,” my dad continues. “Molly makes me happy, and I want you to know that.”

“Okay.”

“Do I have to worry about you and Theo?”

“Maybe. I don’t know...”

“Amelia, seriously?”

“Well, wait—worry how?”

“You know... You’re both...*older* now. And he looks the way he does.”

My God, even my dad realizes Theo is a stud.

“Wait, you’re worried we’re going to hook up?”

“Not exactly. Molly might have mentioned Theo had a huge crush on you back in the day.”

I recoil at the reminder.

Do I lie to him? Say “Oh yeah, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Sure, I might fantasize about him at night, and I’ve basically seen the base of his dick and he saw half my rack, but I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

“Dad, I wouldn’t worry about it. We still hate each other. Can’t you tell?”

He searches my face for the lie.

“I can trust you?”

“Yes, you can trust me.”

“With you both being home, Molly and I are hopeful enough time has passed for everyone to get along. I don’t want anything getting in the way of that.”

My dad’s delusion of being as happy as *The Brady Bunch* is exactly that: a delusion.

“I promise. I was just dumped. You think I’d choose someone as aggravating as Theo to date? Never in a million years.”

“Phew. Okay, thank you, honey.”

He approaches me and puts a hand on my shoulder. “On that note, Molly and I wanted to go away for two nights. Maybe to Laguna Beach. But we didn’t—”

“If we didn’t throw parties in high school we sure as hell won’t now. We probably won’t even talk to each other while you’re gone.”

“Okay, good. Because we already booked it.”

“I’m glad. You deserve to go have some fun.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to job searching. Will you be okay? Has Beckett left you alone?”

“I think so, I’m pretty sure I won’t be hearing from him again.”

A graphic for the chapter title. It features a light green rectangular background. On the left side, there is a dark green pine branch with needles. Overlaid on the green background is the text "CHAPTER FOURTEEN" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below this, the name "Amelia" is written in a black, cursive script font.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Amelia*

**T**he next morning, I prepare for my first real shift at Roasted.

Tawny and I will be working side by side, and I hope she can be professional enough to not make this a waste of my time.

When I arrive, Tawny shows me how to clock in. I'm not above working a near minimum-wage job. But holy shit, it's going to be rough remembering to clock in again.

"It's easy." Tawny shows me the buttons to press.

"Great." I mimic her happy attitude and take a huge gulp of my cold brew.

"It'll get busy with the regulars that come in. You'll learn them by name. They're nice. You can ring them up as I prepare their drinks. I know how they like them."

"I'm going to have to make drinks eventually. Don't you think you'll want to show me?"

"You're not ready yet."

I give her a blank expression, and instead of addressing her passive-aggressive remark, she leaves the counter to get more milk to stock in the fridge.

She unlocks the front door right at 6:00 a.m., and I crack my neck as I prepare for our first customer.

It takes a few minutes before anyone enters, but when they do, I see it's...

Theo?

I can't help but feel a jolt of arousal and hatred at the exact same moment when he steps inside. How is he able to elicit opposite emotions within me?

"Oh hi, you're Theo, right?" Tawny's voice is sweeter than caramel drizzle. "You came in the other day?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"You get a black coffee, right?"

Her memory is impressive, but I'm still standing off to the side, completely useless, as I watch their exchange.

"I'll ring him up," Tawny offers, practically shoving me out of the way.

I want to argue she put me in charge of the register and she needs to make up her damn mind, but before I can protest further, Theo is staring at me.

"What?" I scowl.

"Nothing."

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

“Do you two know each other?” Tawny asks.

Just as I say “No,” Theo confirms, “Yes.”

“I’m here to drink coffee and look for jobs on my laptop,” he claims.

“Here’s the Wi-Fi password.” Tawny slides the business card across the counter with all the info. “Do you come here often?”

“I will now,” he says with a grin that leaves a tiny spot of drool in the corner of Tawny’s mouth.

Theo is a rash that won’t go away. A nuisance that seems to follow me even into adulthood.

“You’re not going to hang out for my whole shift, are you?”

“Amelia,” Tawny hisses out of the side of her mouth. “Shut up and let me enjoy the view.”

“Go stare at the ocean, I’m sure that’s easier on your eyes.”

“I doubt it,” she snips.

“Don’t you prefer a coffee blaster shake?” I ask Theo, his go-to drink when we were teenagers.

“We don’t make those,” Tawny corrects.

I ignore her and wait for him to answer.

“No thanks,” he says with a shake of his head. “Just the one I ordered will be perfect.”

I snatch the drink from Tawny’s hands and add a lid to his cup. Setting it on the counter, I wait for him to collect it and

leave.

When he approaches, I whisper, “Can’t you job search at home? Aren’t our parents on their way to Laguna Beach by now?”

“It’s lonely at home.”

“You should be used to that by now.”

He smirks at me as he attempts to sip his coffee. “You didn’t spit in it, did you?”

“Not this time, no.”

He’s so dramatic as he places his lips on the edge, savors the hot coffee, and swallows. It’s borderline sexual, and I see Tawny ogling him, probably wishing his lips were on her.

“It’s delicious.” His compliment is sent Tawny’s way and she eats it up.

“Great, now leave.” Aggression so early in the day is new to me, but I can’t do my job knowing I have a goddamn spy watching my every move.

“Amelia, that’s not how we treat our customers,” Tawny scolds.

“He’s not a customer, he’s my stepbrother, and he’s leaving. Right, Theo?”

“I think I’ll stay.” He chooses a table opposite the cash register.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.



A group of new customers comes in, and I let Theo fade into the background so I can do my job.

Ringling up is easy, and once the orders are placed, I help Tawny make drinks whether she likes it or not.

I'm reminded how to properly sanitize the machines and that we're never allowed to give away free drinks.

I catch Theo staring in our direction. He's checking out Tawny, which aggravates me more than it should.

This is literally eleven years ago, back when our parents weren't married yet, and Theo hung around the shop like he was an unpaid employee. One day I even put him to work and gave him a rag and cleaner to wipe down all the tables because he was just sitting there. Maybe it was his way of trying to form a friendship while our parents slowly fell in love.

Well, it was ineffective and won't work now, so he shouldn't waste his time.

When an hour passes, and during a quiet part of the day, Theo approaches the counter.

"Yes?" I growl as Tawny asks, "What can I get you?"

"Just one more for the road." Theo shakes his empty cup to Tawny. "And your phone number?"

I blink rapidly, confident my senses have failed me. That's not what I think he said, right?

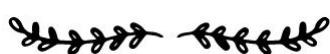
"Oh my gosh, yes, of course!" Tawny reaches for a new cup and writes her phone number on it. She proceeds to fill it up

with fresh coffee and hands it over. “It’s on the house.”

I scoff loudly, because umm, didn’t she *just* tell me we aren’t allowed to give away free drinks?

“Thanks. I’ll text you,” Theo assures her.

Tawny’s a giggling kindergartner and attempts a beauty pageant wave goodbye as we watch his perfect ass walk out the door.



**W**hen I get home, I see Theo’s bedroom light on above the garage.

“Gawwwddddd,” I complain to myself and only myself because I refuse to let him know he still agitates me.

I park my car but take a moment to compose myself. No, I’m not envious he asked for my coworker’s—no, sorry, my *manager’s*—phone number. I don’t mind one bit. He’s fucked his way across the southern continent, and if that’s his prerogative, great.

When I enter from the garage door, I see him eating at the kitchen counter.

Instead of bypassing him and going straight up to my room, I linger at the entrance. A petty comment is on the tip of my tongue, but I refrain from pointing out how he’s wasting electricity with keeping his bedroom light on.

“Need something from me?” Theo doesn’t bother looking up from his phone screen.

“Yeah. Are you going to be hanging out at Roasted like old times? Trying to figure out if I need to buy pepper spray if your stalking continues.”

“Wow, Amelia grew an ego. I’d be going for Tawny. She’s cute.”

“I’m so glad you finally get to experience reciprocated attraction, but I have a job to do, and I don’t need you getting in the way.”

“Do I distract you?”

He finally looks at me, and I can already feel myself gasping for air as I drown in his ocean blue eyes.

“Yes.” I realize I need to include why so he doesn’t assume it’s because of his looks. “I’m waiting for you to nitpick me like you used to. ‘Oh, Amelia, my friend wanted more whipped cream. Amelia, you didn’t make this hot enough. Amelia, can you wipe down this table?’ That was kid’s shit. I don’t need that at my age now.”

“I was just getting coffee today. You’re making a bigger deal out of this. Did I once criticize you?”

“No,” I concede.

“Then relax. You’re so uptight still.”

I clench my jaw so cruel words don’t rip him apart. I could go for many low blows, but I don’t want to get into the habit of that.

“When are you moving out?” I ask instead.

“Not sure, I still need to find a job. We’re in the same boat.”

“I don’t *want* to share a boat with you.”

“You better hope I find a job soon because it sounds like you aren’t having great luck either.”

“Oh yeah, that Zoom interview I had earlier didn’t go so well because some asshole was revving a stalled car.”

“The car has to be started in order to stall it. The engine didn’t even turn over.”

“I’m not a mechanic! If you want me out of the house like I assume you do, don’t sabotage my interviews by being a distraction.”

I take his silence as acceptance and head toward my room.

“You left your clothes on the floor of the bathroom again,” Theo jabs when my back is turned.

Honestly, I swear I picked those up. I’ve been trying not to bring my messy tendencies home with me.

I retrace my steps back to the kitchen with intensity building in each footfall. Now I regret withholding that insult.

“I’m sorry, did my dad appoint you as my babysitter while he’s gone?”

“No, but I would like to remind you the second floor isn’t yours to take over.”

“I’m well aware. If my messiness is too much for you, by all means, please find better accommodations.”

“You think I want to be here? I don’t. But I have nowhere else to go, same as you.”

“Why are you making this a living hell for both of us? Constantly reminding me I’m messy, showing up at my job.”

“It’s kind of fun watching you squirm.”

“Spoken like a true serial killer.”

“You’re my stepsister. It’s expected we don’t get along. I’m only playing into the stereotype since you clearly don’t enjoy being around me.”

“No, I don’t,” I admit, though I haven’t been around him long enough as an adult to see if he’s as pestilent as he used to be. I’m betting yes, now he’s just nicer to look at.

“And trust me, if you think I’m happy being here, watching my mom and your dad play house like they didn’t have happy marriages before, you are sorely mistaken.”

And with that, Theo throws away his food in the trash like the good sibling and walks up to his room.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Amelia*

I wake up earlier than usual because I can't sleep. When I get out of bed to pee, the moment I open my door, Theo's door quietly opens, too.

Except the person leaving his room isn't Theo.

It's a woman.

It's... *Tawny*.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I demand.

Tawny begins stuttering, obviously flustered I caught her sneaking out. I take in her appearance. She's clothed, thankfully, but definitely looks guilty. Her hair is askew, and I'm certain that was the makeup she had on yesterday.

"I-I-I have to get going. I'll see you at work," she stammers. "Don't forget to clock in."

She has the audacity to boss me around even when I'm home?

Theo stands in his doorway, shirtless, as I'm left standing with my mouth hanging open.

“You hooked up with my manager?”

“Define hook up,” Theo drawls.

His bare chest and muscles are so distracting. How can I concentrate on anything else when he’s yawning and itching his back, displaying biceps that could suffocate a man’s windpipe with a simple squeeze?

Once the entrance door downstairs slams shut, I approach him with a pointed finger.

“Don’t bring women back to the house while our parents are away!”

“Are you jealous?”

His serious expression and accusation make me chuckle.

“I’m sorry, jealous of what? Having to share a nasty twin bed with that stranger?”

We’re crammed in the entryway of his bedroom door, and I realize he’s taking up way too much space.

“It’s a full—”

“Or jealous because she had to sneak in because you don’t have a place of your own? Oh wait, I’m jealous I didn’t get pounded in a guest bedroom in my parents’ house.”

“You’re totally jealous,” he repeats with a smug grin on his face that I want to smack off.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I shoot back. “I’m sure you’re still as inexperienced as you were ten years ago.”

Our bodies are only inches apart, and he closes what little distance we have left by lowering his head to whisper in my ear, “You’d be surprised.”

I blink rapidly as his breath lingers on my neck. He leans back onto his side of the doorframe, widening the distance between his chest and mine. All I want is for him to return to where he was so I can inhale his scent one more time.

I’m a fembot from *Austin Powers*, and my head is about to explode from sheer arousal and aggravation.

Theo places his hands on his hips and waits for me to speak. He’s challenging me. But I won’t give in.

“Spare me the details of your erectile dysfunction. I have a job to get ready for.”





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Theo*

Seeing Amelia bemused sets off my morning just right.

Sure, Tawny and I hooked up last night. We made out until I got bored and told her it was getting late. She took it as a sign to sleep over. She must still live at home, too, because who else would have no qualms about sharing a tiny bed?

Either way, I'm a tad pleased Amelia saw. She can assume whatever she wants. Tawny is merely a distraction from lusting after the one woman I can't have.

Whatever you want to call it, my "relationship" with Amelia is already strained at best. Maybe she assumes my attraction to her has disappeared now that we are older. I was a dumb kid yearning after the first girl who talked to me.

I don't know where I messed up with her. Sure, I went into this situation already at a disadvantage because of how wrecked I was over my dad's death. I figured Amelia would be the same, but she seemed excited for our parents. And I hated that. I didn't want my mom to be happy with someone else. Especially Bruce. It was too soon.

And when Amelia gave my mom a chance, but not me, it was like the pain was compounded and multiplied.

She never opened up or got to know me. Which in turn made her my sworn enemy. But damn if I wasn't attracted to her from the first day I saw her.

It was forever ago, yet the same boyish fantasies and daydreams hit me at odd moments of the day. Like last night making out with Tawny. She was an itch that needed scratching, but it left me even more irritated.

When I'm certain Amelia has left for the morning, I turn on the shower. My palms are resting on the counters as I wait for the water to heat up. I look to my side and see her pile of clothes has gotten bigger.

Either she's truly the most absent-minded, messy woman there is, or she's doing it to annoy me. And I don't know her well enough anymore to be certain which it is. Probably both.

I kick her clothing so it's in a neater pile, but when I bring my foot back, her thong is laced around my big toe.

"Don't do it, Theo."

I'm already naked as I wait for the water to reach the perfect temperature, and my dick twitches. Her thong is black and lacy, with two thin straps that hold it together. They sit coiled at my feet and I try not to move.

I picture it in my head now, her curvy, luscious thighs, the small piece of fabric covering her most intimate areas, the two straps hugging her skin flawlessly.

She's a fucking tease leaving these out like this. We share this bathroom. She had to know I'd stumble across these sooner or later.

Did she want me to find these?

My dick is already rock hard and I want to know how they feel more than I want to breathe. I bend down and grab her thong and hold it in my hand.

My pulse is vibrating through every nerve ending, craving a release.

"Fuck it," I concede and bring my hand to my dick.

The fabric isn't as delicate as I thought, but I deserve it for beating off with her panties in my fist and rubbing them against my length.

But fuck, it feels so good. To know these touched her pussy and are now touching me, it's so inappropriate. And yet I can't stop.

The irrational part of my brain doesn't care how good this feels, doesn't care I'm about to spew a hot load into Amelia's panties in under sixty seconds because the images playing in my mind are so dirty and wrong.

Amelia's spread open legs.

The way she tastes.

Amelia begging to be fucked.

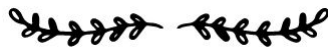
The shock on her face that I do know what the fuck I'm doing.

Amelia coming and screaming my name.

Running to the shower, I finish in her thong and in my hand.

“Fuck,” I groan as the water washes over me. I’ll have to hide her thong until I know what to do with it. Will she notice if I rinse it out now and return it back to her pile? Should I toss them?

I’m tempted to keep them, but I need to show *some* self-control.



**W**hen I step out of the shower, I get dressed for the day and make myself a late breakfast.

My mom put both the reunion invites on the fridge, despite Amelia’s looking like it got run over by a semi-truck.

All I know is mine is in three weeks, and I haven’t decided one way or the other. Of course, I’d like to show up and show off how much I matured. That’s what ten-year reunions are for. To flaunt how amazing your life is. The twenty-year reunion is the one that’s more authentic. You can be divorced and unemployed at that one, but not for the first time you reconnect with your friends.

And I have nothing to show for myself at the moment.

I barely even know where my high school friends are at this point. They might still be in town, they may have moved out of state. I don’t know or care since the two-way street of

reconciling never happened. Neither of us reached out and I have no friends to name.

Amelia may be in a similar position, but her personality will still shine through. Her old acquaintances will be impressed with what she's accomplished so far. Who cares if that piece of shit Beckett broke her heart and she had to move out? She can spin this to her advantage and still have a blast at hers.

This is the only time I wish we went to the same high school so we could go together. But she can barely be in a room with me without whipping out the armor. We're incapable of being friendly, yet an idea forms in my head.

One that will take many days to convince myself it's worth asking.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Amelia*

**T**awny can barely look my way for the hour we work together alone.

She's training a few more employees, and I'm handling most of the drink-making. Any time my gaze meets hers, she cowers behind her Bambi eyes.

I cannot believe she hooked up with Theo. I'm all for a woman getting whatever she needs sexually, but *Theo*? My stepbrother? Has she no morals? They couldn't even find space in her backseat? They had to do it a few doors away from me?

It's tacky and gross, and I don't know if I want to ignore her completely or ask how big his dick was. I physically shake my head and stick my tongue out for even allowing that image cross my mind.

His dick.

It's probably tiny and bends at an awkward angle. Yeah right. I bet it's fucking perfect and would fit me nicely, if even a bit larger than I'm used to.

“Is that double espresso ready yet?” Tawny’s voice practically shakes.

What’s she so embarrassed about?

“Yes, here you go.”

I hand it over and decide that will be my last drink for today’s shift. Taking my apron off, I head to the back and gather my things. Six hours, not a minute more with this woman.

Benny’s in his office so I pop in to say hello. “Hey, how’s business going?”

“Great! I’m finally going over my finances for the year. I’ve been putting it off. All I need to know is if we are in the red or not.”

“And are you?”

“No, ma’am. We’ve been doing well. I just need reliable employees to stop calling out for their shifts. Thank you again for helping me.”

“I have nothing else going on, so consider this a good reason for me to get up and put pants on.”

“Oh, missy, are you walking around that stepbrother of yours without pants? You’re scandalous.”

“No... no. I’m practically wearing layers when he’s around. And he’s around... all... the... time.”

“He hasn’t come in today, has he?”

“Not that I’ve noticed. I’m about to go home. Our parents are out of town, and I don’t want to be around him.”

“You’re both home alone unsupervised? How do you have any discipline? It’d be like walking among landmines.”

“I avoid him when I can. It’s not easy knowing I have to share a bathroom with him.”

Oh shoot, I never took my clothes out after I showered this morning. I need to be better about that.

“I have a bet you two will hook up before the end of summer.”

“Ha!” I laugh and quiet my voice. “I saw Tawny leaving his room this morning.”

Benny’s face is stoic. “You’re shitting me.”

“No. He got her number yesterday, and I caught her sneaking out this morning when I was going to the bathroom. I didn’t hear a thing so maybe Theo is a two-pump chump.”

“Oh come on, Amelia, get real. He can probably last hours.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry for gossiping. I don’t have any friends here, and I don’t want to tell my dad. He’ll think I’m being unfair.”

“You can tell me anything you want. In fact, let’s get drinks one night. You’re finally of age.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“We can bounce around ideas for Roasted. I need some summer promotions since business has been tapering off after



4:00 p.m. No one wants coffee in the late afternoon.”

“Benny, you should have a movie night! You have such a big outdoor patio, you could play movies and have themed drinks. Doesn’t have to be coffee. Could even be alcoholic beverages. Do you need your liquor license to pour?”

“I actually have it. Back when we first opened it made sense just in case, but I’ve never utilized it. I’ll have to see if it expired. This sounds amazing. Did you think of this off the top of your head?”

“Movies have been my whole life. Naturally, I would think of something revolving around that. You could even move all the patio furniture and put a huge screen outside. A movie on the beach? What could be better than that?”

“I love it. Let me figure out the schedule for the rest of the month and I’ll text you.”

“Sounds great. See you later.”

When I walk out of Roasted, the only place left to go is home, and I don’t want to if Theo is there.

I could always run to Target and spend \$500 I don’t have, but that’s not the responsible choice.

I don’t even have Theo’s number to see where he is, and I’m not about to ask Tawny for it.

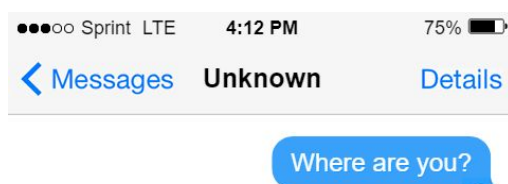
Pulling up Molly’s text thread, I see I haven’t texted her in almost a year. Wow. Have I not given my stepmom a chance? Am I that cruel? Did she stop trying because I wasn’t receptive to her kind gestures at all?

Maybe my dad is right. Maybe I'm back home so I can get to know her better.

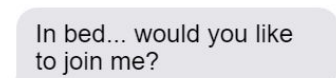
She replies a few minutes later and shares Theo's contact information.

My thank you reply includes a suggestion of dinner out, just the two of us, sometime soon. I can already sense the excitement when she replies. Okay, one step in the right direction.


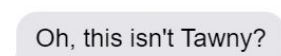
But my heart instantly shrivels up into a raisin when I begin to type a text to Theo. I nearly gag as I press in each number.



I could have at least introduced myself, but I don't care to give him that courtesy.

A grey text message bubble containing the text 'In bed... would you like to join me?'.

“Ahh!” I screech, realizing he must not know it's me. I even drop my phone like it's on fire.

A blue text message bubble containing the text 'You sicko, it's Amelia!'.A grey text message bubble containing the text 'Oh, this isn't Tawny?'.

Are they already on a sexting basis? How did this move so fast? Does he not save phone numbers and text threads?

No, and I was going to come home soon but if you invite her over, I might offer to work a double shift to avoid the repeated awkwardness of this morning.

It's just me home alone.

I'm thankful he didn't add the "in bed" portion because I don't want to know what he's doing in bed at home alone.

Great. Guess I'll see you when I get home.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a light green rectangular background. On the left side, there is a green pine branch with needles. Overlaid on the right side of the green background is the text "CHAPTER EIGHTEEN" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below this, the name "Theo" is written in a black, cursive script font.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Theo*

**D**id I know Amelia was texting? Of course! I love fucking around with her. It's even more fun than arguing. It's only fair for all the times she did it to me when we were teenagers.

She would constantly walk around the house in her bikini, knowing exactly what it did to my raging hormones.

It's payback now that I actually have something worth teasing her over. Plus seeing her freak out and getting a rise out of her is the best part of my day.

When she finally graces me with her presence, our parents aren't home yet and it's almost dinner time.

"You get lost?" I ask.

"No, as a matter of fact. I did not."

She doesn't elaborate, which means she killed time to avoid me.

"Are you going to tell on me because I brought someone back to the house?"

“No, that’s not my business. If sneaking women into your room is the only way for you to seal the deal, that’s your prerogative.”

“I didn’t sneak her in. The timing was right, and our parents happened to be away.” I’m implying more happened than it did. “And don’t judge me. I’m sure you’ll be doing the same thing sooner or later.”

“Theo, I just got out of a relationship. Less than a month. You think I’d be hooking up with guys already?”

“Why not?”

“It’s not the same for women. We get attached. Plus I’m not ready to start dating yet.”

“You don’t have to date to get laid.”

“Have you heard from your mom?” she deflects. “Are they on their way home?”

“Pretty sure they’ll be back in the next hour.”

“Great, I’m having cereal for dinner.”

She grabs a bowl and Cinnamon Toast Crunch from the cupboard.

Instead of sitting next to me, she decides to eat standing up.

“How was work?”

“You don’t have to pretend to be interested in my life,” she says through a mouthful of cereal.

“Hey, don’t we have an hour?” I check my watch to confirm the time. “Let’s practice this nice hour you contracted me

into.”

“Ugh, it was fine.”

“You give me so much to work with.”

“It’s a coffee shop, Theo. I make coffee, I serve coffee, I drink coffee. Not much happens.”

“Any crazy customers requesting asinine drink orders?”

“No, you didn’t come in today.”

I laugh at her playful jab. “You forgot about the rules of the nice hour.”

“I’m still getting used to you being here, let alone shoving my feelings aside for sixty minutes.”

“Is it really that difficult for you?”

“I don’t know anymore. All I know is a friendship with you seems impossible.”

“I’m not asking to be best friends. I don’t want us at each other’s throats anytime we are in the same room together.”

“I’m doing my best, given the circumstances. I feel like everyone has overlooked the fact I’m no longer with the man I thought was my forever. Just because you don’t see me crying every day doesn’t mean I’m over it.”

The thought of Amelia crying herself to sleep at night rips a gaping hole in my chest. Maybe because I haven’t fallen in love before or had a real girlfriend, the idea of mourning a relationship is foreign to me. Imagining her crying or keeping

her feelings locked away because she feels like she'll be seen as weak is a sad realization to hear.

"I'm sorry you and Beckett didn't work out."

"Thanks. It wasn't a perfect relationship. But we put in so much time and effort that I never saw us not working through things."

I hate seeing her upset, and talking about this douchebag, so I change the subject to turn her mood around.

"You love movies. Which one depicted your relationship best?"

Her eyes light up as she places her empty bowl in the sink. "Ohhh, good question."

I'm not about to ruin the moment and tell her to put it in the dishwasher. I'll tell her in fifty minutes.

"We were so different. Opposites attract, I guess? A movie where the guy was cool and she was sweet."

"You're sweet?"

She taps her wrist indicating we still have time, so I let her continue.

"Danny and Sandy from *Grease*? He was so well-liked and popular. She was kind and loved him no matter who he was."

"Do you still love him?"

"Yes." Her eyes catch mine, and they sparkle. But not in a happy way. The glossy shine gives her brown eyes a bronzish

tint. She looks beautiful even close to tears, but I can't tell her that.

I'm sitting at the counter watching a new, vulnerable side to Amelia I've never seen before.

"Ever since my mom died, I told myself not to get attached to the idea of love. You can't expect your happiness to come from someone else, so I tried my best to be content with myself and my life, with or without a man. But Beckett *became* my life, so it was hard not to detach myself from that fact. He's the first person I lost who didn't actually die, you know? It's a different healing process."

"I wish I could say I understand, but I don't. I'm sorry you're having to start all over."

She hops onto the countertop. "Thanks, it's easier knowing I'm down here and he's up in LA."

"He doesn't know you came back home?"

"I'm sure he assumes that now."

"And yet you will be gone before we realized you were here."

"We'll see about that. I've gotten more rejections than opportunities. What are your plans now that you're back?"

She doesn't say "home," and I appreciate it. I'm not home. This is not my home.

"I don't have a plan at the moment," I confess.

"How do you not have a plan?"



“I didn’t when I left ten years ago, and look at me now.”

“You’re saying all I need to do is travel abroad, scrounge for work, and I can return with...abs and no prospects?”

“Sounds about right.”

Amelia chuckles and quickly clears her throat.

“I do know I plan on fixing up my dad’s car while I’m back.”

“While you’re back? Does that mean you think you may leave the States again?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her truthfully. “I don’t think too far ahead anymore.”

“What’s wrong with your dad’s car?”

“It’s easier if I show you.”

I expect her to whine or protest and offer up an excuse about her early alarm the next morning, but she gives me an immediate, “Okay.”

When we’re in the garage, I pop the hood and point to various parts.

“What sucks about old cars is they overheat easily. I’ll need to put in a new cooling system. Definitely a new battery, and while I’m at it, maybe even some new brakes. I can’t even remember the last time I had this on the road.”

She looks on intently, like all these junky parts make sense to her. I begin touching a few things, getting oil and grime on my fingers, but she keeps watching me.

“This is the new engine we put in right before my dad deployed.”

I remember the time vividly. How heavy the engine was and how we nearly broke the cradle getting it inside the car. And when it was finally in, my dad pretended it smashed his fingers and started howling. I freaked out at the time but nearly smile at the memory now.

“What is it?” Amelia asks.

“Huh?” I’m dazed over the nostalgia.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you smile like that before.”

I rearrange my face and get back to the car so she doesn’t ask any other questions I’m not comfortable answering. “It’s nothing.”

“This is the battery?” She pivots the conversation, but in doing so, gets curious and reaches for the corroded box.

“Careful,” I command, grabbing her wrist before she can make contact. “Battery acid is dangerous. It’s best not to touch it.”

A moment passes and I realize I haven’t let go of her wrist. She looks down, surprised as well. Physical contact is rare for us. And even though we’ve technically passed first base when I groped her chest, this feels different. Almost primal.

Her pristine skin now has dark smudges all over her thanks to my dirty hands.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” I try to rub it off but it’s spreading.  
“Dammit.”

“It’s okay, I can go wash my hands.”

“I didn’t mean to get you dirty, I—”

But before I can finish my sentence, the garage door begins to open. By the time I close the hood and the door is up, Amelia is no longer by my side.

Our parents are smiling and grabbing bags from the backseat.

“Hey, honey,” my mom says. “What are you doing in here alone?”

“Oh, nothing really. Checking out the car.”

I figured Amelia would return to greet her dad once she was done washing her hands. But as the three of us go into the house, she’s not waiting in the kitchen.

It’s almost like she doesn’t want to give her dad the idea we are capable of being friendly.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Amelia*

**T**his past week, I've come to terms with my failed job search. I always assumed I'd bounce right back and find a job within my field rather quickly. But the more days that pass, and the more shifts I pick up to kill time, I realize this isn't going to work out for me.

The feel-good movies people watch in theaters are expected to have a happy ending. Maybe mine is looking different than I imagined.

Breakfast is brutal. Everyone seemed to wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Even Theo could barely look in his mom's direction. If emotions were a cloud, his would be dark and looming over the entire house.

If we had a better family dynamic, I'd suggest we all go out and get brunch to turn around our bad moods, but we aren't the kind of household that does fun things like that.

I'm reviewing my resume and cover letter for the millionth time, doubting all the skills I was so confident about in the beginning of my job search. Why am I not getting any interviews?

“Something has to be wrong.” Theo is next to me as I continue inspecting it.

My dad and Molly look over while they sip their coffee.

“Why do you say that?” Molly asks.

“Because I am barely getting any hits. My resume is awesome. Why haven’t I gotten responses?”

“Want me to take a look?” my dad proposes.

“Let me see it.” Theo grabs my laptop, ignoring my dad’s offer.

He scans it, and I wait for him to pick it apart. A few minutes pass by and his face is impossible to decipher.

“Resume looks good.”

I wait for him to elaborate. “Okay, and?”

“Oh, check the cover letter though. You have the word ‘conniving’ instead of ‘convincing.’”

“What?” I shriek, grabbing my laptop. “Holy shit, you’re right. How did that not pop up as an error?”

“Because it’s spelled right, just the wrong word in this case.”

“Oh fuck,” I curse.

“Hey, language,” my dad scolds.

“Dad, you don’t understand. Companies will reject a résumé for any reason at all. Bad formatting, typos, even small fonts.”

“That seems so unfair.” Molly has my back. *Thank you, stepmom.*

“Thanks for catching that, Theo.” It’s like pulling teeth being this gracious. I can barely be this nice in front of our parents, but I did it. Congrats to me.

“You’re welcome.”

“Yeah, good job. You’ve got a great eye,” my dad adds.

Except Theo doesn’t give him a head nod, a smile, nothing.

“Well, Molly and I are going to run some errands today. Do you need anything while we’re out?” my dad asks me.

“I’m good.”

Theo doesn’t answer, so Molly taps the counter to get his attention.

Theo shakes his head no without even giving either parent eye contact.

Molly notices and frowns for a millisecond, but my dad doesn’t care.

“Okay, we’ll be out for a bit. Text me if you think of anything. Will you be okay?” My dad looks to me to assure I’ll be fine being alone with my brooding stepbrother.

I shoot a funny sneer toward an unsuspecting Theo, and we laugh in secret.

And with that, Molly and my dad leave the house and leave Theo and me alone sitting at the counter.

I'm practically shoving my bagel unchewed down my throat so I can fix my resume and get the hell out of here. Something seems up with Theo, and I don't care enough to ask.

"Shit," Theo begins. "I should have told your dad you need shaving cream."

Theo glowers at me with furrowed brows. I can't even hide the guilty look on my face because I am indeed using the expensive kind he has in our shared shower.

"I'll text him," I begin. "I'll tell him you need some deodorant while he's there."

"I think you're mistaken and smelling your own body odor."

"Pretty sure it's you."

"Pretty sure it's not."

"Pretty sure..." I stumble, feeling a bit rusty this morning. "Pretty sure I'm too mature for this conversation."

"Oh, *now* you're too mature?"

"Yes, and if you'll excuse me, I have a cover letter to fix."

"Not working today?"

"Nope. No plans today. What about you?"

"Nothing too important. Is Tawny working?"

"Eww, I don't know her schedule by heart. I'm not the one sleeping with her."

"We didn't sleep together, Amelia."

“Erectile dysfunction? I should have known. You know they make pills for that. Want my dad to get you some while he’s out?”

“While I appreciate the joke, please do not imply your dad has a prescription for Viagra so he can sleep with my mom.”

“Okay, fair, that was gross. I take it back.”

And even though the conversation feels unfinished, Theo gets up from his chair and leaves the room.

He’s so hot and cold. It’s exhausting trying to decipher what mood he’ll be in.

Just so I don’t have to wonder what Theo is doing upstairs, I sit on the couch, open up my laptop, and turn on the TV.

A *Game of Thrones* rewatch is calling my name. Nothing like blood, gratuitous sex, deception, and violence playing as background noise to distract you from your sulking stepbrother upstairs.

I pick up where I left off, in the middle of season four. I’ve watched an episode alone when Theo approaches from the sidelines.

“What is this?”

“Umm, excuse me? Haven’t you watched *Game of Thrones*?”

“I kept meaning to. But then I left the country and the Wi-Fi was always shitty. I could barely send emails let alone stream shows.”



My love for Jon Snow makes me shove aside my indifferent feelings about Theo.

“You don’t know *anything* about this show? The red wedding? Hardhome? Battle of the bastards?”

“Amelia, I have no clue what any of this is.”

I remove the blanket I’m buried in. Grabbing Theo’s wrist, I drag him back to the couch and make him sit next to me.

“Hang on.” I go back to the menu and start over on season one, episode one. “You said you didn’t have plans today?”

“No, not really.”

“Great. You’re watching with me. You don’t have a choice.”

I see him fighting a smile out of the corner of my eye.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a light green rectangular background. On the left side, there is a dark green pine branch with several needles. Overlaid on the green background is the text "CHAPTER TWENTY" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below this, the name "Theo" is written in a black, cursive script font. The entire graphic is enclosed in a thin black border.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Theo*

I don't know if it's the opening scene with the mysterious blue-eyed child or the intro to the show, but I'm fucking pumped.

*Game of Thrones* has me by the balls, and Amelia's intensity as she describes each character is laughable.

"Robb is one of my favorites. Well, no, Jon Snow," she tells me.

"Ned Stark seems like a cool guy so far."

She releases a cry that sounds more like a whimper. I don't know how to interpret that but I turn back to the show.

"Wait, they are blood siblings and they're fucking?"

"Ugh, yes," she says in regard to the Lannisters. "That's the tip of the iceberg. It gets way worse."

"Worse than *that*?"

"Yes, Theo. This show is insane."

"So, it *is* possible for siblings to get along?"

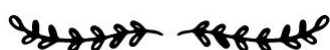
"Don't go there. You have so much more to learn."

Amelia grabs a handful of popcorn from the bowl, and I do my best to avoid her hand as I grab some, too.

“I haven’t had popcorn in forever—HOLY SHIT! DID HE SHOVE THAT CHILD OUT THE WINDOW?”

“Yes! See how crazy this show is?”

“Wow, I’m hooked. Can we watch the next one?”



**T**wo episodes later, our parents come home.

“Wow, look at you two.” My mom admires us sitting side by side without a hand around each other’s throat.

“Mom, not now. This little shit Joffrey might have Sansa’s direwolf killed.”

“Direwolf? What are you watching?”

“*Game of Thrones*,” Amelia and I say in unison, still captivated by the TV.

We haven’t spoken much, but it’s definitely the longest duration we’ve gone without making a joke at each other’s expense.

“Looks violent,” Molly adds. “Theo, did you ever get gas in my car?”

“Oh shit!” I exclaim. “What time is it?”

“3:00 p.m.” Amelia’s zombified voice answers without looking away from the screen.

“Shit!”

That gets her attention. “I thought you didn’t have plans today?”

“I don’t. Well, I do. I have an interview at 4:00 p.m.”

“Oh wow, what for?” She sounds genuinely interested.

I wipe some popcorn crumbs off my lap and realize I have just enough time to shower and get ready.

“Habitat for Humanity reached out for a Global Village role. It’s a coordinator position.”

“Need me to drive you?”

I’m taken aback by her kindness and realize I might have to accept her offer. I won’t have time to get gas, and I really don’t want to deal with parking, being this late. The Mustang isn’t working, and I don’t want my mom taking me because she gives credence to every bad stereotype about women drivers.

“Yeah, if you wouldn’t mind?” I ask.

“Sure. Go get ready. What time do we need to leave?”

“In twenty minutes. The interview is in San Diego, and it’ll be crazy right now with traffic.”

Before showering, I lay out my dress shirt and pants and realize they’ll need to be ironed.

Fuck.

I’m rushing, already predicting I’ll blow this interview.

When I’m done showering, I dry off and wrap a towel around my waist. Normally I’d shave in the shower, but I need the mirror to make sure I do a clean job.

A knock at the door startles me. “Come in.”

I’m wound up and pressed for time but when Amelia enters and takes in my practically naked figure, her staring increases the excitement for my already out of control nerves.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you weren’t decent.”

“I’m covered... well, most of the parts that need it. What’s up?”

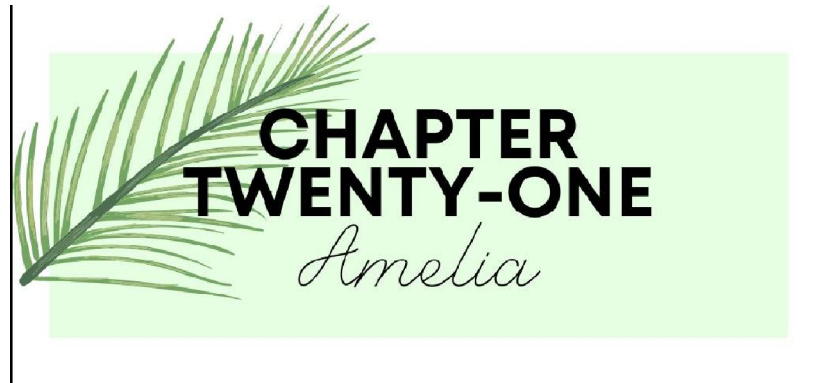
“I was seeing if you needed anything.”

I don’t know if she’s clocking the sixty minutes now or if she’s truly being thoughtful, but I appreciate it.

“No, as soon as I’m done shaving, I’m going to iron my clothes and get dressed. You still don’t mind taking me?”

“Nope.” She’s staring in my belly button region and I instinctively flex my stomach since I have an audience.

“Great, I’ll be ready soon.”



**M**y eyes linger a bit longer than they should when I leave the bathroom.

He's really something else. I can't go so far as to claim he's perfect, but he's pretty close. The only flaw he has is that personality that seems to continuously clash with mine.

And yet, I am slowly getting to know him a little bit more, and maybe he's not so bad.

I even go the extra mile and iron his clothes for him since he's so frenzied and late. And he'd have no idea where we keep the ironing board. It's the least I can do.

See, I can be an adult about this. We are turning a new leaf.

I'm in my room waiting for him to finish up when he steps through the doorframe in his boxers.

"You ironed my outfit?" he asks, the bulge in his briefs impressive as hell.

"Yeah, is that okay? Did I do a bad job?"

"Wow, thanks. You didn't have to do that."

“You’re running late, and I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Thanks, I’ll meet you downstairs in five?”

“Sure.”

I watch his ass as he leaves. I’ve never cared about a man’s backside until I saw Theo’s. Consider me converted.

“Theo?” his mom calls from the first floor.

“Yeah?” he yells from his room.

“Bruce and I are going out. I wanted to wish you luck with your interview.”

“Thanks, Mom!” he shouts back.

Exiting my room, I spot my dad.

“Hey, where are you two going?” I ask.

“Seeing the new Christopher Nolan movie.”

“You two go on dates a lot, huh?”

“Gotta keep dating your spouse.”

Spouse. Not my mom. Molly.

“I’ll let you know how it is,” my dad offers.

“Don’t. I hate Hollywood right now.”

“Meryl Streep didn’t fire you, your company did.”

“I don’t care. I won’t watch another movie again.”

What a lie. But I’m still butthurt and taking it out on the A-list celebrities.

Theo joins us downstairs.

“Wow, you look so nice,” my dad tells him.

“Thanks.” Theo’s tone is flat, and it’s the same attitude he gave him at breakfast.

What the hell is his problem? Nerves?

“Ready?” he asks me.

“Yeah...”

We get inside my car, and I can’t even compliment him on how nice he looks because his mood is off.

“I’ll put the address in maps and we can go.” Theo arranges his phone and sets it in the middle.

His legs are bouncing, and he wipes his hands on his freshly ironed pants.

“Nervous?” I ask as we pull out of the driveway.

“No.”

I take that as a sign to not talk to him because he’s clearly anxious about something.

During the silence, I replay the last two weeks in my head. How Theo basically ignores my dad anytime he’s around. The way he gives a one-word response when my dad tries to engage with him.

My blood starts to boil as I ruminate on why Theo is still holding a grudge against him. I’ve accepted their new marriage, and I even give Molly the courtesy of eye contact.

What is Theo so upset about?



The map says we have fifteen minutes left to our destination. I know the timing is horrible, but I've never been good at keeping my mouth shut.

“Are you and my dad okay?”

“What do you mean?” Theo's voice is inscrutable.

“Well, I notice you barely talk to him. Can't even look him in the eye.”

“We're fine.”

The lie is as obvious as the confession that no, they are not fine.

“Are you serious?”

“Are *you* serious? Amelia, I'm about to go into an important interview, and you're asking me about my relationship with your dad?”

“You were rude to him before we left.”

Ugh, my timing is terrible. I couldn't wait an hour and yell at him on the drive home?

“Can we talk about this later? Actually, no. I don't want to talk about this ever.”

When I pull up to the building, Theo leaves my car without even saying a word to me.

I guess I deserved that. I take full responsibility for the timing of this. It was never my strong suit. Technically, neither is cleanliness, but I'm doing better.

I have no clue how long Theo will be, so I find a Starbucks around the corner and order a drink.

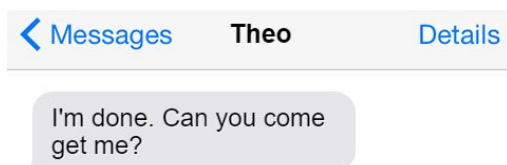
I'm cheating on Roasted, but I have nowhere else to go. Consider this a quality check of the competition.



**M**y phone buzzes as I check my emails.

I replied to a job offer about an administration position back in LA.

It didn't seem like a good fit, and the salary was half what I was making and didn't actually seem feasible, given my single situation.



No please, but sure Theo, I can be your chauffeur. I get back in my car and pull up to the same spot I dropped him off at.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—he's loosening his tie by yanking on the knot until it slips off his neck. He looks insanely handsome walking down the steps. He's disheveled—his coiffed hair now looks like he got in a brawl—but wow he looks sexy when he's angry.

But then I remember we're pissed at each other and I wipe away the expression on my face and look in the opposite direction.

“How did it go?” My jaw hurts from clenching it so hard.

“It fucking sucked.”

Shit, I probably put him in the worst mood. My fault.

“I’m—”

“Did you have to ask about your dad right before my interview?” he practically yells.

He doesn’t realize I was on the verge of apologizing, so instead of clearing the air, I yell back. It’s what we do best.

“I didn’t realize my dad was a controversial topic. You were the one who was a complete asshole to him right before we left.”

“No I wasn’t,” he argues.

“Yes, you were. You’ve been like this since the day you came back. I didn’t notice until right now. What is up your ass?”

We are stuck in gridlock traffic as we continue beating each other with sharp words.

“Nothing is up my ass. I have nothing against your dad.”

He’s a terrible liar.

“Yeah, okay, Theo.” I dramatically mock his tone like we are preschoolers. And we were doing so well today. “You have nothing against my dad, yet the mention of his name was enough venom to ruin your interview? Please help me make sense of *that*.”

I have a point, and his stillness confirms it.

We are bumper to bumper on the five freeway, refusing to even look out the other side of the windshield.

I'm replaying the past weeks as our speed gradually increases.

Theo clearly has an issue with my dad. We weren't supportive of our parents dating in the beginning, but I figured we are adults now and we can't change the past. I'm sure we wish our current lives were different, but there's nothing we can do.

He's ignoring me, and I don't even feel like continuing the topic anyway.

It's literally two steps forward, twenty steps back. Just as we were getting along, something royally screws us up.

We drive the rest of the way home in complete silence—no radio, no music, nothing.

When I park in the driveway, Theo doesn't even thank me for taking him.

I'm not offering to be nice to him anymore. If he can't give my dad the courtesy of being civil, I don't need to go out of my way to offer courtesy to him.



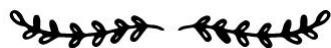
## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Theo*

I can't get anything past Amelia. She picked up on my problems with her dad immediately. But on the way to an important interview was not the time or place to bring that up. Had she chosen a better approach, maybe I would have opened up to her and told her more. But she sure ruined that moment.

When I'm safely inside my "room," I grab my laptop and send a thank you email to the men I met with. I don't know how to explain my surly demeanor, but I phrase it well enough to make it seem like this isn't normal behavior.

I'm certain my next interaction with Amelia won't be a pleasant one, so for now, I'm going to pretend like she doesn't exist.



I'm able to avoid her for a few days, spending most of my time either in my room playing video games on an outdated console or borrowing my mom's car to walk along the beach. I'm trying not to spend money, so I bring coffee from home as I sit and watch the waves.

I'm also certain I can't stop by Roasted without being literally roasted by the two women working there.

Tawny, because I'm not texting her back.

And Amelia, because somehow I'm the bad guy in all this.

Not that I'm keeping score, but she was the one who ruined *my* day and *my* interview. I feel like she owes me an apology for the way we left things.

Habitat for Humanity passed on me, which was expected. I apologized to my old supervisor who put in a good word for me. I no doubt ruined the opportunity of ever getting in their good graces again.

I can't escape all my problems by running off to other countries. I figured I had this job in the bag, and I wouldn't have to worry about my next move. Now I'm back at square one.

I have someone meeting me at the house to look over my dad's car. I think I'm in way over my head because a lot of repairs are beyond what he taught me.

No one is home when Gus comes by.

"Wow, you've got a beauty," he tells me.

"It's been a while since it ran. I don't even know what else it needs."

"Let me take a look and I'll give you an estimate. I work exclusively on Fords, and I've rebuilt more cars than I can count. You can trust I'll be fair in my appraisal."

“Thanks. Take your time.”

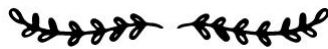
When Gus is done, he makes a list of all the repairs the Mustang will need. And thankfully, all can be done at his shop.

“You’re not looking at too many crazy expenses. I can get this done in maybe two weeks? I have to order the parts.”

“That would be great, I appreciate your help.”

I sign some papers and give him a deposit for the supplies he’ll need to order. We schedule a day for him to tow it back with him.

If I do decide to go to the reunion, looks like I’ll have a working car to my name.



**T**hat night, I manage to avoid my mom and Bruce pretty well. They have their usual meal at 6:00 p.m., and spend the rest of their evening reading, with a brief respite to watch Jeopardy.

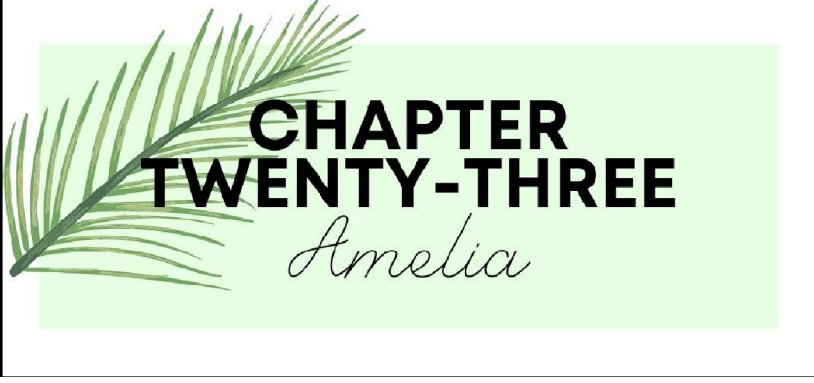
Who the hell knows where Amelia is. I don’t keep tabs on her, but I seem to sense when she’s present in the house.

When I’m done washing my dish in the sink, I take a look outside in the backyard.

The Jacuzzi bubbles are going wild but no one is sitting in it. Amelia must have warmed it up to come back to it later tonight.

Looks like I've been ignoring her for long enough. I could use an hour of nice Amelia right about now.





**CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE**  
*Amelia*

**I**t's been unusually quiet in the house. Almost like everyone is tiptoeing around waiting for a landmine to explode. Even my dad is giving me space.

I'm grateful for my short shifts at Roasted because it gives me an excuse to leave the house. But wow, being on your feet isn't the same when you're practically middle-aged. The Jacuzzi has been a lifesaver, and I need it now more than ever to soak my weak muscles.

When I reach the Jacuzzi, I see Theo sitting in the same spot he took when he first came home.

My heart flutters when we make eye contact.

"Hi." My tone is flat and evokes zero happiness. I'm unsure how I should treat him. Is he still mad at me? Is he over it? Maybe I'm still mad at him?

"Are you kicking me out?" he assumes.

"No, unless you want to be alone?"

"You can join if you want."

“Gosh thanks, considering I *did* turn it on.”

“What? You’re turned on?” Theo cups his ear like he didn’t hear me.

Okay, so we are going to pretend things are fine. I can do this. He holds the metaphorical broom, and I can lift that rug up just so.

“Theo you are full of jokes,” I deadpan.

I slowly step into the water so I don’t fall in like last time. Theo even reaches out a hand as a guide, but I wave him off.

“Thank you, but I’m fine. No alcohol in me this time.”

I let my body sink into the hot water and immediately feel my skin ignite.

It’s hotter than I expected. I fix the bun on top of my head so my neck is free from any stragglers. My breasts are forced together as I make a messy topknot. Unless he looked away, I don’t catch Theo watching me like I expected him to.

“This water feels amazing,” I practically moan and immediately realize my mistake. That sounded sexual and the type of atmosphere I’m trying to avoid. Even with Theo sitting across from me, bare-chested with his perfect forearms, I need to keep my attention elsewhere.

“...Despite the company,” I tack on as a joke.

Theo humors me and offers a forced smile.

“Are you going to be in here long?” he asks.

“Why, already wishing I was gone?”

“No, I might get a beer.”

He exits the Jacuzzi and runs his fingers through his wet hair, slicking it back. He has such impressive shoulders. His biceps are nice, too. Okay, I love the whole package.

“Want anything?”

“Oh.” I’m taken aback at his kind offer. “I really didn’t want to drink tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want a repeat of last time. Flashing you wasn’t my best tipsy moment.”

“I saw your breast, Amelia. Not the worst thing in the world.”

“Ouch. Make me regret it more, why don’t ya?”

“It was a compliment.” His voice is low and deep, and fucking hell, I *do* need a drink. “A masked compliment.”

“I’ll take a can of the hard seltzer please.”

“You got it.”

He returns quickly, holding two cans and two beers in each hand.

“Two? Okay, that’s my limit. No more.”

“You’re more fun when you drink.” Theo hands over the two cans.

“I came out here to relax, not get picked on because drunk Amelia is cooler.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be nice.”

“Really? Seems like we haven’t been capable of that lately.”

“Sorry, I’m under a lot of stress.”

“I’m sorry, too. I should have known better.”

“Yeah, you should have.” He smiles.

“Hey, let’s work on the snark. I’m trying to apologize.”

“I’ll give you your allotted sixty minutes. Can you handle that?”

“I can go longer than sixty minutes,” I reveal. *A sexual innuendo—great, Amelia. You’re really killing it trying to avoid a sexually charged environment.*

Theo grabs his phone and sets a timer. “We’ll see about that.”

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“Yep, I don’t think you’re capable of lasting sixty minutes without making a joke at my expense.”

Theo takes a drink of his beer, and even the act of him holding the neck of the bottle is attractive. Why are the most mundane things so irresistible when Theo does it?

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Beckett liked that beer.”

“Have you spoken to him lately?”

“He finally stopped checking up on me. Maybe he took my silence as a sign to leave me alone.”

“Have you had your rebound yet?” How quickly Theo steers the topic into inappropriate territory.

“My rebound?”

“The meaningless sex to get over your ex.”

“It would take a lot of sex to get over four years.”

Theo’s eyebrow rises in curiosity like he wants to know more.

“Not like that,” I add. “It was such a long relationship. I’m not ready to date again.”

“I’m not the best person to talk about dating to anyway.”

“Why? Did you and Tawny break up?”

“Please. We weren’t even dating.”

“She finally got to know the real you?”

“I’ll let that one slide.” We each smile, and the playful jabs might be harder to hold in than I realized.

“Oh come on,” I groan. “You seem very guarded. Like you don’t let people in. And that’s not a dig. I’m being honest.”

“Fair enough.”

“Fair enough? You are impossible.”

The left side of Theo’s mouth smirks at me, and I find it so unfair he has such an effortless way about him.

It’s dark out, and the only light is the one below us illuminating the Jacuzzi. The bubbles are on, and despite not

being able to see his lower half, the top of his abs are visible enough.

My lower lip has folded back into my mouth as Theo tips his head back to drink the remains of his first beer.

I watch his neck muscles and Adam's apple move as he swallows. There's no other word to describe the sight before me except *masculine*. He's strong, the typical rugged alpha male who could save you from a burning building.

Theo catches me staring. "What?"

"Nothing." I bring my drink to my lips.

"Did you have to bite your tongue because you had something for me?"

The sentence is innocent, but the delivery is not.

"No, absolutely nothing."

"You sure?"

"I'm being good for an hour." I give him my sweetest smile, and he laughs.

"Amelia, being a good girl."

Once again, what an innocent sentence that screams sexual. Am I reading too much into this?

Theo watches me as I release my bun and let my hair fall below my shoulders, the tips of my hair dipping into the water.

Maybe I'm imagining this. Maybe he's playing around.

"Wanna make a bet?" he asks me.

“I usually don’t make bets, but I’ll entertain an offer.”

“We each have one drink left. Let’s chug it. Whoever loses has to jump into the pool.”

I’m waiting for him to finish that sentence with “jump into the pool...naked,” but it doesn’t come. What the hell is wrong with me? *Do* I need that rebound? I’m strung up so tight I am turning everything sexual inside my head. Next thing you know, I’ll suggest we play truth or dare.

“Jump into the pool? That’s it?” I confirm.

“Did you want something else? Loser has to go to their reunion?”

“Hell no. Fine, the loser jumps into the pool. Make it a belly flop to spice up the night.”

“Deal. Ready?”

“Wait, are you trying to get me buzzed because I’m more fun that way?”

Theo doesn’t respond but flashes a brief smile and becomes serious again. “No, why would you think that?”

I open the can as Theo twists off his lid. The hiss of his drink and the pshh of mine makes my tummy flip. I’m going to get a stomachache.

“Go!” I say as we tip our heads back.

I finish within seconds as Theo takes two more huge gulps.

“What the hell? Is that your party trick? You were so fast,” he tells me.

“I can open my throat; it’s pretty easy. You basically let gravity do all the work.”

“Wow, open your throat...”

I can’t deal with these innuendos. I’m creating enough made-up ones in my head, and now Theo’s catching on.

“All right, you better show me the loudest belly flop I’ve ever heard.”

“You got it.”

Theo gets out of the Jacuzzi, shaking off some of the water from his arms and legs.

“The pool isn’t even that cold,” I complain. “This is so lame. It’s probably sixty-five degrees.”

“Hey, these were the terms you agreed to.”

“All right, let’s get going, we don’t have all night.”

As Theo walks to the pool, I have the sudden urge to sign up for anatomy classes so I can analyze all the muscles moving on his back. Even his thighs look built solid.

When he reaches the edge of the pool, he looks back at me. I stand on the ledge we were sitting on so I can get a better view.

“Better hit it hard,” I tell him.

“Hang on, I’ll go higher.”

He walks over to the stone waterslide and climbs the rock to the edge where the waterfall would be spilling out and into the pool.



“You don’t have to go that high,” I mutter, realizing this might be painful. I’ve heard stories where if you hit the water just right, it can be like face planting onto asphalt. “In fact, Theo—”

But before I can finish my sentence, his body plunges over the side and falls into the water abs first.

The splat is terrible. I felt it in my own skin when his body made contact.

Cringing and rubbing my arms, I wait for him to emerge like the moron he is. But when I see his body still floating face down, my heartbeat increases and my blood runs cold.

“So typical. Of course he pretends like he’s drowning.”

But as the seconds go by, I realize how long he’d have to be holding his breath.

I get out of the Jacuzzi and dash over to the pool in hopes by the time I am closer to his body, he’ll already be laughing at my gullibility.

“Goddamn it, I swear if you—”

“Ahhhhhh!” Theo releases a weak scream that still manages to frighten the shit out of me.

“Theo, you jerk!”

“Oh come on, I had to.”

“You’re so childish.”

I walk back to the warmer water and take a seat. The bubbles of the chugged drink are going to my head.

Theo returns as well, his front half red from the rough contact of the water.

I point to his abdomen. “You deserve that.”

“The six-pack? Thanks, Amelia.”

“The internal bruising you’re experiencing.”

“I’m okay.” He rubs his stomach and winces. “Okay, that actually hurt, but nothing another drink can’t fix. Want one?”

Against my better judgment, I say, “Fine, but that’s it.”

Theo returns again, with one drink each. Did he deliberately touch my finger with his? I had to imagine that. There’s no way someone would intentionally do such an innocent thing on purpose.

“What an exciting night for us. Just like old times.” I open my can and take small sips.

“Hey remember that time you had your friends over and you caught me spying on you?”

“Which time?”

“Fair.”

“You were so obsessed with Callie. I thought she was going to stop coming over because of you.”

“The redhead?”

“Yeah.”

“No way, I didn’t like her at all.”

“What? I’d catch you staring any time she came over.”

“I was spying on *you*. You just happened to wear skimpier bikinis when you had your friends over.”

“Jeez, Theo, I didn’t take you for a voyeur.”

“I didn’t take you for someone who talked about sex so often as a teenager.”

“You heard all that?” I exclaim, trying to remember decade-old conversations. “Did you have some listening device or something?”

“I might have cracked open the window to get a better listen.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“You’d be surprised what I heard out there.”

“Please don’t remind me. I blocked all that out.”

“It’s where I learned how catty females can be.”

“Catty?”

“You never noticed anytime you had something nice to say, Callie had to one up you? She did it to you all the time. Always had to be better than you.”

“No, I never noticed that. Wow, that kind of makes a lot of sense now that I’m older.”

“I used to hate that for you. She always acted like it was a competition between the two of you. Who can get the better tan, who had the cuter clothes, who got the guy.”

“Should have joined us and defended me. Could have been the start of a friendship.”

“Some of what you said was interesting.”

“Like what?”

“You both seemed rather interested in my dick size.”

If I had any drink in my mouth, I’d be spitting it out right about now.

“Dick size?” I cringe because I definitely don’t remember hitting that topic. I don’t put it past me berating him in front of my friends. But his penis?

“Yep, your blonde friend said I was probably huge, but because I was horrible with girls, no one would ever know it.”

“I—I don’t remember this.”

“And you said, ‘I’m sure Theo is tiny. Have you seen his hands?’”

Shit, I remember now.

“I said that? Sure this isn’t a repressed memory with an ex-fling talking about your dick size?”

“Pretty sure it was you.”

“Why are you bringing this up now?”

“You really think my dick is small based on my hands?”

He puts his palms up like he’s trying to de-escalate the situation, but he’s doing the exact opposite.

I review his strong hands he places out for examination, hands that look like they can tear phone books in half. Hands

that built houses, calloused hands that are attached to athletic arms flexing before my very eyes.

My heart is working double time and I worry Theo can see the intrigue all over my flushed face. Is this part of his game? Taunting me now that he's gorgeous and has something to hold over me?

Just to steer the conversation back to playful, I say, "Yeah, I bet you're small."

"You'd be surprised," he warns.

Neither of us are breaking concentration as I try to figure out what the hell he's doing. Is he goading me?

I could joke with him again, throw it back in his face with something comical to pivot our back and forth in a more innocent direction. But I'm done playing this game. What the hell does he want? He wants to talk about this? Fine, let's do it.

"Really? Prove it," I demand.

He blinks twice, our eyes locked on each other.

"Did I hear correctly?" he asks.

"Yep, show me. Let's see it."

He laughs and rubs his chin as water droplets fall from his jawline, unsure of what to do or say.

Ha! I knew it.

I double down and stand up, stepping toward him.

“You want to prove me wrong and show me how big you are? Let me see.”

I’m provoking him on purpose because I want to see him back down, to confirm I still have the upper hand like I did years ago.

“Amelia,” he begins, his voice hoarse and alluring.

I don’t think he realizes how turned on I am. All my efforts were for nothing. Trying to keep it casual and innocent while we’re practically naked? Not going to happen. I’m secretly begging he whips it out right here and now.

I wait and watch him staring at me.

“Amelia,” he repeats, this time with an edge. I hear it all in my name.

*Don’t do this.*

*You can’t take it back.*

*You’ll regret it.*

But I know I’m holding all the cards. I think he knows it, too.

My chest is in his face as I bend down to whisper into his ear, “You’re the one who started this. What are you waiting for?”

Regardless of how dangerously close to a line I’m dancing, this excitement is waking me up, reminding me how fun it is to flirt. It feels good. It also feels a bit wrong, but I feel vindicated seeing him fidget beneath me.

But without warning, he grabs both my wrists and pulls me lower to his face.

“If you’d like to *feel* how big I am, by all means, sit on my lap right now and find out.”

And this is when I fold.

I can’t fucking do it.

He sees it in my eyes the moment I forfeit, and he smiles.

“What’s wrong? Can’t handle me now that I’m right in front of you? You’d be pleasantly surprised at the size of me right now.”

I want to, I want to, God, I want to.

His phone lights up with an alarm, and the sixty minutes have come and gone.

It’s a cold bucket of ice water over my head, a realization I took this too far. A test I failed, because Theo has less to lose than I do by playing this silly game.

And even though the fantasy is disrupted, Theo doesn’t let the situation end.

I step back as he stands up close to me, very little distance and personal space. Now it’s his turn to whisper in my ear.

“Don’t fuck around with me or you’re going to find out how serious I am.”

I’m unable to form a sentence as Theo gets out of the water. He steps onto the concrete, dripping wet.

Don’t look down.

Don't look down.

And yet, I look down anyway.

From his chest to his sexy stomach, to the lining of his shorts. There it is, an impressive bulge fighting against the fabric like it wants to break free. I had a chance to feel that beneath my lap, and I didn't take it. He is not small in the slightest.

“You're still a fucking tease, Amelia. You really think you'll be saying no to me next time?”





I leave the Jacuzzi as the sensation of pins and needles puncture my extremities.

I'm so fucking horny and on edge. I don't know what I would have done if Amelia did, in fact, sit on my lap. Actually, that's a lie. I would have fucked her brains out if she let me, no condom and chlorine be damned.

But I could see the look in her eyes. She wanted to see it, wanted to feel it, but knew it'd be wrong. Is that why this feels so good? That vulnerable feeling of wanting someone you can't have, knowing it might be everything in the moment but ultimately can't last?

I shut my bedroom door as blood surges into my lower half.

My heart is pumping, and I'm breathing like I ended an hour-long fuck.

The intoxication is still swimming throughout my veins. Amelia's breath in my ear, the hunger in her eyes, the provocation behind her voice.

I don't know if Amelia scaled the outside walls of the house to enter through her balcony or what, but I haven't heard a peep since I locked myself behind my door.

I'm still semi hard as I dim my lights and beat off to the image of Amelia in my face, asking, "What are you waiting for?"

I'm waiting for her to come to her senses so that she can come all over me.

But I'm brought back to earth when I remember how taboo this is.

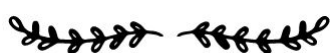
"She's your goddamn stepsister," I whisper to myself in shame, yet saying the words aloud is turning me on even more.

She's off limits. Newly single. Not interested in a rebound. But my hand increases speed, and I pump my fist like I'd be pumping my dick inside Amelia.

It's insane what the imagination can do. I picture her flawless breasts bouncing like when she was chest level with my eyes. I'd show her everything she was missing and give it to her so good other men would never again measure up.

I come hard in my hand.

Fuck, I needed that.



I know seeing Amelia after last night is going to be awkward as hell. If I could, I'd pretend the taunting last

night never happened, but I think this one might be too massive to overlook.

She must be off today because I didn't hear the garage open this morning. My room is directly above it, and depending on how the night went, the mere opening of it will disrupt my sleep.

That necessary tug relieved me of a lot of stress I didn't realize was weighing me down.

I can be the bigger person in our situation, so as soon as I'm done showering and getting ready for the day, I'm going to find Amelia, apologize, and call a truce.

We can't keep this going. One of us is going to push it too far and ultimately hurt the other, or she's going to find a job and move out, leaving our strained situation worse than ten years ago. And this was not my goal when I decided to come back. I wanted to reconcile and make peace.

Her room is quiet and closed off as I make my way to our shared bathroom.

When the door opens, I'm surprised there's plenty of room for me to walk through the doorway.

Normally, Amelia's pile of clothes is so large it blocks the entrance, making me shove my way through like I'm trying to complete an obstacle course.

But lo and behold, there is no mountain of dirty clothes anywhere in sight.

“Progress,” I mutter to myself. The truce should go well today if she’s already making strides in being cleaner.

Turning the shower on and letting the water warm up, I remove my shirt and boxers and stand naked in the bathroom. There are a couple of red blotches on my stomach from the belly flop. The skin is sensitive to touch, so I leave it alone and let them heal without poking.

Checking the water temperature, I fan my hand against the stream and it’s still chilly.

“What the hell?”

Moving the knob to the left and increasing the temperature, I wait another minute before checking again.

“What the hell!” I shout this time.

The water is freezing.

“Something wrong?” Amelia’s voice materializes on the opposite side of the bathroom.

I instinctively cover my private parts with my hands even if I locked myself in.

“Did we run out of hot water or something?” I ask while keeping my distance from the door.

“Oh, I bet we did.” Her tone is smug and her self-superiority resonates beyond the walls locking her out. “I took a sixty minute shower this morning.”

Shaking my head with annoyance, I blow out a long breath and remind myself I’m calling a truce today.

Today.

But not right now.

“An hour? It takes you that long to shave?” I howl out a laugh.

She’s quiet on the other side.

Maybe she left. Or maybe she’s formulating another way to ruin my morning.

“Figured you deserved a cold shower today,” she declares.

“Well unfortunately for you, I’m used to cold showers. I’ve spent years in places where clean water is a luxury. This is no big deal for me.”

And it isn’t. I’m grateful enough to have soap and shampoo to bathe with. This is merely a minor inconvenience. “Better luck next time.”

I jump up and down and inhale a sharp breath to prepare myself for the frigid conditions.

It’s a quick ABC wash for today: armpits, butt, cock. Albeit one Amelia won’t be able to time because I’ll keep the water running long after I’m out and drying off.

I wash up with vigor and step out with a towel around my waist.

The room is freezing, and my entire body breaks out in goosebumps. Oh shit, is that why she wasted all the hot water? So my nether regions would shrink from the chill?

Leaving the bathroom with my clothes in hand, I open the door and see Amelia standing in the hallway, waiting for me.

“Something I can help you with?” I ask.

“Just checking to see how that shower went.”

“It was wonderful, thank you for asking. I feel so invigorated.”

“Uh-huh.”

She doesn't sound amused, so I bring her back to reality.

“Next time you want me to freeze my ass off, don't waste water. Or were you hoping for a peek after?”

I clutch the towel near my belly button, and she doesn't falter.

Interesting.

Last night she was all talk and no action. Suddenly she's calling my bluff less than twelve hours later?

“You wanted a peek?” I repeat.

“Is it even big enough to see?”

I figured calling her a fucking tease was over the line, but here she is, proving my point yet again.

“Okay, let's get this over with,” I threaten with a breath of impatience and begin to undo my towel.

She doesn't stop me when there's no longer any fabric bunched around my torso. The towel hangs loose and all I

would need to do is drop it to the floor to expose my lower half.

Her eyes are on mine and it's a staring competition, no blinking allowed.

Time crawls to a stop, and my fingertips slowly release the terry cloth fabric as it drops in slow motion.

“Wait!” Amelia screams as my towel hits the floor.

She shrieks, no time left to prepare her for the glorious sight of my eight-inch dick...that's hiding behind my boxer shorts.

She's cognizant of the prank I pulled on her, keeping my briefs on beneath my towel just for the sake of driving her wild.

“You think I'd go flashing my goods after what happened last night?” I ask with a scoff. “The only way you're ever seeing me naked is—”

“Theo, put some clothes on for heaven's sake,” my mom reprimands at the top of the stairs. “What are you doing?”

I collect the towel off the floor, and because Amelia is a smart girl, she doesn't run into her bedroom to imply something happened between us.

Instead, she stands her ground to ensure we are above suspicion.

“Theo got this weird rash from the Jacuzzi last night. See all over his front?”

My mom rushes over like the typical concerned mother she is. “Oh my dear, how did you get those?”

“We can’t figure it out.” She watches my mom hover her fingertips over the bruises.

Trying not to flinch because I’m still delicate to the touch, I smirk at Amelia as my mom acts like a dermatologist.

“Are you itchy, honey? Or sore? You might want to take a Tylenol. Do you feel okay?”

She places her palm on my forehead, and okay, now I’m a little embarrassed she’s babying me in front of Amelia.

“I feel fine, Mom.”

“You sure? Want me to make you some soup?”

“I’ll be fine. Gus is coming to pick up the Mustang soon so I need to get ready to meet with him.”

“Are you selling it?” Amelia asks, like it’s any of her business. Like she even cares about that car.

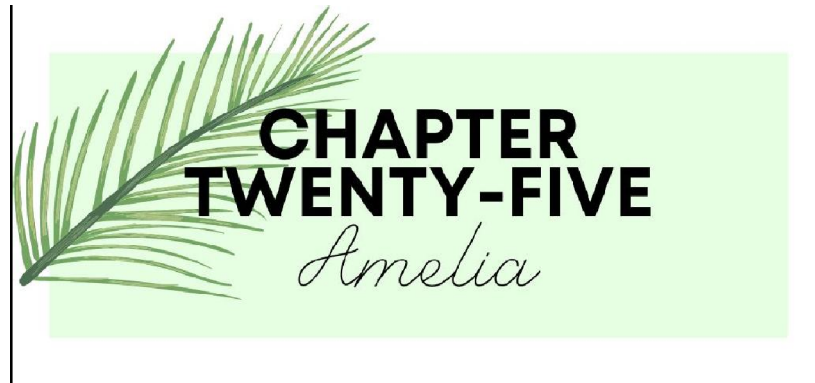
“No, I’m getting it repaired. They’re towing it to their shop to do the work there.”

“Theo, get dressed and keep an eye on that rash, will you?”

“Yes, Moth-er,” I enunciate as I walk back to my room.

I catch Amelia’s eyes before she cowers behind her bedroom door, and I mouth, “We’re not done yet.”





I'm on the verge of a panic attack as I close my door.

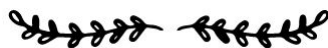
That was stupid of me. So stupid. I'm a goddamn marathon runner gulping for air after an intense 50K expedition.

Why did I lure him into a trap like that? I should have known he'd see right through me.

Fuck.

That's it. I'm getting a hotel. I can't do this anymore.

As soon as I'm done with this nap, I'm looking for an Airbnb, rental property, *anywhere* to get me away from this temptation.



When I make my way downstairs after a glorious snooze, my dad and Molly are tag-teaming the laundry on the couch.

“What are you up to today?” Molly is folding my dad's underwear, and I want to throw up.

“Nothing on the agenda. Might go for a walk—”

Theo bursts into the house like the world is ending. “Shit! Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” Molly asks, and my dad opens his mouth but wisely decides to hold his tongue.

“They took the Mustang, and I left my phone on the passenger seat. I can’t even call Gus back because I don’t know his number.”

“Go get it at the shop. Amelia, you said you didn’t have plans today. Why don’t you take him?”

Oh, now my father decides to talk.

Theo ignores my dad, again. “Mom, can I use your car?”

“I’m...parked...behind...them,” I sputter.

“Amelia, go take your brother,” my dad jokes, but oh wow did that fall flat.

The energy in the room is vacuumed out by the reality and impact of that sentence.

“He’s not my brother.” I try to keep my tone even in spite of the internal tornado I’m experiencing.

And because I want to vacate this scene as soon as possible, I add, “Fine, let’s go.”

Lord, let me make it through this car ride without strangling him in the passenger seat.

When his door shuts and we are met with silence, I back out of the driveway.

“You know where the shop is I assume?”

“Umm, no. That’s what Google is for.”

“Great, can I trust you to plug in the destination?” I offer out my phone like it’s a temporary white flag and we can behave for those pesky sixty minutes.

“Yes, sure, umm.”

He’s fumbling with the maps app and types something in the search bar but deletes it.

“You do remember the name of the business, right?”

“It’ll come to me, hang on.”

I’m headed toward the freeway regardless if I am going in the right direction.

“I swear,” I mumble under my breath.

“This is the place,” he says confidently as he points to the screen, showing me where to go.

“If you say so.”



**W**hen we arrive, it is, in fact, NOT the place.

“How do you not remember the name of the company?” I complain as he enters the information for another garage.

“Please stop yelling at me!” he hollers, like he’s in the middle of diffusing a bomb instead of plugging in an address.

“I’m not yelling!” I shout, but barely. “Google classic Mustang repairs in San Diego.”

“I did, and it’s only showing me results of businesses who want to buy vintage cars, not repair them.”

We’re driving in circles until Theo can figure out the next location.

“I’m certain this is the place.” He points to my phone screen.

“Great.”

We make our way there in silence, and luckily for Theo, he’s right. Because I was about to head home and tell him his mommy can do this for him.

He collects his phone and returns to my car.

When we reach the freeway on-ramp, we’re met with gridlock traffic.

“When I get really stressed out,” Theo begins, “Sometimes my brain stops functioning.”

I’m taken aback by how forthright he’s being. We barely touch the surface of honesty and here he is diving in.

“I didn’t mean to yell at you. I get overwhelmed sometimes when I have tunnel vision, and it’s like my body doesn’t know how to operate.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” I stammer, because umm, where is this coming from? “If you want to talk about anything, I charge by the hour.”

Theo is correct in his assumption I deflect with jokes when things get intense.

“Charge by the hour? What’s your going rate, and does that include the mouth?”

Sounds like he does, too.

Taking my hand off the wheel, I lightly punch his shoulder with my right fist.

We laugh as traffic continues to inch forward. But as I take my foot off the brake, Theo and I are flung forward, our seat belts locking us in place.



**M**y neck jerks forward as someone rear-ends us.  
“Owww,” Amelia whines.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She looks in her rearview mirror. “It scared me, that’s all.”

Her car was already in the slow lane, so it doesn’t take long for her to steer onto the shoulder.

A young boy pulls up behind us in a massive SUV.

We are outside the car as traffic creeps by, craning to get a glimpse of carnage.

Sucks for them; all they will see is Amelia’s bumper, which now resembles a wad of crumpled paper.

We examine the damage right as the driver exits his vehicle.

“I swear I wasn’t texting.” The driver is young, younger than the adult departing the passenger side. “I have my permit, and I was getting practice with my brother but I knew I wasn’t ready for the freeway.”

“Hey, Cooper, it’s okay. It’s a minor accident,” the older guy reassures. “This is my younger brother, Cooper. He’s sixteen and has his permit. I’m Dylan.”

Amelia has stars in her eyes as she gawks at Dylan. He’s tall—taller than me, and I’m 6’2. My leg muscles expand on instinct so I can reach his level. Or to feel superior with the height advantage.

“I’m so sorry,” Cooper apologizes for the millionth time. This kid is already driving me crazy. Can’t we exchange info already and get back to our lives?

“It doesn’t look too bad,” Amelia murmurs.

“Yeah,” Dylan agrees. “I’m sure the dents can be popped out. All it needs is a good buff and paint job.”

“No, she’ll need a replacement,” I confirm. “See how deep this dent is? It hit the framing.”

“Please don’t call the police,” Cooper pleads.

Amelia and Dylan chuckle like they are best buds and I’m the one who wrecked her car.

“No one is calling the police.” Amelia’s tone is borderline flirting. “But we will need to exchange numbers. And I’ll need your insurance information.”

“Here.” Dylan practically shoves his little brother aside into oncoming traffic. “Take my number. I’m sure I can pay for any repairs out of pocket, Ms...”

“Call me Amelia.”

“I will, without a doubt, call you, Amelia.”

It’s comical as I watch Dylan put the moves on my stepsister. She doesn’t seem like the type to fall for that—

“Give me your phone, I’ll put in my information.” Her voice is breathy, like Dylan is her first bump of oxygen after she was suffocating from being in the car with me.

Wow, okay I didn’t expect that from her. I thought she wasn’t even over her ex yet. Now she’s taking dude’s numbers off the side of a freeway?



“This is an excellent meet cute,” she says now that we are back in her car.

I’ve regressed back into the quiet, moody stepbrother she’s familiar with. The rare moment of honesty prior to the fender bender is extinguished, and I sulk in the front seat.

Dylan gets in the driver’s seat, and she allows him to pull out first before starting her car.

Except it doesn’t start.

She puts her foot on the brake and presses the start button, yet nothing inside her engine turns over.

“Are you serious?” Amelia shakes the steering wheel as if that will help.

“Might be your catalytic converter.”

“This isn’t a Cadillac, it’s a Honda.”



A boisterous laugh comes out of my mouth due to her innocent indignation that I can't help but find adorable.

"If it's not starting now, it won't. The rear end collision might have jerked around your transmission, too. You'll need a tow."

"Are you serious?" she shouts again.

"Please stop yelling in my ear."

"I can't afford car repairs right now. Not on a minimum-wage salary."

"Well maybe on top of a dinner date with Dylan, he'll pay for your deductible, too."

"I can't believe this. I need a car," she says while she frantically texts on her phone, no doubt asking her dad to come pick us up.

"Call you insurance and see if they'll send a tow truck."

"My dad will take care of it."

"Can't you do it?"

"I wouldn't know what to say."

"You're almost thirty and you've never had to deal with your insurance company before?"

"My dad took care of all that stuff for me. Don't tell me your mom *never* did things like that for you? Make doctor appointments? Force you to see the dentist?"

"No, never." I evade the truth well because, while she never made appointments for me, she reminded me to floss daily

since I didn't have access to regular dental care.

“Shit, my dad can't be here for an hour. He and your mom are thirty minutes from home, which will take another thirty minutes to get here with all this traffic.”

“Awesome. If you don't mind, I'm going to take a nap.” I lean my chair back until it's horizontal and cross my arms over my lap.

“Umm, yes, I do mind.” Amelia grabs hold of my wrist and yanks me up. Gosh she's strong. “I'm not sitting here in silence.”

“So turn on the radio,” I suggest.

“We're stuck in the same place with nothing to do, and you're going to sleep?”

“Would you rather go in the backseat and do other stuff?” I ask with a straight face.

Maybe she contemplates it for a split second, but she quickly objects.

“No! Can we talk about what the hell happened last night?”

Oh yeah, my truce. The cease-fire I planned on having with her. “Sounds like you fucked around and found out. I found out a lot, too.”

“Okay, you caught me. You're fucking hot, and of course I am curious what you have going on”—she waves her hand above my crotch and I can feel myself getting thick through my jeans—“down there.”

What I wouldn't give for a handjob on the shoulder of this busy highway right now.

"Was that a good idea telling you that right now? Probably not," she admits. "But seeing as how you cannot stand to be around me without declaring war, I figured maybe we should pretend we don't exist for the sake of our parent's feelings, or I'm finding a cheap hotel to stay in."

Oh hell no she's not getting a hotel. Over my dead body. I wouldn't say we are buddy-buddy just yet, but we're on our way.

"Our parents seem fine, if you haven't noticed," I say instead.

"Not my dad. Because you don't even give him the time of day. And don't deny it. I noticed. He noticed. And I think your *mom* even noticed."

Fair assumption because she's right. I don't like her father, and he will never take my dad's place. That will be a conversation for another day.

And it's here in this moment that a light bulb burns bright.

Why am I putting myself through all this when I don't even like Bruce? To see if I can conquer Amelia? Is she a test to pass or a notch in my belt? What the hell is my end game here?

"What do you want from me?" I ask her.

"I don't even know. I don't want to fight with you like this. Can you imagine how pleasant life could be if we got along?"

“Is that possible for us?”

“I think so.”

“I will cut back on the jabs,” I concede.

The optimism and inflection in her voice reveal all the hope she must be holding onto. The one positive I see coming from these new happy attitudes is that she’ll find out I’m not inexperienced like she assumes.

I know she wants me, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a mutual attraction. But there is no way it could last beyond sex. We are too different, and she would drive me crazy.

Unless the sex was that good...

“Hey!” Amelia slaps her palms together and brings me back to our reality of being stranded.

“I’ll be nicer. Stop setting traps for me and I’ll be nicer,” I repeat.

“Okay, fair. Deal. But you can’t walk around shirtless.”

“I knew it was a distraction.”

“Okay, so sue me. It’s a huge distraction. I’m fresh out of a breakup, and I have Thor’s younger brother walking around without the hammer.”

“Loki was his adopted brother. And I do have quite the hammer—”

“Can’t you take a fucking compliment?”

“Is that what that was?”

The groan that comes out of her mouth is impressive, and if it wasn't filled with such annoyance, I'd find her roars quite the turn on.

"I feel like I've said enough, and you're sitting there getting admirations up the ass."

"What would you like me to say?"

She's flustered while I sit calm and collected.

"I've laid all my cards out on the table," she asserts. "I'm trying to make peace with you for the sake of my sanity."

"And I agreed we can scale it back."

"I still feel like I don't even know you."

"What would you like to know?" I ask, right as a white car zooms past us.

Traffic is moving along but at 40mph. Amelia's car shakes from the turbulence.

"What have you been up to in the last ten years?" she asks.

"Not a whole lot. I volunteered, which turned into a low-paying job. I had a blast learning the cultures and owning the few things I could fit in a backpack. I came home because I felt like my time was up—and I missed my mom."

"Why didn't you come back more often?"

"Would you like the honest answer or the scaled back version?"

"Honest."

“You and I left on bad terms, and I didn’t want to see you. I knew you’d be excelling at whatever path you found yourself on. I was lost and confused, with no direction, and I didn’t want you, or anyone, to see me like that. Most days I still feel like I’m on that same path with no end.”

I’m being vulnerable, and I don’t know if I like it or not. These are some deep emotions that I’ve never fully accepted, even in my own mind.

“I’m not excelling in anything right now,” she admits. “I’m single, working the same job I had in high school, and I’m living at home. Who feels like a failure now?”

“I guess we’re two losers, aren’t we?”

We both laugh, but not loud enough to be heard over the white noise of the traffic.

“Kind of sad, huh?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I never thought I’d be back here. It’s literally like high school. I’m going to have to borrow my dad’s car. Or he can drop me off at Roasted like old times.”

“Our reunion is next weekend, ya know?”

“Gosh, don’t remind me. I’m not going to mine. How about you?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“You have to stay strong and not go. If you go, I’ll feel like I have to go to mine.”

“Why? Don’t go regardless. It’s that simple.”

“Because if you go when we’re in the same place at the same time, I’ll feel like I’m being a baby about all this. Granted you got hotter and I got...a little bigger around the waist.”

“Amelia, stop talking yourself down. You look great. You always have. This doesn’t have to be a popularity contest. Don’t go if you won’t have fun.”

“Fine, it’s decided. I won’t.”

Another white car speeds along now that traffic has broken up, and Amelia comes up with a childish game to pass the time.

“Every time a white car drives by in the slow lane, we have to reveal a secret not many people know.”

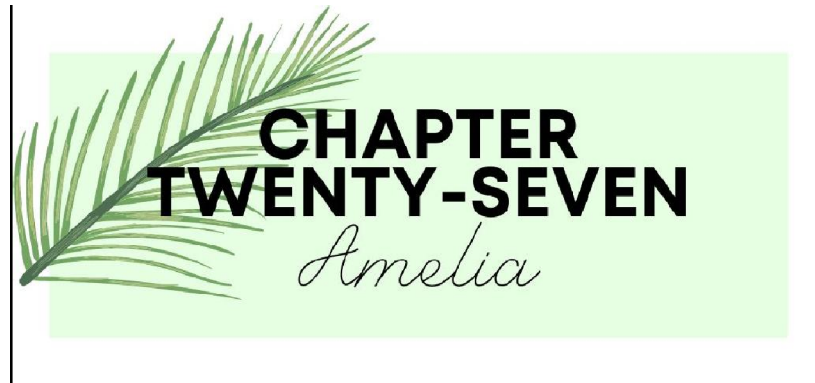
“What if I don’t have secrets?”

“Come on, Theo. Everyone has secrets.”

“Okay, fine. Go first.”

“Ugh.” She thinks for a minute, and I have no idea what end of the spectrum this little secret will land. Innocent? Naughty?

“I went through all of high school without kissing a guy.”



**CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SEVEN**  
*Amelia*

**M**y confession is innocent enough. I'm not about to admit I've only slept with two men my entire life.

"Shit, same secret then. I didn't kiss anyone for a long time even *after* high school," Theo admits.

A white car passes by so I ask, "Share your secret on how you lost all that weight."

"It's not that mind-blowing. I ate a lot of protein, worked out, and only drank water. Ten years is a long time to lose weight and build muscle. Wish I had a better story for you."

"How unremarkable."

"Since you asked for my secret, I get to ask yours."

"Everything has to be fair with you, huh?"

"We *are* siblings."

"Gross, Theo. We are not. Stop. I barely know you."

"Take a joke, Mellie."

"Do not give me a nickname. It's a new way to badger me and then we are back where we started."



Not that I don't love Theo teasing me, but I have decided I cannot allow myself that temptation. Want to really fuck everything up? Sleep with Theo. That'll do it. I can't jeopardize my relationship with my father all because I can't resist the stranger sitting beside me.

"Not exactly a secret, but if Beckett apologized and asked you back, would you go to him?"

"No."

Even I'm shocked at how quick I was to admit that. Theo and I stare at each other as our eyes light up in amazement.

"You said 'no' faster than most of the women I approached when I was a pudgy loser."

"I know, I'm surprised by myself. Subconscious feeling?"

"Possibly. Are you still grieving the relationship?"

"Yes, but maybe it's easier to move on knowing he chose someone else."

The clarity of that statement feels like a punch to my throat. I wasn't good enough for him. Maybe I wasn't as funny, smart, or pretty. Either way, I was lacking something, and that feels horrible to realize.

"Don't do that to yourself. Beckett sounds like a fuck boy who had no idea what he had."

"Thanks." I wish I could hide the dejection in my voice.

Two white cars pass us, and Theo says, "You're going to know every dark secret of mine before the tow truck comes."

“Give me two quick ones.”

“I’ve never been in love and don’t really believe in the idea of soulmates.”

“What? That’s impossible. You are in love with yourself and only yourself.”

“Excuse me, but how many times have you been in love? And how did that work out for you?”

“Okay, true. That’s fair, but—actually, I don’t know how to respond to that because love sucks at the moment.”

“Hey, we didn’t agree to confess and have a discussion about it. Your turn.”

“Okay, two secrets. One time I took all the tips out of the tip jar and didn’t split them up fairly. I can’t remember his name, but that one guy I worked with, who would disappear during his shifts and wouldn’t help at all, I didn’t tip him out.”

“Amelia, I hope the police don’t find out that naughty secret. Does your boss know?”

“Shut up. Yes, I told Benny. He ended up firing the guy anyway.”

“His name was Joel.”

“Yes! How the hell do you remember that? Oh yeah, because you were the honorary creeper customer.”

“It’s not my fault I can remember weird tidbits about the past.”

“I can’t tell if that’s a good or bad thing.”

“And your other secret?”

I’m unable to give it to him because without warning, my dad pulls up behind us to save the day.

Our bonding moment has been broken, but at least we had a breakthrough.

We’re going to do our best and be nice. Why make this harder on ourselves?

My dad gives me his car to take Theo home while he waits for the tow truck. He’s making this so simple for me, and I appreciate it more than he knows. Even if I’m feeling like a spoiled daddy’s girl, this is a load of stress removed from my shoulders.



The following week, Theo and I prove to be capable of portraying civility for the sake of our parent’s feelings. To be fair, Theo hasn’t really left his room to interact with me, so it hasn’t been that difficult. And I’ve been working more shifts to pick up some extra money.

I arrive at Roasted two minutes before my shift begins.

“You forgot to clock in...again,” Tawny chides while she sanitizes a machine.

I want to tell her I haven’t clocked in at a job in years, but I think she already put a hex on my house because Theo never texted her back. She must hate everyone under our roof.

My apron is fastened around my waist as the door chimes.

“Hi, welcome to Roast—” My words trail off and my eyes widen when I see the man standing in front of me. “Oh, shit.”

“Amelia?”

“No, no, no,” I whisper like I’m about to be robbed at gunpoint. I think I’d prefer that.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“What are *you* doing here, Beckett?”

“Umm, I’m—”

“You’re not here to ask me back, are you?”

A sliver of hope and the familiarity of our relationship sinks its doubtful claws into my back. Regardless of the admission I told Theo in my car, I don’t know if I’d be opposed to him asking my forgiveness and choosing me.

The chime of the door dings again, and my heart rate accelerates. Not another customer, I don’t need a line forming right now while I’m reunited with my ex-boyfriend.

Beckett’s nose has healed nicely, but there’s still a faint bruise that’s only visible if you knew I broke it.

“Sorry, my love. I didn’t mean to take so long on that call.”

The fashion model standing before me radiates confidence and charm. She’s beautiful, tall and thin, and I want to ask her about her skincare routine. But then my focus remains on her perfectly manicured hands and the fat, brilliant-cut diamond that has to be at least three carats.

I'm staring at the heart of the ocean from *Titanic* but in ring form. On her left hand.

"I—" the words won't form. I'm mute, my brain is currently incapacitated by the whiplash of that fucking diamond.

"Ooh, a caramel swirl latte sounds amazing. May I get that in the petite size?" she requests.

Her eyes are even smiling at me. How is that possible?

I'm still glaring at them like I'm Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* when Ursula stole her voice.

"What will you get, Beckett?" she asks him.

"Umm... umm... I'll get the same, I guess."

I want to protest and remind him that dairy gives him horrible diarrhea, but I still can't form words.

Beckett's eyes have a pleading look to them. Pleading for what? That I don't make a scene? That I don't tell his fiancée who I am? That I use oat milk instead of whole milk?

Instead of tossing scalding coffee in his face—I can't push my luck with the assault I've racked up—I say, "Sure, that'll be nine-fifty."

Beckett hands me fifteen dollars with trembling hands and tells me to keep the change.

Is he bribing me? What the hell is this?

I'm heating his milk, and I contemplate burning it. But I don't want Beckett thinking that not only am I a single loser, but on top of that, I can't even make coffee.

I confirm both lattes are perfect. I do the caramel swirl with gentle, careful hands.

When I place the finished drinks on the counter to be collected, they give a polite smile even though they can cut the tension with a knife.

She gives a bewildered, “Thanks,” and makes a beeline for the door.

Beckett mouths, “I’ll text you,” so his unassuming fiancée doesn’t notice.

I flip him off instead but use my ring finger.

As soon as they are out of sight, I run to the bathroom and cry.



**T**awny gives me a ten-minute break so I walk the seawall to get some fresh air.

Beckett proposed? How did all this happen in the span of a month? He wasn’t even with her that long. And what the hell is he doing in my hometown? He’s not from here.

When we broke up, he barely gave me any information about this mystery girl. The only thing I knew was they had been together for six months.

*Who the hell gets engaged before they’ve been together a year?*

I'm reminded of the movie *Leap Year* and how the male main character proposed after only three days. Sure, it's all hypothetical and fictional, but this doesn't happen in real life.

I want to text him, but it's none of my business.

But shouldn't she know? Why should she spend the rest of her life with a man who cheated? Would I want to know?

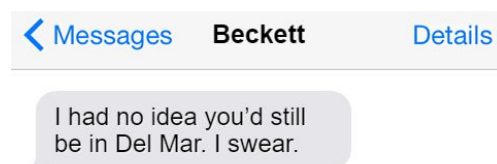
So many questions swirl my mind like the caramel I splattered all over their drinks.

Hopefully, Beckett is shitting his brains out right about now. Because yes, I used whole milk for that asshole.

I can feel the sun burning my shoulders through the fabric of my shirt. It's in the high 80's, and I don't want to go back into the store sweating, so I turn around and head back.

But right before I step through the backdoor, Beckett texts.

I want to throw up.



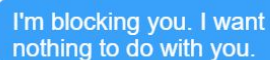
When I get home and have the comforting smell of my own duvet, I reread Beckett's text in the cave of my blankets. I don't answer yet.

He is old news. History. In the past.

I don't know if it helps that he's moved on in such a dramatic way, but I'm hoping this will help me get the closure I need. We are done.

I am Bette Midler from the *First Wives Club*: frumpy, damaged goods. His fiancée is the exquisite Sarah Jessica Parker: the hot replacement and new object of Beckett's desires. Except in the movie, Bette reconciles with her ex, and I don't see that happening now.

I text Beckett.



I'm blocking you. I want nothing to do with you.

As soon as I hit send, my phone rings. He's calling.

"You little shit." Beckett has the gall to break the unspoken rule of calling instead of texting back. And yet, I answer anyway.

"What?"

"Amelia, don't hang up."

He's not whispering, so wherever he is must be safe enough to have this conversation.

"You have one minute before I hang up and I block you for good."

"Okay...okay...where do I start?"

"I'll start with congratulations. Are you bruised and bandaged in your proposal photos?"



“Yes, actually—but no, no. That’s not what I want to talk about.”

“Forty-five seconds, Beckett.”

“I want to apologize. This has nothing to do with you and how I felt about you. Despite how stupid I sound, I’m not trying to save my ass.”

“Okay. Can I hang up now?”

“I don’t want us to see each other and feel anger.”

“You feel anger when you see me? Wow.”

“No, that isn’t what I meant. Shit.”

After a moment of my deliberate restraint to not cuss him out, he finally asks, “Are you going to tell Scarlet about us?”

*Scarlet.*

“I don’t plan on running into you ever again, so long as you never return to Roasted. What the hell are you even doing here?”

“We’re in town because—”

“You know what? I don’t care. I don’t want to know.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

“You need to tell her yourself. You’re not my business anymore.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“You *will* tell her, right?”

“Oh...ummm...” He’s stuttering instead of assuring me he’ll come clean.

“You’re a piece of shit, Beckett. I hope for her sake you let her down easier than you did me.”

I hang up and delete our entire text thread. Years and years of history and memories in those text exchanges.

Step one in moving on past our breakup, done. I even block his number.

“I need a drink,” I tell my empty room.

The last thing I want is for my dependence on alcohol to skyrocket, so I pour myself a small glass of wine.

Theo isn’t home or else I’d be divulging all my dirty secrets to him since we seem to be getting along. And I say that loosely. We’re being civil.

I’m picking up my clothes, and he’s keeping his on. A win-win.

No one is home, in fact, so I put on my bathing suit and inflate a raft. I will float away my sorrows in the pool. And drown the rest of my sorrows with my wine.

My earbuds are in and I blast some angsty emo music from my high school days as I roast in the sun. But one glass down and the entirety of *The Used* self-titled album completed, I realize I can’t settle on a half measure. I want to get fucked up. Just to the point where I don’t have to remember my current predicament. And then one drink after that.



**W**hen I get home, it's past 9:00 p.m.

I left the house around dinnertime when Bruce and my mom started being overly affectionate right in front of me.

When I make my way upstairs, I see Amelia's light is on and her door wide open. Curiosity has me heading left to her side of the second floor and knocking on the doorframe.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask.

"Umm, no I've had a pretty rough day."

She's in a plain black shirt—quite possibly mine—with no bottoms on, but her bikini top strings are poking out from the back of the collar and the front has tiny wet triangles. She has a bottle of wine open, and I don't see a glass anywhere.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I ask her.

The view before me is deceptive, because even though she's not wearing any pants, it's causing quite the predicament in mine.

"You better sit down for this," she warns.

Amelia pats her bed, and I feel like a vampire crossing the threshold of her restricted bedroom. I've never been inside before, but I'm not one to turn down an invitation of sitting on a woman's bed. Especially when she looks naked.

"I'm a little drunk," she admits, the fruity scent of her wine lingering on her breath. I enjoy the smell, and the dumber part of me is curious about how it tastes off her tongue. "I was in the pool...sorry I'm not wearing pants."

I try to keep my gaze on her face, not on her bare legs that are inches away from mine.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Beckett came in today."

"To Roasted?"

"Yes."

"Oh shit, you don't say?"

"I saaaaaaaay," she slurs, and I try not to laugh. I've never seen her like this, and it's a bit comical.

"Tell me about it." I reach for the bottle of wine and realize it's empty. "How much have you had?"

"That bottle? The whole thing. The one by the pool? The whole thing."

"Jeez, when did you start?"

"Around the time I got home from work. It's been a consistent buzz ever since."

"Have you had any water?"

“Oh, I don’t knowwww.”

She flings herself backward on her bed and her thighs are exposed, along with the small triangle of fabric on her bikini bottoms. I literally have to force my eyes to look elsewhere. I can’t be hypnotizing myself while sitting on her bed when she’s intoxicated.

“So, what happened?” I ask.

“Beckett came in with his *fiancée*.”

“Fiancée?”

Even I’m shocked. I knew he was cheating on her, but who knew he’d propose within the last month of her moving out?

“Yep.” She dramatically enunciates the P sound and I look behind my shoulder as she stares up at the ceiling. I expect tears to form any minute.

But they don’t.

I believe most women would be sobbing right about now, if the love of their life cheated on them, dumped them, and got engaged.

“I’m sorry. I honestly don’t know how to respond to that. Did you call him out? Punch the piece of shit?”

“We pretended like we didn’t know each other.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. She looked so sweet. I didn’t want to ruin her life.”

“You’re a better person than me.”

“Wow, you’re doing so well with this play nice thing. What do you want from me?”

She’s under the impression I’m being kind so I can butter her up for something. But I’m honestly not. Now that our fists are down, I could use a friend.

“I don’t want anything,” I say as my dick tells me it wants to see underneath her bikini. “You seem okay?”

“It’s whatever.” Her thighs spread a millimeter, and I hope she’s drunk enough she doesn’t notice my breathing has become restricted. The situation I’m in is wildly inappropriate. My dick is getting harder by the second, and I need to remove myself from this tense position I put myself in.

“It’s getting late, I better go—”

“No!” Amelia grabs a chunk of my shirt, and the opening where my head goes through is skewed and revealing my shoulder.

“No?” I question.

She releases my shirt from her imposing yet possessive grip.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to attack you there.” She straightens my shirt and brushes off the shoulder area.

She accentuates the brushing of her palm and moves the location of her hand to my back.

“These muscles are so impressive,” she muses. “Wow, I’ve never felt anything so hard.”

*Honey, if you think that’s hard...*

“Thanks, but umm... let’s get back on topic.”

I’m trying to be a gentleman. I’m not going to take advantage of her in this state. I won’t.

“I hope you blocked his number,” I tell her.

“I did.”

“And never give that piece of shit the time of day.”

“I won’t.”

She crosses an X over her heart, waits a beat and then bursts out laughing.

She’d be mortified to know she spit on me, but because I’m on the verge of erupting in my pants, I find it a turn on.

She’s cackling that drunk laugh we’ve all heard a million times. And over something not even that funny.

“You’ll find someone better than Beckett.”

She won’t remember much of this conversation tomorrow, and even if I want to be her knight in shining armor, my efforts are futile.

“I’ll be single forever, and that’s okay. If that’s how my life goes, that’s okay.”

She’s playing with a wet piece of her hair as she changes positions.

She relaxes her body weight onto me, her back on mine like that’s my sole purpose here. We sit like this in silence for so long, I think she fell asleep.

“Hey, Amelia?” I gently lay her down.

“Yeah, Theo?”

“I’m going to go get you some water and Tylenol. You’re going to hate life tomorrow.”

“I hate life every day when my mom isn’t here.”

And in an instant, the mood has shifted from goofy and suggestive, to sad and honest. I see the transformation across her face when Amelia realizes it too.

“I miss my mom.” She puts her hands across her face and begins to cry. Her cheeks are already pink and flushed from the wine. The tear that managed to escape her fingertips leaves a wet residue that Amelia doesn’t bother wiping away. “I miss her every day.”

I return to my spot on her bed, and she wraps her arms around my neck.

“It’s like she was never even here,” Amelia admits. “Nothing is the same.”

As she continues to cry, I can’t deny the fact that my eyes are beginning to sting with tears of their own. Fuck it, if I cry now, she won’t remember it tomorrow.

“I miss my dad, too,” I confess. “I think about him every day. It’s not fair they’re gone.”

We aren’t ugly crying. No heavy sobs or giant heaves of breath as we hyperventilate.



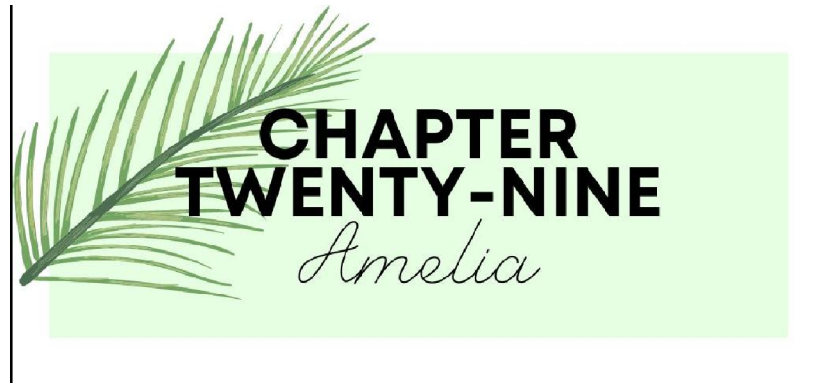
We've experienced all types of grieving for our parents over the years. Right now, it's a subtle cry. One that doesn't need to pull all the attention from every single sad moment of our lives, but a quiet, uncomplicated cry.

Our conversation has ended, and there are no words left to say.

She misses her mom.

I miss my dad.

She forces us to lay back on her bed, her arms still around me, and we lie there together, silent, tears rolling down our cheeks.



**B**efore my eyes open, it's the headache attacking my skull that hits me first.

I haven't even seen sunlight streaming through my blinds yet when I realize there's a twenty-five-pound weight sitting on my forehead.

“Oh my God, what is happening?”

The heel of my palm connects to my head, and everything is swollen. I'm alone in bed and cannot, for the life of me, remember what the hell happened last night.

But I'm startled by a knock at the door.

I'm still in my bikini but at least I have a shirt on.

“Come in?” I question, unsure who it could be.

“Morning, sunshine,” Theo greets while holding two glasses.

One is filled with water, the other has to be a mug with steaming hot coffee because my adrenal glands are going ape shit as I inhale the nutty aroma.

“What are you...umm...” I clear my throat and cover up my bare legs with my blanket. “Umm, what are you doing here?”

“Bringing you some coffee. I’m sure you feel awful.”

He pulls out a bottle of pain reliever from his pocket and tosses it to me. My reflexes are shit and I let the bottle bounce on my bed with no attempt at catching it.

“How did you even know I was in this condition?”

“You don’t remember what happened last night?”

I gulp the water and swallow some pills, but even after they are safely down my throat, a lump forms.

“No, what happened last night?”

“We slept together.”

I choke on my words. “We—wha—what?”

My fingertips reach for my throat to try and force the words out. “How do I not remember this? Was I even any good?”

It’s been weeks, probably months since I’ve had intercourse, and I’m not even sore. Why can’t I remember such a significant experience?

“Amelia, fuck, I meant like *sleep* together. We didn’t have sex.”

“Ha...ha...ha...” My laughs are delirious and delayed as I process my slip-up. Okay, so Theo didn’t take advantage of me while I was drunk out of my mind. Thank God.

He hands me the mug of coffee, and I slurp it like a madwoman despite the scalding temperature.

“Mind refreshing my memory? How did you even end up in my bed?”

“You needed some company last night. You didn’t want me to leave.”

“Oh, really? Wow. I must have been out of it bad.”

“Must have been,” he reassures. “You spooned me the whole night.”

“I do love being the big spoon. This is quite...shocking.”

“Quite. Can you imagine what would have happened if your dad saw us? I snuck out around 6:00 a.m. and went back to my room. And as much as I’d love to tell you more, I have to get going. I’m going out to lunch with my mom.”

“It’s already lunchtime?”

Grabbing my phone on my nightstand, I check the time and see it’s 11:00 a.m. I’m so grateful I don’t work today. Because if I did, I’d no doubt be written up because I didn’t show up for my shift.

“Is my dad around?”

“I don’t know,” Theo admits as he backs out of my door. “We’ll talk later.”

That’s Theo’s goodbye for the day, so I hold the mug in silence at the bombshell he dropped on me. We slept in the same bed together. I don’t know if I’m more disturbed by the fact we slept together side by side the entire night, or I didn’t want him to leave.

Oh, if only my eyeballs weren't popping out of their sockets.

When I'm dressed for the day and have enough liquids in me, I still feel like I'm being held together with scotch tape. Any movement shifts my whole axis off balance.

I find my dad outside pulling some weeds along the side of the house.

Finding a shady spot in the grass, I plop down and lie back.

"You okay? I didn't see you come down for breakfast."

"I'm hungover."

"That was your wine bottle by the pool? Sweetheart, you know I don't like glass outside."

"I'm sorry, I know."

"And hungover? Do I need to ground you to prove my point?"

He looks at me with a dead-faced stare, but we burst into fits of laughter.

"I'm too old to be grounded."

"The rules haven't changed around here just because you're an adult. I'm still your dad and can discipline how I see fit."

"I'd rather be on the streets than be grounded and stuck inside...with Theo."

My dad wipes his dirty palms on his jeans. "Then be careful with the glass around the pool. I don't want any accidents."

“I will. I promise. I’ve made progress with my dishes, right?”

“Yes, thank you. Molly appreciates the help.”

“Speaking of Molly, she and Theo are at lunch?”

My dad nods his head as he pulls out a giant crabgrass weed and tosses it in his pail.

“Has she mentioned anything about Theo since he’s been back?”

“In terms of?”

“His personality? The way he won’t look at you or give you the time of day?”

“That’s nothing new, honey. I’m used to it. And it’s okay. If he doesn’t like me, he doesn’t like me. I know how hard it was for you when we started dating. I will always love your mother, and I miss her every day.”

*I miss her every day.*

Oh shit, I think I said that to Theo last night. Did I cry? Oh my gosh, I cried in front of him. It’s all coming back to me. I started crying, forced him into bed with me— perhaps against his will—and we slept together.

Groaning and rubbing my head, my dad takes this as an indicator I’m feeling nostalgic about my mom.

“It’s okay, Amelia. I go through good days and bad days, too.”

I let my dad assume we are on the same page instead of admitting I'm having major regrets about my decision-making skills last night.

“Why is Theo so standoffish? Have you ever asked him?”

“I've talked to Molly about it. She tried talking to him, but he shuts down. We've decided to let it be.”

“I don't like that he's rude to you. In our home.”

“It's Molly's home now, too.”

“It's not, though,” I grumble.

My dad looks at me, and the conversation happens without even saying the words.

I need to accept that, while this will always be my childhood home, Molly lives here now. Not my mom. Not the three of us like we did when I was a child. My dad and his second wife. And despite them being together for almost a decade, it's still a fresh wound that hasn't healed.



**E**ven though Theo stated our conversation wasn't over, I avoid him when he returns home from lunch. Correction. I have no clue when he and Molly come home because I borrowed my dad's car to go for a drive.

During my cruise along the coast, I called Lucille, and we set up a dinner date in two days.

She's officially retired, so she has all the time to meet up now.

I'm happy for her, but part of my brain– the one that doesn't think rationally– hoped she'd start her own company and surprise me with a position, and we'd all live happily ever after.

Except I know these uncomplicated, magical endings don't always happen in real life.

But a girl can hope, right?



The following morning, after I successfully avoided Theo and everyone else in the house the day before, I come downstairs and set my phone on the counter.

People are shuffling behind closed doors, so I know I'm not the only one awake. But no one has joined me in the kitchen yet.

Preparing an easy breakfast of cereal yet again, I sit at the table and scroll aimlessly.

A new number appears in a banner with an incoming text.

Pulling it up, I read it carefully, hopeful Beckett didn't create a new number so he can try to contact me again.



Hey, it's Dylan. I wanted to let you know my insurance will cover the repairs to your car. As an apology, I'd love to take you out to dinner. Whatever your in the mood for.

*The good news I needed—*

“He used the wrong ‘your,’” Theo says with a snort.

I jump about six inches and involuntarily swat at him. He hops back, and the smile on his face tells me this was all intentional. “Hey! Do you need a bell around your neck? A little privacy would be nice. And a warning you’re entering the room.”

“You’re going to go out with a guy who doesn’t know proper grammar?”

“Why not? Weren’t you saying I need a rebound?”

“What’s a rebound?” my dad asks when he enters the kitchen. “I know you’re not talking about basketball. Amelia isn’t a fan of sports.”

“You don’t want to know, Dad.”

Molly must be working in her office, so it’s an awkward threesome breakfast while Theo does his best impression of not hating half the people in this room.

Or maybe he still hates me but pretends well.

“You work tomorrow?” my dad asks.

“Yes, and Benny and I need to figure out a time to talk. I have some ideas for Roasted, and it could bring in some extra money.”

“Need to borrow my car?”

“Yes please.”

“When will yours be done?”

“Soon, I hope. The guy just texted me and said his insurance company is handling it. What a relief.”

The two-way conversation is happening while Theo stands and prepares his eggs. I decide to bring him into the discussion.

“What are your plans today, Theo?”



**F**eeling grateful Bruce dropped his line of questioning about rebounds, I set about making my eggs. While I'm staring at the skillet, stirring, Amelia asks what I'm doing today.

"I'm guessing the same as you," I answer her.

"Hiding in your room?"

"Sounds about right."

"You both have your cars in the shop for repairs. When will the Mustang be ready?" Bruce asks me.

I can't deflect the direct question, and even though Amelia and I agreed we'd be nice to each other, that temporary reconciliation didn't accommodate her dad.

"The day before the reunion."

"You're not going to yours, are you, Amelia?" Bruce asks.

"No, I'd rather live at home forever. Which kind of sounds like my future anyway if I can't find a job."

“I haven’t asked yet, but perhaps Molly has some work you could assist her with?”

While I’m sure he didn’t mean anything malicious behind it, Bruce speaking on my mom’s behalf ignites a fire in me. Her floral business was a side job she took on while my dad deployed. She started it from nothing and has built herself a serious reputation in the Southern California region.

Amelia “helping” her when she doesn’t need the extra hands is insulting.

“I’m pretty sure my mom is doing fine and doesn’t need the assistance.” My tone is overprotective.

“Oh, okay. It was just an idea,” he backpedals.

I scrape my eggs onto a paper plate and wipe out the skillet.

“Gosh, Theo, it sounds as though you want me living at home forever.”

Her comment is dripping with sarcasm and a hint of anger. She is so good at picking up on my subtleties. Instead of answering her, I pick up my plate and leave the room.

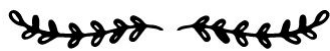
Once safely upstairs, I methodically chew while contemplating my next move. Amelia has been avoiding me, I can tell.

Is she embarrassed about our little sleepover? Maybe she doesn’t remember all the details. But I do.

The way she wrapped her leg through mine. How my ass was pressed into her lap the entire night. How I risked losing

feeling permanently in my arm because I didn't want to move positions. It was everything I didn't know I was missing. Her body warmth, her cute small frame holding onto mine pretending she could fit around me, how I felt her faint breath on the back of my neck like it was white noise I could sleep to...

I would give anything to feel that again.



The same trap has been set. The Jacuzzi bubbles are flowing. I'm sitting out here alone. And yet, she doesn't join me.

When I'm back inside and turning out the lights, I hear her tiptoe downstairs.

I flip the kitchen lights back on and catch her in her bikini with a towel under her arm. She freezes like a deer in the road.

"Going somewhere?" I question.

"What the hell, Theo! I thought you were in bed."

"As you can see, I'm not. Where are you off to?"

"Umm, nowhere, I was getting some...water."

"Water? From the Jacuzzi?"

"Maybe."

She's caught red-handed, and her lies are so bad I can't stop asking more questions to put her further in the hole.

“Did I do something wrong?” I coax. “I’ve been well-behaved. I’m wearing clothes. Are you avoiding me?”

Guilt devours me as I take in what little clothing she’s wearing. She’s in her usual bikini, standing half naked in the poorly lit kitchen. I can see the goosebumps on her chest.

I have my towel wrapped around my bare waist and a shirt on.

“I’m not avoiding you, I’m in need of some quiet...time.”

“And I’m not quiet?”

“You’re everything *but* quiet for me.”

“Okay, that’s fair.”

“I don’t trust myself around you right now.”

Her confession speaks volumes, and I’m asking for it when I reply, “Because we slept together?”

“Shh. Our parents are in the room down the hall.”

The kitchen is shaped like a U, and we stand on opposite sides of the counters.

“Relax, they can’t hear anything. And we didn’t do anything...yet.”

“Yet?”

The begging in her voice is palpable. She wants more and so do I. But there is no way in hell she will ever cave and make the first move.

I'm feeling lucky tonight, so I decide to see how she'll react to my dismissal.

"Don't let me keep you. Go on. The water should still be warm."

After a grueling ten seconds of watching her contemplate how to respond, she settles on, "Thank you."

"Hey, you still owe me a secret," I remind her right as she's about to take a step.

"Oh, that's right. Okay, here's a doozy."

I don't know what I expect her to say, but it's nowhere near the confession that comes from her lips.

"I faked my orgasms with Beckett."

Now I'm the one frozen in the road. She sees my reaction and begins to leave.

"Whoa, excuse me, come back here. You can't leave me hanging with that."

"Hey, you said it yourself. We didn't agree to confess *and* have a discussion about it."

"I have to know the details. Why the hell couldn't he please you?"

"I'm difficult to please, apparently."

"Is that a challenge?"

"No!" she shouts and then cringes, looking around. She lowers her voice. "No, I mean, I've only been with two guys and neither of them knew what they were doing."

“Have you ever had a real orgasm?” I ask, knowing she has, but by her own hands.

“Of course.”

“But have you ever had an orgasm from someone other than yourself? From a man? His hands? His mouth?”

She swallows as her eyes lock onto mine.

“No,” she whispers, not with shame, but with intrigue.

I’m feeling cocky and stupid enough to accept this challenge. “I bet I could make you come in less than five minutes.”

She releases a nervous laugh, but I can see her clenching her thighs together as if she’s fighting the urge to let me try. “I really doubt that.”

Her words finally put my brain in gear. I flip off the overhead light, leaving just the light on over the sink so the added darkness gives us more privacy.

Walking the three paces her way, I bend down to scoop her up. I lift her with ease, letting her ass hit the countertops so we are at the same eye level. Stepping between her legs, I spread them open with my thumbs. Fuck pretending there isn’t a giant bubble of tension enveloping us. We know it’s there. Ignoring it will only make it worse.

I lower my gaze to where the tiny bit of fabric is covering where I want to touch most. “I bet I can make you come without even taking your bikini bottoms off.”



She's breathing hard and looks like she has sobered up with my proposal.

"Theo, I shouldn't have said anything. I'm kind of horny and—"

"So, five minutes might be too long? Three minutes?"

She's oozing at the thought. I can see the silent begging in her eyes.

"You're fucking with me," she accuses. "You'd never go through with it."

I place one of my hands on her cold thigh and she flinches. "But our parents are..."

"Can you be quiet?" I ask.

"I don't even think *you* can..."

I'm about to whip out my phone and set a timer, that's how committed I am. It might be an awkward angle for my wrist and fingers, but I know I can get the job done without her having to move positions. Even if the fabric is in the way, my finger can do enough and satisfy her in ways no one could.

I trail my fingers along the inside of her thighs and she gasps.

"Do you want me to touch you on the outside of your bikini?" I ask her, still unsure if she has the guts to let me.

"Are we doing this?" I hear pleading in that question like she is begging me to say yes.

“Do you want me to? I can stop—” I pull my hand back, and she grabs my wrist.

“Keep it there,” she demands, returning it higher than where I was before so I can feel the lining of her bikini.

“Want me to touch your skin or keep it on the outside of your bathing suit?” I ask her, my voice raw, praying she allows me to feel her wetness firsthand.

“That’s up to you,” she breathes. “If you’re...serious...”

I’m fucking serious.

I take it slow and rub my thumb over the center of her, the fabric feeling thicker than ever. I don’t want this barrier, but I will do whatever she wants, even if that means stopping completely.

We are face to face, the closest we’ve been physically, and I can’t help but smile at what I’m about to do. Something I dreamed of as a teenager.

When I touch her clit through her bathing suit, I see and feel her stiffen in response.

“Want me to stop?” I ask, letting her know she can back out now. We haven’t crossed the line...yet.

“I—I—”

She’s stuttering and I bring my hand back, again, and realize she may not be ready for this. Maybe she’s baiting me again. Maybe she expects me to stop. I don’t want to, but she still seems unsure. Her indecisiveness is saving us from making a

mistake. Because once we overstep that invisible boundary, I know I'm going to fuck her in the near future.

I begin to back away, the naughty voice in my head screaming I'll never get this opportunity again. But I'm not even two steps backward before she grabs the collar of my shirt and forces my face to hers.

"Make me come, Theo," she demands.

My fingers are already dragging her bottoms down as she lifts her ass to assist me. They fall down her legs as my skin meets hers.

She's warm, wet, and inching closer off the countertop so she can be nearer to me.

My thumb connects to her clit again, and this time, I get to feel her arousal firsthand.

She squeaks out a moan, right in my ear, and I have no idea if I'm allowed to kiss her. That almost feels more intimate than what I'm doing between her legs, which is crazy.

The angle is indeed awkward, but I'll wear a wrist brace as a badge of honor. She's wound up tight, needing this release even more than she realizes. There's no way she's lasting five minutes.

Her legs part to make room for my large hand.

I'm savoring every moment, knowing this will be the fastest minute of my life. The way her head falls backward when I massage her just right. And how quickly she returns her face to mine when she grinds her pelvis into my fingers. I thought

wrong about eye contact. She wants to look into my eyes while I do this.

She has no qualms about making this work for her, adjusting her position to ensure my thumb is rubbing her where she needs it. She's dripping onto the counter, and I can't wait to see her reaction when I'm done with her.

Her rapid breaths and stifled moans are sending waves of heat to my dick. My free hand that is keeping me upright wants to open up my towel and stroke myself until I'm coming undone along with her.

But this is about her, not me.

Amelia is right on the edge. Her consistent breathing is now rapid and irrational, building up so tight and she's about to unravel.

I get to witness Amelia orgasm, not behind closed doors, not in my imagination, but inches away from my ear.

She lightly punches my arm while grabbing a fistful of my shirt and smothers her moans by biting down on my shoulder.

This is better than I ever imagined.

It's real, raw, and the sexiest thing I've ever heard. Her high-pitched, muffled cry combined with her convulsing lower half makes me want to laugh, because I'm fucking giddy at hearing the consequences of my actions.

She writhes against my fingers in her final moments before she realizes what happened. I'm expecting her to go off the deep end, to freak out in the most obvious way possible.

But she seems okay.

And then I taste my fingers.

“Oh my God,” she whispers, hopping off the counter and snatching her bikini bottoms off the floor. “What the fuck? What? What did we do, Theo?”

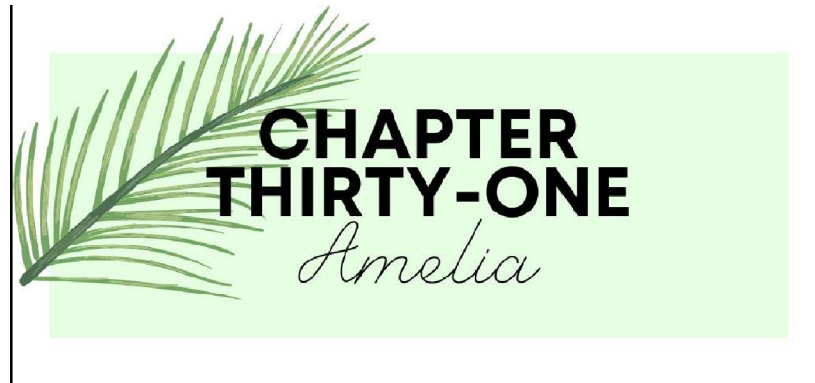
“I think I just gave you the best orgasm of your life.”

“But—but—you...your fingers...”

I figured she'd be regretting the entire thing, but somehow, she's more mortified that I know what her pussy tastes like. She's ruining the post-orgasm euphoria and thinking too much.

She tastes amazing, but I can't even tell her this because she literally runs out of the kitchen.

I'm left standing in the dark, a wicked smile forming on my face.



I have never been more grateful for having a job the next day.

The unease in the house is going to be insurmountable. Granted, I released my entire body's tension, but that's beside the point.

What the hell do I say tomorrow to the man who lives across the hallway? What if he comes to my room tonight and asks me to return the favor?

Would I? Probably... No. I mean no, I wouldn't.

Is it the attention I'm seeking? The desire I never got from Beckett? What is it that makes this so compelling?

We crossed the line. We've *been* crossing the line. But fuck me, it was so wrong yet felt so good. How is this not the right course to take? Why haven't we been doing this since day one?

Because our parents are married, that's why. Because I just got out of a relationship and can't handle a new one. Because Theo seems like the type of man who breaks hearts. But even

with what we've done so far, we could ruin an already fragile home environment.



**F**orgoing breakfast for a deep clean of the kitchen, I get dressed and sneak out the front door before anyone is awake.

The day goes by in a flash thanks to the distraction of picky customers and rushes of teenagers in their swimsuits.

When my shift is about over, I collect the tips from the jar and change out the coins for dollar bills. Despite feeling like I worked on autopilot, I made \$50. I'm grateful for the extra cash, and I approach Tawny.

"Hey, we made \$50. Sure you don't want to split it?"

"Nope, managers don't get tipped out. But wow, \$50? I've never gotten that much in a day. What are you doing, giving away free drinks?"

I've had it with the hostile behavior. She hasn't been friendly or even kind to me since day one, and I'm over it.

"Okay, what's wrong? Do you not like me? You don't even know me."

She gives me a onceover and clicks her tongue.

"I haven't decided yet."

"Are you holding it against me because my stepb—I mean, Theo—stopped texting you?"

“That’s none of your business.”

“Great, well, I’m too old for this drama, okay?”

I walk away and put the \$50 in my pocket right as Theo enters the store.

“Wonderful,” I groan under my breath.

Tawny sees him enter and practically runs to the back. Second shift can take his order; I’ve already clocked out.

Maybe he’s here to get a coffee and leave. Maybe he wants to reconcile with Tawny because he got a taste of me, literally, and decided I’m not worth it.

I’m beginning to realize my self-esteem has gone to shit thanks to Beckett. Maybe I need to stop inventing scenarios in my head and get out of here.

I take off my black apron and throw it into the bin where they get washed at the end of the night. I’ve been bringing a change of clothes with me because I’m sick of coming home smelling like dried milk and coffee.

Going to the back of the store to our private bathroom, I remove my sticky jeans and put on the one pair of shorts I’ve been wearing these sweltering days. I pull out a flowy tank top and toss my worn clothes into my oversized purse.

Before I leave the store, I grab the iced coffee I made myself for the end of my shift. I’m going to need caffeine if I plan on surviving the rest of the day.



To my surprise, Theo is on the other side of the store, watching me.

I feel his gaze travel up my bare legs. I'd adjust my shorts to ensure they're not too short, but the insecure gesture would be noticed immediately. I don't need Theo homing in on my fragile ego. I'm still trying to process what the hell happened last night.

I grab a straw and head for the door, unsure if Theo is waiting for me or wishing to drink his coffee in peace.

But right as I'm about to step through the open door and let it shut behind me, Theo runs after me. "Hey, can we talk?"

My iced coffee all but disintegrates in the heat.

"What do you want to talk about?" I ask as I put on my sunglasses. The temperature outside is vastly different from the glorious AC inside Roasted.

Theo's proximity to me is closer than I'm used to, especially in public. We keep a fair amount of distance between us on even good days, so I'm thrown off by how near his chest is to my face.

Theo has at least eight to nine inches on me. He's built solid, you can tell by the way he carries himself. I'd be violently knocked down by the rough ocean waves crashing in the distance. But Theo could shatter each cresting break with his shoulder and power through the water.

"Can we talk somewhere else?" he asks.

"Yeah, let's walk the sea wall," I suggest.

My heart is beating ferociously in my chest, and caffeine is the last thing I need at the moment, but what the hell could we talk about? Maybe he's moving out?

Theo's long legs are about to take off sprinting while my short legs and tired feet are strolling at a leisurely pace.

"I have a favor to ask you, and yes, I know it's weird."

"Okay," I drag the word out as we settle on a spot overlooking the ocean.

"I'm going to my ten-year reunion."

"I hope you have fun. But I'm still not going to mine, if that's the favor."

"No, it's not."

He takes a large sip of his coffee, and this can't be what he wanted to talk to me about.

"I was hoping you'd come with me to mine," Theo confesses quietly.

I'm stunned. "I don't even want to go to my own. Why would I go to yours?"

"Because I need you to go as my date."

"Pardon me?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I can't go back there and show up alone."

"If it's an issue of dignity, I guarantee you won't be *leaving* alone."

“Well, obviously.” His smile is playful with a hint of mischief, which helps break the tension.

I take a moment to admire the ocean and close my eyes. I don’t even know how to answer him.

“Think about it. It’s one night.”

“Won’t all your friends be there? They’ll remember me, and word will get back to our parents about what we did and they’ll have so many questions.”

“Let me handle that. I’m sure they’d understand you doing this small favor. We’d tell them we are going as friends. It’s not like anything physical would happen...”

His words are ironic and borderline arrogant. We’ve already been physical.

“It sounds like a bad idea.” I’m replying to his suggestion now and to every situation we’ve put ourselves in.

The sun is brutal, and we’re overheating by the minute. I’m about to drip sweat like the condensation on my iced coffee cup.

“Can you think about it?” Theo looks like he’s about to get on his knees and beg.

“Why is it so important you don’t go alone? And why me?”

“Why not you?”

Oof, that simple question could be picked apart and analyzed to death. And my broken heart is trying its best not to cling to that compliment to boost my dwindling pride.

“This isn’t what I expected,” I tell him. “I was anticipating something worse. Like you were moving out because of what happened last night.”

“Did something *bad* happen last night?”

His tone is caustic but truthful.

“Theo, are we ever going to talk about it? How we keep moving the goalpost?”

He leans closer. “You’re implying we are looking to score, and I think I like that,” he whispers in my ear.

His warm hand rests on the thickest part of my thigh. My skin is on fire. It’s a combination of the sun’s powerful rays, Theo’s body heat next to me, and the intense yet combustible passion remaining from last night.

“Theo,” I practically moan. “What are you—”

“Just stare out at the ocean and pretend like we’re having a conversation,” he demands, his hand inching toward my inner thigh. “I want to see how wet you are.”

My adrenaline spikes at his last sentence. What the fuck are we doing? And why am I begging for this to continue?

This is so fucking foolish, and I’m incapable of telling him to stop because *I don’t want him to*.

Theo’s palm separates my thighs an inch as he skims his way back until he hits the frayed edge of my shorts. His pinky and ring finger bend backward and creep their way inside my clothes, slowly nudging my panties aside.

It's quite obvious what Theo is about to discover. I know for a fact I'm dripping everywhere from this mind-boggling conversation that somehow turned into...this.

How is he able to have his hand between my legs yet a fist around my lungs at the same moment?

I can't breathe. My chest is heaving as he makes his move.

His two fingers are parallel with my opening, and he delicately presses against me, releasing the floodgates.

He doesn't even have a finger inside me, it's hovering at my opening with the lightest pressure.

Just as fast as it started, it ends. He removes his hand and returns it to his lap.

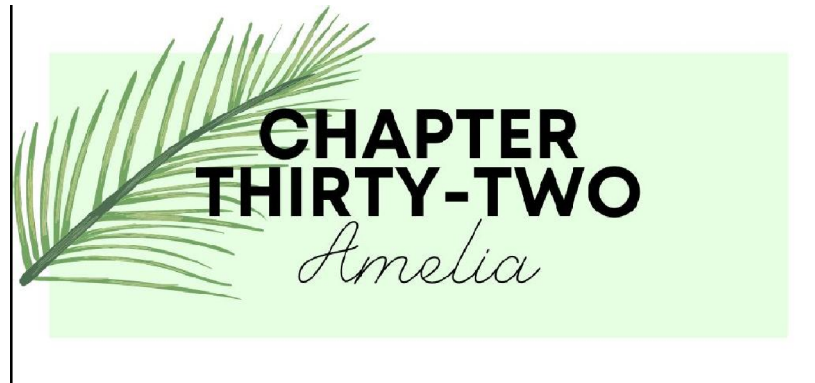
Is he going to taste me again? Here? In front of everyone who have no clue a recklessly erotic deed took place?

"I'll see you at home." He gets up from the bench and tosses his empty coffee in a nearby trash can. "Think about my favor."

When he turns to walk back, he takes his finger and swipes it across his now glistening lips, flashing a fatally devastating smile.

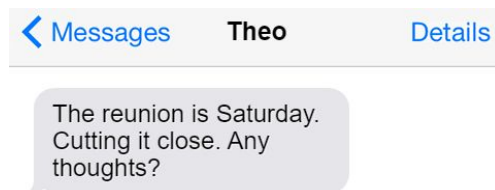
I'm stunned speechless as my chest is having a fit trying to keep up with my failing blood supply.

We've violated plenty of rules already, and yet, I want to break the biggest of all.



I picked up a double shift because a few of the new hires didn't work out, which was expected. But I got a couple more hours in, some extra tips, and I'm on my way to see Lucille for happy hour.

While I'm driving up, a text message appears on my phone.



It's Thursday, and my thoughts are no different from when he suggested this little proposal. We keep moving the line and stepping over it. At what point will it disappear completely?

What would going to the reunion do for our relationship? Would it strengthen it? Would it make it worse?

I plan to ask Lucille for her advice, because I'm unsure what the right move might be.

When I spot her at the restaurant, I'm received in the motherly hug I've missed for so long. Even if Molly could

provide that tenderness, I'm not as receptive to it. But from Lucille? I'll let her cuddle me for as long as she'd like.

“Hi, darling. Oh, I've missed you so much. I can't believe it's been a month.”

When she puts the timeframe in perspective, I realize I was supposed to be out of the house by this imaginary objective. And I'm no closer to finding a job, and Theo is already home for good.

“A lot has happened.” We sit at a table, and I'd rather talk about her. “But tell me what you've been up to.”

“Not much. My kids came out to visit, and it was so great to see my grandchildren.”

“I bet that was nice. And you're not going to return back to the workforce?”

The pipedream that's dangling in the back of my mind is the last hope I have for getting out of this mess.

“Oh no, I'm done. I should have retired a long time ago.”

And that bubble has burst. Lucille isn't going to save my ass by starting her own business and taking on Hollywood.

This isn't a fairy tale, and I can't keep hoping something will fall into my lap.

“I see you are still in one piece, living with your stepbrother. Remind me his name?”

“Theo.”

“Ah yes, Theo. How's it going?”

I wave a lackadaisical hand in the air that either reveals everything or nothing.

“Have you two...” Lucille makes a suggestive face, and I guess it was expressive enough to convey we’re getting along.

“We may have called a temporary armistice for the time being.”

“I take it you’re getting along well?”

“No,” I counter. “We’ve been petty and arguing all the time, but we’re trying to be better. Theo asked me to be his date to his high school reunion.”

“What do your parents think about all this?”

“They’d assume we’d go as friends.”

“And you two are friends?”

“Depends on the day.”

“You’d go as his date? A real date?”

“No, a fake one. He doesn’t want to show up alone because of an ego thing, I guess. I can’t figure him out. He seems to read me well, and I can hardly guess what mood he’ll be in.”

“Are you thinking about going?”

Giving her the most PG version of events, I fill her in on the abrupt mood swings we are both guilty of possessing. How one day we can get along and next it’ll be like we hit a nerve.

“His dad passed away when he was younger?” Lucille asks.



“Yeah, he died in Afghanistan when he was fifteen. My mom died a year later from cancer.”

“And they were close? Theo and his dad?”

“Yes. He was so upset when our parents began dating. I wasn’t happy either. My mom had been gone for a year and they met at a support group. Their friendship turned into something more. I don’t know where it all went wrong. Theo never gave me and my dad a chance.”

“How awful. I can’t imagine how hard it must have been losing your parents during the prime years of your adolescence.”

“I’ve made peace with my mom’s passing. I miss her all the time but now that I’m an adult, I’m glad my dad won’t be alone. But it’s not easy being in the house. Everything is different.”

“How so?”

“It’s like on those television shows. The one where someone buys the outdated house and flips it, except they decided to keep the house and continue living in it. I don’t even know where all the old photo albums are.”

“I’m so sorry. That can’t feel good, especially with everything going on.”

I’m fighting back tears. And even if Lucille would be supportive and understanding, I don’t want to cry in front of her.

I change the subject to something lighter because I can't stand when people catch up and it's a one-sided conversation.

"Do you miss working?" I ask her, knowing she's also a widow and probably rather lonely.

"I do but I don't. My time has come to hang up my hat. But I miss seeing you and the team every day."

We catch up on more company gossip, and I pull up LinkedIn to see what Mr. Robinson has been up to. Not much.

When the bill comes, Lucille grabs it before I can. "Let me get this."

"Lucille, no. No way."

"I receive social security, and I had a lot of years to save for my retirement. I'm not a poor old woman, ya know."

"I wouldn't have gotten that third drink if I knew you were paying. Gosh, thank you. I promise my treat next time."

"We'll see, but yes, let's talk soon. Let me know how the reunion goes and if you find a new job, use me as a reference."

"Of course."

We hug goodbye, and as I'm walking out of the restaurant, my wobbly legs are a great indicator I'm too buzzed to drive.

"Shit."

The restaurant is attached to a mall. Let's see if they have any nice dresses in case I feel charitable and go as Theo's date. Nothing I have back home fits me well, and I could use a new black dress in my wardrobe.

As I walk into a store, I'm met by a sales associate that sprints to my side.

"Hi, what are you shopping for?"

"I need a black dress."

She takes me in and scans my body type.

"I have the perfect dress for you. Oh my gosh, this is going to look fucking *sick*."

Laughing at her brashness, she grabs it before I have a chance to check the details. She walks me over to the dressing room and opens a curtain.

"If this is too small or too big, let me know."

She shoves me inside, and I'm sure the nice little buzz is making this experience far more enjoyable. Shopping for clothes sucks when you have no money to spend and are no longer the size six you used to be.

"What's the occasion?" she asks as she waits on the other side.

"I might be going to a high school reunion."

"You'll kill in it. Is it on yet?"

"Almost."

My phone pings, and I'm sure it's Theo asking for a final answer. But I look at the message and see it's from Dylan.

< Messages Dylan Details

I'd love to take you to dinner tomorrow night. Are you free?

“Oooh,” I say aloud.

“What? Does it not fit?”

“Oh, no. I just got asked out on a date.”

“From someone else? Get it, girl.”

This is the bossiest yet most supportive sales lady I’ve ever met.

Before I can decide if I’m ready to date, I announce, “Okay, I’ll say yes to the date.”

I’m high off this woman’s energy. A thrill of excitement runs through me as I realize Dylan thinks I’m worthy of a night out.

Stepping out of the dressing room feeling like a million dollars, I turn to look at the huge mirror with better lighting. The saleswoman takes me in and gasps. I study my reflection with squinted eyelids.

“If you don’t buy that for yourself, I will,” she says.

Wow. I look amazing.

The black dress has a square neckline that reveals the perfect amount of chest. I don’t feel like I’m spilling out for once, but it’s still tasteful and sexy. But the real stunner is the black silk tulle skirt that is just sheer enough to see the

bodysuit hidden underneath. I spin in all directions so I can take in every angle.

“Wow, this looks incredible on me. And I never say that.”

I grab a handful of the skirt and run it through my fingers. The length is perfect and hits me right at my shins. All I need is a new pair of heels.

This will exceed the expectations of the cocktail attire dress code. *If* I end up going.

“Shall I ring it up for you?” the saleswoman asks.

“Yes!”

I’m soaring as I walk out of the store in a stupefied daze. I didn’t even bat an eyelash when I whipped out my credit card. The whole interaction has me smiling from ear to ear. My alcohol buzz has worn off, but I’m high on happiness the whole drive home.

It’s once I’m parking my dad’s car that I realize what I’ve done: Dropped nearly \$500 on a dress I can’t afford and may never wear again. And I agreed to my first real date since I was dumped. And while looking through my phone to see the confirmation text I sent Dylan, I see I *also* buzz replied to Theo as well.

A simple “yes” sits in a text bubble in Theo’s thread.

Looks like I formally accepted his invitation.

Shit.



**W**hen I receive Amelia's one-word response, I'm beside myself.

Call me crazy, but I didn't think she'd take me up on this questionable proposal.

When the garage opens below me, I peek out my window and see her pulling up.

We need to discuss the details. If she works tomorrow and Saturday morning, we won't have much time to finalize the ground rules. And knowing Amelia, she will have a complicated and precise list of every possible outcome.

I have no idea where she's been all day, but I make my way downstairs and casually pretend I'm grabbing something in the garage as she enters the house.

Our bodies collide as she walks through the door right as I'm exiting it.

"What the hell?" she shrieks.

I have to grab her lower back with one hand and place the other on the wall so we don't take each other down as we

stumble around.

It's surreal being so close as we stand in this awkward embrace.

Amelia always keeps a healthy distance between us, so it's difficult to gauge my strength and size. I loom over her with my height difference and take this rare opportunity to check her out now that our bodies are lined up.

I'm imposing and powerful to her delicate and feminine stature. Fuck, if my primeval ways aren't coming out. I would protect this woman with everything I have—

“Can't you watch where you're going?” she pants, out of breath, as our bodies are flush against each other.

She brings me back to earth, and I separate from her now that we have our bearings.

“Sorry, I didn't even hear you coming in,” I lie.

She grabs onto her purse, and I see she left something in the backseat.

“I think you forgot something,” I point to the car.

“It's nothing. Can you move so I can go in?”

Leaving enough room for Amelia and her animosity to step through, I keep my arm outstretched so she knows the way.

I follow her into the kitchen and open the fridge.

The sun has already made its descent. The sky is a vibrant orange and pink, and I figure it's nice enough to swim in the pool for a second time today.

Removing my shirt, I toss it on the counter.

“What are you doing?” Amelia asks as she fills her tumbler with water.

“I’m going swimming. Care to join me?”

“I just ate.”

She’s so quick with the rejection that it’s comical.

“Pretty sure that’s an old wives’ tale.”

“Are you just saying this or do you secretly hope I might drown?”

“Nah, I’ll give you mouth-to-mouth if it comes to that.”

“Before or after I’m unconscious?”

She’s back to the snappy confrontation we know so well, and I live for this.

“You seemed rather eager and cognizant when I offered to do a lot more with only my fingers.”

“Which we will not be doing again.” She extends her pointer finger like she’s disciplining me.

I think neither of us believe that, so I respond with, “Whatever you say.”

When I cannonball into the pool, I wait for Amelia’s bedroom light to turn on. I calculate a seventy-percent chance she’ll join me in the next ten minutes.

When her room illuminates the backyard in a yellow glow, I realize she could be applying for more jobs or putting on her



bikini. I'll find out in a few minutes.

Maybe I'm not as tempting as I assumed, because she's not out here yet.

But then her bedroom light turns off. And soon after, the sliding glass door opens, and she tiptoes outside.

"I figured we better go over some parameters for the reunion, because I have a busy couple of days ahead of me."

"Whatever you say," I repeat as I did in the kitchen. "No belly flop?"

"Ha," she humors me by sticking her foot in the water to gauge the temperature.

"It's warm," I say.

"Probably because you peed."

I sweep my palm across the surface of the water and collect a nice wave that splashes onto Amelia's dry body.

She shrieks and steps back like I splattered her with acid.

"You are incapable of behaving like a grown man even for a minute, aren't you?"

"Maybe."

She shakes off the droplets and uses the stairs to acclimate to the water. We're in the shallow end but where my shoulders are below the surface, she's letting each limb adjust to the temperature.

"What do you need to know for the reunion?" I ask her.

“What happened between you and your friends, for one?”

Cursing under my breath, I admit, “It’s not good. Thinking back on it, it’s childish and stupid.”

“An emotion you’re all too familiar with, but continue.”

I pretend to splash her again, but before I do, she dips underwater and submerges herself whole. When she comes up for air, she wipes back her hair so it’s no longer in her face.

She removed her makeup upstairs and the simplicity of the sight before me makes me lose my breath. My chest throbs for the yearning to touch her. She’s effortlessly beautiful. And I can’t even tell her this because she won’t believe me. Won’t believe I’m capable of such a compliment.

“My dad and Seth’s dad were in the military together. Different branches; they never knew each other, but the familiarity was there. His dad came home and mine didn’t. It was harder and harder going to his house, knowing his dad was alive. And when I had to move into your house, I didn’t want him over.”

“Why not?”

“This isn’t my house. I’m not comfortable here.”

“But I remember Seth still came over from time to time. It’s vague, but I remember.”

“Want to know why he stopped?”

“Yes.”

“He wanted to ask you out. I told him he couldn’t.”

“Why?” she hesitates.

I exhale and notice the way Amelia is watchful of the way my chest deflates. Maybe she’s checking to make sure I’m breathing throughout all this. I’m inhaling but my lungs are struggling.

“I was resentful. I was already dealing with a lot, and the last thing I wanted was to lose a friend to you.”

She’s silent but lowers herself into the water so the surface reaches her lips.

“You lost him anyway?”

“Yes. We got into a huge fight. I said you’d reject him anyway. He said I was being a jealous asshole. Then it turned into a bigger discussion about how depressed I was and I needed help.”

“Seth said that to you?”

“Yeah, and in hindsight, he was right. I was a fucking mess. I still am.”

Those last three words were an accident. I didn’t mean to include them at the end of my sentence. But it’s out there.

How can you not assume I’m a mess with the way my life is going? I haven’t even looked for a job, I’m living each day with no plan for tomorrow. Amelia can speculate on her own that I don’t have a lot going for me. I don’t know why the motivation has siphoned out of me.

“I know I was a jerk,” I continue. “And I was jealous. You were the popular girl, and I was a pudgy loser.”

She flinches, and I didn’t mean to throw it back at her, but it’s the truth.

“Do you ever wish you could do it all over again?” she asks.

“In what way?”

“All of it? High school. Demand your dad not go on his deployment. I’d force my mom to go to the doctor sooner and maybe buy more time. Wish for a different ending?”

“All the time.”

“I’m starting to think nothing is going to work out for me.”

We’re wading in the pool right near where the shallow end drops off. She drifts to me as I deliberately wait to see how close she’ll get.

“How so?” I challenge.

“All the movies I’ve watched over the years, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Notebook*, *Pretty Woman*, they all got their happy ending. Andy escaped prison. Noah and Allie reunited. The escort married the rich guy—”

“Are you comparing your life to that of a convict and prostitute?”

“No,” she laughs and sinks under the water again. When she comes up, she’s still laughing. “I’m saying movies make it seem like it all works out in the end. What if it doesn’t?”

I’m as dumbfounded as she is and shrug my shoulders.

“You’re asking the wrong guy. I’ve never seen a light at the end of my tunnel. Feels like I’m struggling to get out of the dark but I’m constantly being pulled back, almost like I know the brightness would blind me.”

“You can go blind in the dark, too.”

“Interesting way to put it,” I say.

My lips fade into a sincere smile, one she doesn’t notice because she isn’t looking my way.

“Is *The Shawshank Redemption* your favorite movie?” I ask.

“Don’t make me choose.”

“When did your obsession begin?”

“It became my thing with my mom. Before she even got sick. There was nothing like the thrill of going to Blockbuster on a Friday or Saturday night to look at the new releases. We’d watch all the classics, too. Then when she got diagnosed, she couldn’t do much at all.”

She coughs, but it’s an obvious distraction as she musters up some courage to keep her composure.

“You can cry, it’s okay.” I sympathize with her because it’s the same bottled-up emotion I experienced in her room.

We’re both silencing our emotions because our parents are happy together, which makes it feel unfair to complain about the past.

“Did I cry the other night?” she asks.

“You did.”

“Shit. I hate when people see me cry.”

“It’s okay, it’s really not a big deal. Anything else you need to know about my high school days?”

“Any girls you want me to spill a drink on that were mean to you?”

“That spot is reserved for you.”

“Aww,” she coos, hand pressed to her heart.

“Are you working Saturday? Do you have enough time to get ready?”

“Yes, I’ll be off around noon. Plenty of time.”

“Great, maybe tomorrow night we can go over our fake history—”

“Oh, tomorrow I’m actually going on a date.”

I start laughing. “Come on, really?”

“With Dylan. He texted me and we’re getting dinner tomorrow.”

A hot rage burns inside of me. I finally get the opportunity to win her over as she pretends to be my girlfriend, yet the night before she’s going to be wined and dined by that asshole? If it goes well, she might cancel on me altogether.

“A date. Cool.”

“You’re such a wordsmith, Theo.”

“It’s getting late.”

“It’s barely 8:30 p.m.!”

“You better go to bed soon so you can get a good night’s sleep for your date tomorrow.”

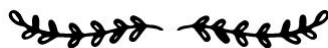


**H**is brush-off as he exits the pool gives me whiplash. What the hell? His departure is so abrupt I'm standing there for a solid minute before I can comprehend how I ended up out here alone.

The conversation was going so well. We were opening up to each other. I admitted I'm going on a date, something he suggested and was supportive of earlier this month, and now that's a hot topic for him?

I'm not stupid. I see the way we look at each other. There might be an unspoken attraction we can't deny, but we know what happened in the kitchen can't progress.

It can't.



**T**he following night, I allow myself some time to get ready for my date.

Theo's Mustang leaves a trail of gas fumes as it rambles home, powering down our street and giving everyone a head's



up he has returned. That thing is so loud it shakes the house. I have to wait to put on my mascara so I don't smear it across my eyebrows.

My car should be ready next week, and I can't wait to have dependable transportation again. I'm borrowing my dad's car for dinner tonight, and I'm glad Dylan suggested meeting at the restaurant and not picking me up at home.

I'm not ready to date, but I think this will be a nice icebreaker for me; a toe in the dating pool before I submerge there...one day.

Dylan already got a table, and he has earned a point for making a reservation on a busy Friday evening. When I spot him, I expect a flip in my stomach, maybe a dead butterfly coming back to life. Not even when he beams a perfectly white, possibly veneered smile, does my chest light up. The appeal when I was rear-ended is gone, but I'm hopeful it's just nerves.

"You look great. How are you?" He's a gentleman and gets up from his chair to give me a kiss on my cheek. He even pulls out my chair and assists me as I sit down.

"Oh, thank you. I'm doing well, how are you?" I ask.

"Great, I'm so glad you had time for me."

"How's your brother? I hope he's not still upset about the accident."

"He's fine. Our parents only grounded him for a few weeks."

“Ha!” His joke sticks, but then there’s a brief awkward silence.

I don’t have the energy for this. To make small talk, to pretend I’m ready to move on when I’m not. It’s been a month and I’m subjecting myself to this for the sake of getting over Theo.

Wow, I mean Beckett. Getting over Beckett. My ex, not my stepbrother.

Dylan is in the middle of a story, and I realize I spaced out for most of it.

“What do you do for work?” he asks.

“I’m between jobs at the moment.”

I don’t have the energy to explain my part-time job or my living arrangements. To be honest, I don’t feel like getting personal with him at all.

In spite of his good looks, I feel nothing. All that energy and excitement are gone now that I’m sitting in front of him.

“Order whatever you want. I’m buying,” he informs me.

“Oh, wow thank you.”

Dylan orders the most expensive steak they have on the menu, and I settle for a chicken dish that is nowhere near that price range. I’m not about to take advantage of this and act like I’m on death row and this is my final meal.

Apparently all we needed was some time to warm up because when our meals arrive, I’m feeling better about all

this. Sure, that spark is fighting to keep aflame, but Dylan is rather charming.

Maybe, just maybe, I'll see him again.

When we leave the restaurant, he walks me to my car.

The weather is perfect this time of night. The sun has set but the temperature is impeccable. No cold breeze and no sweltering heat.

"Thank you so much for dinner, I had a great time," I embellish.

"The pleasure is all mine." Dylan's body approaches mine, and I assume he's going for another polite kiss on the cheek. But when his mouth opens and his tongue darts toward my lips, I dodge his face.

"Oh, sorry I thought you were going for my cheek again." I'm sly in the way I move my body away from his, but he doesn't seem to take the hint.

"Come here," he requests while grabbing onto my lower back.

I'm fidgeting in his grasp because I *do not* want to kiss him.

"You like playing hard to get, don't you?" he whispers.

"No, I'm not playing. I don't want to kiss you."

"Wait, really?"

"Yes."

"I bought you dinner. An expensive dinner."

“That means I automatically have to let you put your tongue in my mouth?”

“I was expecting a little more than just *tongue*.”

“Are you serious?” I shriek as I open my car door. His body language isn’t aggressive, but I would like to remove myself from this situation immediately.

“Why are you acting like this?” he asks.

“You’re gaslighting me now?”

“Are you so new to the game that you didn’t know people fuck on their first date?”

“I’m sure it happens. But it’s not happening with me.”

“Fucking tease.”

I gasp as though my lungs collapsed, like this is the first time a man has said those words to me. Theo said it first, but that felt more accurate during the compromising position we put ourselves in as opposed to now.

Getting into my dad’s car with a loud huff, I wish I’d taken Theo’s car instead so I could blow a bunch of exhaust fumes into his face.

Right as I’m about to peel out of the parking lot, I lower my window and yell, “You can’t even use your and you’re correctly!”

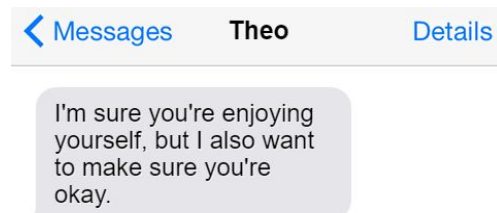


nstead of going straight home, I drive along the coast north from Del Mar up to Carlsbad. The ocean is so calming at night, yet the waves still crash as violently as they do during the day. A dark void that hides the aggression better.

It's late, and my dad assumes I'm getting drinks with friends. I didn't want him to worry I was on a date with a stranger. Only Theo knows that detail. But who cares now? Dylan is a jerk, and he is a perfect example of why I'm not going on another date anytime soon.

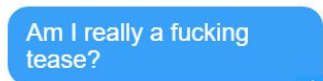
I'm parked along the shoreline with the sunroof open.

It's almost 10:00 p.m., so when a text comes through, I hope it's not Dylan requesting my Venmo name so I can pay him back for the dinner.



And my emotional, overstimulated self bursts into tears.

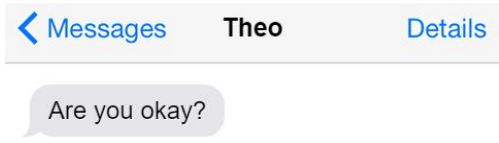
His kindness is rare yet so appreciated.



I wipe my eyes as Theo types out a response.



I'm laughing and crying at the same time, unable to control which one is engulfing the other.



My tears have subsided, and I shake my head to rid myself of all the crippling doubts plaguing my inner thoughts.





**E**ven though she told me not to wait up, I stay awake until the garage opens and closes. I wouldn't have been able to sleep knowing she was out crying and driving in the middle of the night.

Men are assholes, and I hate that I've lumped myself in that category when I said the same words to her.

I'm not like Dylan.

I'm not like Beckett.

Yet both those men got the chance I never will—a *real* chance.

The following day is my reunion, and I wait by my phone, fearful Amelia will say she changed her mind, that being my fake girlfriend is going to be too difficult after Dylan showed her how horrible men can be. But she doesn't.

When she comes home from her shift at Roasted, she tells me she's taking a power nap and will get ready when it gets closer to leave.

My reunion is being held at a fancy hotel right near the water.

I went to the more prestigious school, and of course the Associated Student Body got together to have it at one of the classiest places in Del Mar, L'Auberge, making the entry fee \$150 each. That includes two drinks and appetizers served throughout the night. Not even a full meal.

Not only will I have a smoking hot date on my arm, but I finally get to see all the assholes who bullied me when I was a senior.

The dress code fell somewhere between business casual and cocktail attire. I have no idea what Amelia will wear, but I'm sure she will be stunning. I'm wearing a pair of black pants and matching suit jacket with a crisp white shirt.

I knock on Amelia's door and she yells from inside her room, "Gimme a minute!"

"Fine, I'll be downstairs."

I run a hand through my perfectly styled hair and hop down the steps with a tiny quiver in my fingers. This evening feels more momentous in my head than it will be in person.

Grabbing the Mustang's car key, I palm it in my hand and toss it in the air a few times. It's running like it's brand new, and I gave it a wash and wax while Amelia was at work.

I try not to look at my watch every five seconds, so I pull up my text thread with Amelia from last night.



Her disastrous date hasn't been brought up since. She has no idea I was seconds away from finding where that asshole lived and kicking his ass. All she needed to do was say the word and I was ready to end him. I can't think about it again or I'll amp myself up, and I need to be smooth and subtle tonight.

*Shit, I forgot cologne.* I run back upstairs to the bathroom.

I'm sure Amelia was hoping for a grand entrance down the staircase. However, I ruin it when I bump into her leaving the bathroom right as I'm entering.

Holy shit.

She's in a Gothic style black dress that is revealing yet tasteful. The fabric hugs her upper body so well and fans out near her hips. Her voluptuous chest makes my mouth go dry. How is that amount of cleavage fair for a woman who looks like her? It should be illegal.

"Wow." It's all I can say, like a love-struck teenage boy seeing the girl of his dreams.

"Your first look wasn't supposed to be right after I peed, but thank you. I take it you like this dress?"

She does a slow twirl, and when our eyes disconnect, I shake loose the greedy thoughts running rampant in my brain.

"You're going to put all the women to shame."

"Please, no one is going to be looking at me." She fixes her lipstick in the mirror and turns so she can get a good look at my attire. "You look like a young James Bond. That suit fits you well. Looks tight in the crotch, though."

“Thanks for noticing. Didn’t realize you look at my dick as often as you do.”

“It’s kinda hard when...”

“Oh my goodness, Amelia.” My mom invites herself into the bathroom and looks her up and down. I’m glad she doesn’t do the same to me because she’d notice a bulge in my pants.

“Look at you two, wow.” Bruce joins us, and boy does it feel awkward in this small space.

This isn’t prom.

“You’re so sweet to be going with Theo,” my mom adds.

If she knew under what capacity, would she still be so gracious?

“We better get going,” I tell everyone.

“Will you guys be out late?” Bruce asks.

“Not sure, but we’ll be good. Don’t worry about us,” Amelia assures him.

“I won’t even drink that much since I’ll be driving the Mustang,” I say to Amelia and avoid Bruce’s question.

“Okay, have fun you two.” My mom waves us goodbye.

When we’re both in the car, and the doors slam shut, Amelia says, “We never discussed the physical stuff.”

“Physical stuff?”

“Yeah, hand-holding is an obvious yes. Hugging, yes. I doubt we’ll have to kiss. It’s not like your friends are still

immature fuckwads and demand we prove our relationship to them.”

“I don’t know, they might not believe it. We better put on a good show.”

“I’m not kissing you,” she insists, but with a hint of hypocrisy. I’ve tasted her pussy twice now and even though she’s yet to see what my cock feels like, we’re definitely past pleasantries.

“I’m not expecting you to kiss me. But I’m hoping you can pretend to like being around me for one night.”

Even though we’ve already crossed so many lines, surely we can drop our swords and get along. We’ve been doing well these past couple of days.

When I start the Mustang, she jumps.

The way her chest heaves from the excitement makes me want to skip the reunion altogether and take her on a proper date.

“Going to back out?” she asks.

“No, are you?”

“I mean out of the garage. We’re just sitting here. Does the engine need to warm up or something?”

“Oh, no. We’re good.”

I exit the garage and the aroma of old car fumes lingers in the air even though our windows are up. It’s the characteristic

smell of gasoline and cracked leather that makes this car so unique.

When we're nearing the freeway on-ramp, I look over to Amelia. "You okay?"

"Was this dress a mistake? I bought it during a buzzed trip to the mall and maybe it's too much?"

"You look great. Honestly. I'm not just saying that. You look hot, in fact."

"Really?" She has doubt in her voice, and I wish I could tell her that her insecurities are for nothing. She's beautiful, resourceful, creative, and sexy. But we don't talk like that, and I can't share that with her now.

"Trust me."

I punch the gas getting onto the freeway, and suddenly, we're going 85mph and Amelia is squealing at the lightning fast acceleration.

The engine is deafening, as loud as a freight train. It's powerful, exhilarating, and a little dangerous.

I weave around slower vehicles, feeling reckless. Old cars don't have power steering, so it takes more strength and muscle to turn the wheel. I feel my body tense at the thrill.

Looks like we won't be as late as I thought.



**D**espite the hotel offering a valet service, I don't trust them with the keys to something so valuable to me. I back into a spot in the corner of the dark parking lot and let out a sigh of unease.

Am I going to regret this? Who gives a shit what my peers of ten years ago think of me? *I do, apparently.*

"You ready?" Amelia asks.

"Ready as I can be. Anything else we need to go over?"

"Nope. We've been dating a couple of months," she begins, recounting the story we concocted in the last five minutes. "Except we'll leave out the fact we each moved back home with our parents. If anyone asks about jobs, you recently returned from volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, which is easy to remember since it's the truth."

"And what do we say if people find it creepy we are dating?"

"We barely knew each other as teenagers, which isn't a lie either. We corresponded through emails while you volunteered, and somewhere along the way, our friendship turned into more. When you came home, we basically fell in love, blah, blah, blah. Do you think people will care?"

"My old friends might. They'll wonder how I went from hating you to dating you in ten years."

"Ten years is a long time," Amelia points out.

"Well, they knew I hated your guts."

“Can you pretend you don’t for the next two hours?”

“Yes. Let me get your door.”

Running to her side of the car, I open the heavy door and offer a hand.

“Thank you.”

I assist her out of the car, and once our bodies are beside each other in the parking lot, I wish she was on her back in the backseat. Fuck, it’s going to be so easy pretending with her, faking feelings that are in the background of my mind anyway. This might even be fun. But at the end of the day, I have to remind myself it’s not real. It can’t be real.

When we approach the hotel’s entrance, with its dramatic upside-down-V roofing, I gently put her hand in mine. I can see people mingling above us, and suddenly, I’m nervous.

“This okay?” I whisper.

“You don’t need to ask permission. You’ve put your hands in way more compromising places. You’re fine.”

We both release a loud breath and smile at each other.

“All right, let’s go in.”

The hotel is right near the water, and despite the sky already turning colors from all shades of orange and blue, the ocean is the focal point. It’s hovering on the horizon like it’s within reach.

We approach a table that has the designated person welcoming each guest as they arrive. “Hi there. Name please,

so I can confirm payment and give you your nametag and class list.”

“Theo Bilson,” I say to the woman who has a name tag displaying “Kendra.”

“Th–Th–Theo? Bilson?” she confirms.

“Bilson with a B, yep,” Amelia interrupts, almost territorial.

“Wow, you look amazing,” Kendra tells me.

“Thanks.” I’m not trying to be a douchebag, but I guarantee I’m going to be hearing that a lot tonight.

“Here’s your nametag.” She hands it over, and I see my name typed on a white sticker label. “I’ll handwrite one for your date. This way you can differentiate who is from our graduating class and who is a guest. Name please?”

“Amelia. A-M-E-L-I-A,” she tells Kendra.

“Thank you. Here are two drink tickets each and a handout in case you want to reconnect with anyone. It has their email or phone number, whichever they offered. Also includes some history of what our class has been up to since. You didn’t share anything on the Facebook page.”

“I like to remain a mystery.”

“Ooooooh!” Kendra’s giggle reminds me of her nerdy days, a fellow loner. “Have fun!”

“She’s staring at your ass,” Amelia mumbles into my ear, looking behind us as we walk in. “She’s not even being subtle about it.”

“Don’t be jealous, there’s plenty there for everyone.”

“Shut up.”





**T**here are dozens of tables atop the expansive roof, but no assigned seating. High top tables are also scattered throughout the event so you're not obligated to sit down with potential strangers you don't even remember graduating with.

I don't know a single soul here, but I know how to mingle and do small talk. I'm the queen of small talk. But I have a feeling no one will be interested in a word I say. They'll be hanging on every vowel Theo cares to share with them.

I'm not as nervous as I expected. My arm is linked with Theo's, and it feels natural. Despite his bulky, muscular build, he's comfortable, warm, and has a sense of familiarity.

"Okay, where do we go first?" I ask him.

"The bar. Let's get a drink."

We hand over two of our four drink tickets. If we want to purchase our own after we've maxed out, we're welcome to do so. And I can guarantee I will be doing so.

If I have to pretend to be Theo's girlfriend, I'm going to need some liquid courage to get through this night. My

catastrophic date last night has me on edge.

I can already see the vultures circling, nosiness taking over as they try to solve the mystery of who they graduated with, me or Theo.

We settle on champagne, and he clinks his glass with mine.

“To love,” Theo says with a leer.

“Stop it.” I nearly snort at his humor but clink it anyway.

We take a long sip, and before the bubbles have even cleared in my throat, a man approaches us.

He looks at Theo’s nametag and says, “Theo? Holy shit, man, it’s so good to see you.”

This burly, bearded frat boy even opens Theo’s jacket and peers inside like he’s looking for something.

“Where is the rest of you? Duuuuude!”

His name tag reads Jeff. He looks like he never stopped partying.

“Hey, Jeff. How have you been?” Theo asks.

I feel weird standing in this awkward reunion triangle. I give them their moment to catch up as I catch up with my drink.

“Living the dream, my man!” Jeff shouts without giving any specifics.

I’m guessing living the dream means he’s between jobs and had to move back home with mommy and daddy, like us.

“Who is this vixen?” Jeff looks at me.

“This is my date—err, I mean girlfriend, Amelia.”

He shakes my hand. “Nice to meet you. Did you know your boyfriend was an oinker back in the day?”

Instead of ganging up on poor little Theo like I’m familiar with, I play it safe and sweet.

“You’d never know it now,” I compliment, giving him a tiny rub on his back.

“Dude, all the guys are coming tonight. Seth, Greg, even Devon.”

Seth. Oh no. This was expected, but hearing the name of Theo’s ex-best friend and my allegedly former crush causes the champagne sitting in my empty stomach to swirl about.

What the hell are we trying to get away with here? This is careless. If my dad finds out we went as dates, he will stroke out.

“From what I’ve gathered,” Jeff begins, “Trey is already divorced, and Danny and Cat are still together.” He looks at me and adds, “High school sweethearts.”

Jeff leans closer and this is clearly prime info time. “Prissy Priscilla works for the FBI, and Matt is lowkey trying to sell drugs here tonight. Don’t let him near Priscilla.”

This is the gossip I want to hear, yet Theo says, “Awesome, can’t wait to see everyone. We’ll catch up later, cool?”

“For sure. Let’s do shots before the end of the night.”

Jeff leaves and I turn to Theo. “Dammit! That’s the good stuff. I want to know more.”

“You don’t even know these people.”

“So what? That drama is exactly why people go to reunions. Who has a criminal record, who had an affair with one of the teachers, whose parents were a part of the college admissions bribery scandal?”

“You’re odd, you know that?”

“Please, you’re curious, too.”

A breeze blows against my skin, and I rub my arms.

“Are you cold? Do you want my jacket?” he offers.

“No, I’m good.”

“You okay?”

“What if we get caught, Theo?”

“It’s not illegal to date your stepsister. Especially when we didn’t even grow up together.”

I don’t know if Theo is trying to convince himself of this or if he’s trying to calm my nerves. We finish the rest of our champagne, and Theo is a gentleman and retrieves our last complimentary beverage.

When he returns, I grab the flute and glance past his right shoulder. What I see almost makes me drop my glass. “Oh my God.”

“What is it?”

“The man that walked in now,” I begin, forcing Theo to switch positions with me. “The one with red hair. Do you know him?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think I know the woman on his arm. Sandra? Sarah? No... Scarlet!”

My bones disintegrate. Thanos snapped his fingers, and I evaporate in a puff of dust. What alternate universe are we in right now?

“That’s *Beckett!* And his... fiancée,” I yelp.

“No. How? That’s him?”

“He was going to tell me why he was in town but I blocked him. Now I realize it’s because she went to your freaking high school.”

“I thought she lived in another state.”

“I don’t know the details. Oh sweet heavens, this cannot be happening.”

I grab his arm and pull him into a dark corner, away from the crowd. I instinctively force him closer to my body so we’re out of sight. My chest is heaving from breathing so hard, I feel like my boobs are smashing into Theo and giving the wrong impression.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to kiss me,” he whispers suggestively into my ear.

“I’m not! Will you stop talking for one second? I’m trying to think.”

Theo keeps his body pressed to mine so we aren't seen in the shadows.

“Do you want to leave?” he offers.

I don't even respond. I don't even breathe.

“We can't avoid him all night. When he sees us, there's no way he'll believe it's real. But he also might avoid *me* because he's scared I'll tell Scarlet everything.”

“He might believe it. He got engaged after your breakup, why is it so impossible you could find a boyfriend?”

“Okay, yes...this could work.”

“Or we can leave?”

“Okay, yes, that could work, too.”

“So, let's leave.”

He grabs my hand and leads me out of the dark corner and to the exit.

I'm keeping my head down in case—

“Amelia?”

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

Theo looks stunned, as if Beckett came out of nowhere.

“What are you doing here?” Beckett asks as he stands in the crowd alone.

“Beckett?” I practically put my entire upper body inside Theo's suit jacket as I hold onto him like we are joined at the chest.

Theo responds well and puts his arm around me, and once again, this feels natural.

“Me? What are you—”

“Hi, I’m Theo. Her boyfriend.”

”*Theo?* Your step—”

“I’m back.” Scarlet announces as she takes a quick glance at my boyfriend for the night. “Theo, wow, look at you. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. We were chatting with your fiancé. Congratulations.”

Beckett has to know I told Theo all about their nuptials because our conversation was nowhere near that topic. In hindsight, we weren’t having a conversation period.

“He proposed like a week ago. It was such a surprise. But yes, this is my fiancé, Beckett.”

“Nice to meet you.” Theo extends his hand, and Beckett nervously reciprocates the shake. I see him wince as Theo crushes his fingers.

“You look so familiar,” Scarlet says to me.

“I didn’t go to your high school,” I assure her, anxious to change the subject.

“No, I didn’t think so. Maybe—oh, Roasted! Don’t you work there?”

What the hell, does she have a photographic memory?

“I do, part-time,” I admit through clenched teeth.

“Are you still living here?” Theo asks Scarlet.

“No, I moved to Arizona. Beckett and I met at a conference and have been together almost a year.”

“Wow, engaged before a year. You must have known she was the one, huh?” I turn to Beckett.

His stare says so much: I’m sorry. Forgive me. Please don’t do this.

“When you know, you know,” Beckett says with a tight smile.

“Let’s see that ring,” Theo asks.

The fake dating must have given Theo telepathic capabilities because I’ve been dying to get a closer look.

She presents her left hand and Theo and I examine it.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell her truthfully.

“How long have you been together?” Scarlet asks us.

“A couple of weeks.” Theo offers this tidbit, despite the fact we said we’d embellish the timeline. “Just like Bennett said, when you know, you know.”

“Beckett,” he corrects, his mouth a horizontal line of annoyance. I’m secretly delighted with Theo’s performance and make a note to suggest that he consider acting.

“I made my move the second she was single,” Theo tells us. “Bided my time for this rare beauty to be on the market again. And finally, like it was fate, it happened. Hard to believe



someone would throw away such a treasure. Certainly deserves an ass beating, am I right?”

I’m the only one who laughs as I snuggle into his arms.

“When is the wedding?” Theo is asking all the right questions, and maybe I *will* kiss him tonight. I might even allow tongue on our first date.

“We haven’t figured that out yet,” Scarlet admits.

“Well, it was nice to meet you both. I think we have some catching up to do with some folks, but maybe we’ll see you later.” Beckett ushers Scarlet away before she can even offer a goodbye.

Theo and I stand in shock.

“What...the...hell...” I say.

“Why is she even marrying that dumbass?”

“I have no clue. What was she like in high school?”

“A track and field star. Super smart. Got a perfect score on her SATs.”

“How the hell do you remember all this?”

“She was one of the nice ones. Smart mathematician, too.”

“Great, so she’s Albert Einstein’s daughter. She should be smarter than this.”

“Why don’t you tell her?”

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to process this.”

“Wouldn’t you want to know?”

“Of course I would!” I nearly shout.

He murmurs a low, “Shhhh. People are staring. I don’t want to fight with my girlfriend tonight.”

“Come hug me or something.”

Theo plucks an untamed piece of hair away from my face and brushes it back along with the rest of my curls. He even has the gall to tuck it behind my ear and let his finger lazily graze my jawline. I can feel a trail of heat along my face even after his touch has disappeared.

His face is inches from mine, and his voice low and deep. “Does it look like we are fighting now?”

“No,” I breathe, his closeness making my heart beat outside my chest.

“Do you want to leave?”

“No.”

“Am I making you uncomfortable being this close to your face?”

“No.”

“Want me to go find Jeff and see what gossip he has for us?”

My laugh helps break the sexual tension.

I’ve yet to taste his lips, and I can’t help but fantasize how they’ll feel against mine.

“That was funny, calling him Bennett,” I muse. “Classic.”

“I wanted to piss him off.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s still working.”

We look across the room and see Beckett shooting imaginary laser beams from his eyes in our direction.

“Come on, let’s go get some food.”



**W**e’ve done pretty well avoiding Beckett and Scarlet. Ugh, even their names go well together; it makes me sick.

Theo has received many compliments on his appearance, and I’m sitting back listening to him tell the same story over and over. No one suspects a thing or asks me who I am and how we met. They don’t care. They’re waiting for their turn to brag about how amazing their life is.

The crowd is smaller than I expected. Times must be tough—and the expensive ticket wouldn’t help that. Who even *wants* to go to their ten-year reunion *and* pay to get in? I’d rather get a pap smear.

Yet here I am, with Theo, pretending to be his girlfriend.

He does try to include me in the conversations he’s having, which I appreciate. But again, no one cares about me. They want to know everything, from Theo’s workout routine to his skincare regimen.

If I have to hear him say, “A great SPF and a hat worked well for me in South America,” one more time, I’m going to

scream. He has to be incorporating *something* else because he doesn't even have crow's feet near his eyes. Maybe because he never smiles... That must be the trick! SPF and refusing to laugh will prevent wrinkles and those lines near your mouth. It's not fair how good he looks compared to everyone else here.

I leave Theo to catch up with his old classmates so I can get another drink at the bar. Beckett approaches me to my left like he's been waiting for this opportunity to get me alone.

"I can't believe you're here...with *him*," he says with an edge.

"I can't believe you're here with *her*. You know all it takes is one sentence to ruin your life, right?"

"Don't do this. Don't be mean."

"Mean? This is *nice*, Beckett. I can be mean if you want... Tell your fiancée you were dating her while living with me. How could you do this to her?"

"Me? You're dating your stepbrother? That's disgusting. If it's even true."

"Oh please, you know I barely knew Theo. We didn't grow up together."

"My point. You told me you hated him. What the hell changed? A rebound?"

"Well, Beckett, that is none of your business anymore."

I grab my drink and begin to walk in the opposite direction.

Beckett grabs me by the arm and prevents me from leaving. It's not exactly aggressive, but I can feel the agitation in his grip as I'm yanked backward a step, expensive alcohol sloshing out of my cup.

Theo eyes us from across the room and is by my side in a matter of moments, leaving his conversation mid-sentence. His buddies are staring.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd take your fucking hands off my girlfriend." The razor sharp edge of his voice is unfamiliar and extremely alpha. The possessiveness, even if fake, makes my legs go weak.

"I'm—I'm sorry..." Beckett puts his hands up in defense. "It's just, this is unexpected, and I don't know what the hell is going on here."

"Looks pretty clear to me." Theo glances at me to confirm I'm okay.

Theo's stance is overprotective, like he's a bodyguard protecting a movie star. Why is this turning me on?

"Scarlet can see us, you idiot, and I don't want to deal with your lies. Leave us alone," I hiss.

We turn to walk away right as Seth startles us by grabbing Theo around the waist and launching him in the air.

"Theo! My God, it is you."

Their embrace is one I might have had with my best friend in second grade, being reunited after a long summer apart. It's

endearing seeing an old acquaintance of Theo's show him such affection even with a rocky past.

Now that our Beckett drama is over, I have to readjust to this one.

"You look incredible," Seth repeats. "How have you been? Are you here with anyone?"

Seth's face changes shape once it dawns on him who I am.

"Amelia?"



**CHAPTER  
THIRTY-SEVEN**  
*Theo*

**S**eth is surprised to see Amelia here, and I don't blame him. For months before our parents got married, I complained about my soon-to-be stepsister. I vented to him, enraged about my situation, and here I am "dating" her. And what a hypocrite I was, because I didn't want him asking her out.

"You look great, too," he tells her respectfully. "I—I'm speechless. Is this for real?"

"It's still new," I tell him, hopeful his mom and my mom don't communicate like they used to.

"Wow." Seth nods his head like he's trying to make sense of it.

"What have you been up to?" I ask him.

"I'm married now. My wife is home with the baby. She's eight months old."

"Baby? Wow, congratulations! Are you still in Del Mar?" I ask.

“No, we’re in Ladera Ranch, an hour north of here.” Seth pauses for a moment. “Are you two...living together?”

Amelia gulps beside me, and I take it this is my question to answer.

“It’s kind of a long story,” I confess. “A lot has happened since we last spoke.”

“Why don’t I give you two some time to catch up?” Amelia offers, clearly dying to remove herself from this conversation.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Seth begins. “Theo and I need to make up for lost time. Do you still have the same number?”

“No, I had to get a new one when I left the country.”

My statement about leaving the country doesn’t spark any curiosity in him. He doesn’t ask what that means or what I was doing. Yet we exchange information, and I assume I can tell him all about it at another time.

“We’ll catch up over drinks,” Seth suggests.

“That’d be awesome.”

Amelia waves an innocent hand goodbye as he leaves to talk to other classmates.

“That wasn’t so bad,” she murmurs.

Before we can figure out our next move, a leggy blonde-haired woman struts up to me and puts her arms around my neck. “Holy shit!”

I’m unsure where to put my hands, so I keep them at my side until she lets go of me. We’re being hammered one by one



as new classmates surround us.

“Theo-fucking-Bilson,” she swoons.

Hannah. Prom queen, head cheerleader, stereotypical popular girl.

“Wow, look at you. I had to run to the yearbook to confirm the ugly duckling turned into this.”

“I can’t tell if you’re insulting me or complimenting me.” I’m truly puzzled.

“It’s a compliment, trust me.”

“Hi, I’m Amelia, the ugly duckling’s girlfriend.”

“Wow, you two are hot together,” Hannah says with a giggle, eyeing both of us like she’s interested in a threesome. “Good for you, girl.”

She gives Amelia a high-five.

I’m feeling possessive, so I grab Amelia’s wrist and pull her closer. Amelia stumbles into me as she wasn’t expecting me to lay claim over her so fiercely. It’s the Jacuzzi night all over again, except this time, I feel both of her tits when I catch her by the underarms.

She starts blushing instead of pushing me away because such an act isn’t foreign for a boyfriend and girlfriend, something we are pretending to be.

“Theo, save that for later tonight,” Amelia coos.

Amelia must see Hannah as competition and turns up the chemistry. She grabs my hand and puts it around her lower

back and places it on her opposite hip. Just to push her buttons, I move my palm further onto her backside, closer to her ass than I've ever been. It's taking all my willpower not to grab a handful.

"My girl is clumsy, aren't you?" I give Amelia a light slap on her ass, which causes her to yelp in surprise.

It's playful, a bit inappropriate, but I don't care seeing as I'll never be around these people again.

"How have you been these last ten years?" I ask the go-to question to break the ice.

"I'm selling real estate up in Hollywood, and I'm doing well. It took all ten years to get here, but I'm trying to get on that reality show. Wouldn't I be perfect for it?"

"I don't know, I haven't watched TV in years."

"What have you been up to?"

"I volunteered for Habitat for Humanity and built homes for families."

"Wow, how selfless."

"But when I got back, Amelia and I reconnected, and it's been quite the adventure with this woman."

"Will you go back and volunteer?" Hannah asks.

"I haven't decided yet."

"Well, building homes, selling homes, if you ever need a foot in the door, call me."

Hannah hands me her business card. “Gosh, I’m so mad we vetoed the voting for our reunion. You’d win it all. Best looking, most changed...everything.”

She looks me over up and down and realizes something after checking her watch. “Oh shoot, I do have to announce the winner of the raffle, though. I’ll catch up with you later?”

“If we’re still here, sure.”

She winks at Amelia and turns to leave.

As soon as she’s gone, Amelia mumbles, “You...spanked...me?”

“I’m pretty sure you liked it. Or can you handle it harder?”

“No one is around, you don’t have to keep pretending.”

“I’m not pretending. I bet you like it rough. Tell me I’m wrong.”

I am, without a doubt, crossing into uncharted waters.

Sure, I’ve given Amelia an orgasm and felt her up a few times, but I’m insinuating I want to fuck her. And right now, I’d give anything to make that happen.

“Theo...”

“Yes, Amelia?”

I’m unable to hear her response because Hannah and Jeff appear on stage and begin speaking into the microphone the band was using.

“Hey everyone! Thanks again for coming tonight,” Hannah begins. “It’s been so fun catching up. If you haven’t been able

to find someone, check the handout you got at the entrance. It has most of the contact info for everyone who came tonight and those that weren't able to attend. Thanks to the band that provided us with music all night! And thank you to L'Auberge for hosting this reunion."

Everyone claps, and Amelia checks her phone for the time, probably hoping we can leave soon.

"In fact, they were so generous that they offered us a two-night stay here as a raffle prize. I have a bowl with all our names in it, so let's pick a winner!" Jeff swirls his hand inside to jumble up the names.

"This feels like *The Hunger Games*," Amelia whispers in my ear.

I have no idea what she's talking about, but the crowd waits in silence, hoping for their name to be called.

"And the winner is Theo Bilson," Hannah cheers.

Everyone claps and looks in our direction.

Jeff is clapping with all his strength and ushers me up on stage. "Come up here, man."

I force Amelia to come to the stage but she stands off to the side as I collect the envelope from Jeff.

"Doesn't he look great, everyone?" Hannah says into the microphone.

This is the recognition I wanted, but it feels wrong now that I'm receiving it. So what if I grew up and lost some weight?

Apparently the lesson I needed to learn tonight was I don't give a shit what people think about me anymore.

"Theo won a two-night stay here, complete with a spa and dining credit. Thank you, L'Auberge, for hosting our reunion. Anything you'd like to say, Theo?" Hannah asks.

I'm caught by surprise, and the one thing that comes to mind is, "Thanks, this is an awesome gift. Might need a room tonight, if you know what I mean."

"Do not disturb! Yeah baby!" Jeff shouts, like he's Austin Powers.

Everyone erupts into laughter.

"Speaking of, get that girlfriend of yours over here for a photo," Hannah suggests.

Amelia looks as though we hired her to do a strip show for the graduating class. She waves her hands and shakes her head but Jeff gently shoves her forward.

"Smile," Jeff demands.

I wrap my arm around her waist and she does the same. We smile together as I hold up the envelope.

"Kiss her!" someone yells from the crowd, and I know right away it was Seth.

"Mother...fucker..." Amelia grits through her fake smile.

"Kiss her, man," Jeff urges.

This exact moment was what Amelia was afraid of. That my stupid friends would still be as immature as they were when

we were teenagers. Without giving it a second thought, I dip her low and leave a fleeting kiss on her lips. The gesture itself was more passionate than the kiss.

The crowd applauds and cheers, and our kiss is over as quickly as it started.

Amelia looks shell-shocked as we escape off the stage.

I walk past Beckett, and his eyes follow my movement. My eyebrows dance up and down as I smile at him. He looks like he wants to throw a punch.

When I reach Amelia, she says, “Okay, while this was fun and all, can we get going?”

“Yeah, whenever you want.”

Why isn’t she berating me for breaking the kissing rule?

“I need to collect myself and use the restroom. Meet me at the bar in five?”

“Sure.” I put the envelope in my pocket and take a seat on one of the empty barstools.

Before my ass even hits the chair, Beckett approaches me with a furious scowl on his pink face.

“You’re not taking Amelia into one of these hotel rooms.”

“Where’s your mistress?” I ask. “I’m sorry, I mean girlfriend?”

“Fiancée,” Beckett snaps.

“That’s right, fiancée. It’d be a shame if she found out what kind of person you really are.”

“Scarlet wouldn’t believe you. Just like I don’t believe you and Amelia are romantically involved.”

“Beckett, I don’t give a shit what you believe.”

Technically, Beckett has a height advantage on me since I’m sitting down. But I correct that when I get up from the chair. I have three to four inches now that we are parallel and loom over him like a threat.

“Amelia would never be with a guy like you,” Beckett informs me.

“Well, I guess her tastes have changed. Amelia likes being with a faithful man she doesn’t have to fake orgasms with.”

The hit blows through him like a bullet straight into his lungs. He actually stops breathing.

“You’re fucking lying,” Beckett seethes.

And this is where I should have walked away, but I don’t. I hate that he’s still dictating what she should and shouldn’t be doing. He had his chance and he blew it.

“I know you’re unfamiliar with the sounds she makes when she climaxes, but I’ll tell you this: It’s addicting. I don’t know what I love more, how Amelia tastes or the way she begs me to—”

Beckett’s fist soars through the air but manages to miss me completely as I step back. He has to readjust his stance, no doubt waiting for my retaliation.

Everyone around us is watching. Instead of forming a circle around the controversy like in high school, they get their phones ready in case this turns violent so we can go viral.

“Don’t make me re-break your nose,” I threaten him quietly. “Go find Scarlet and have her take you home.”

“You’re a piece of shit!”

“And you’re a fucking idiot! You had the best woman any man could have asked for. Beautiful, witty—a smart-ass at times—but loyal and kind. You let her go. So let...her...go.”

I walk away, not the least bit worried he may charge me from behind. He’s the kind of pussy who wouldn’t have the guts even with the element of surprise.





**CHAPTER  
THIRTY-EIGHT**  
*Amelia*

If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I would assume my ears were betraying me.

Theo called me loyal, kind, and beautiful. All words I've never heard from his mouth.

I was still processing our kiss in the bathroom, but this? I'll even accept the smart-ass comment. Wow. He doesn't know I heard him, so when we walk to the car, I'm floating in a haze.

Sure, Theo complimented my outfit choice for the night. Said I looked "hot," but what he told Beckett was more than just an observation of my appearance. It's as if he peered inside me and realized I'm more than a pretty face. He's confirmed all the doubts I had in my head that maybe I wasn't good enough for Beckett. He made it sound like I'm too good for *any* man.

When we get to the Mustang, Theo doesn't suspect a thing. And why would he? He has no clue I overheard him. Has no clue I'm flooded with arousal after hearing him defend me.

That wasn't included in our fake script. That was genuine. And I can't help but feel heat traveling through every vein in my body.

When Theo shuts his door and is settled in the driver's seat, *obviously* I pounce on him.

His gorgeous face is between my hands, and I'm kissing his lips with such savagery I startle him. He doesn't reciprocate, instead placing his hands over mine.

“Amelia?”

“I'm sorry, I know we said no kissing—”

“Ah, fuck it.”

He grabs a fistful of my hair and brings my face back to his. This time, he matches my desire; might even exceed it. He's felt and tasted plenty of me, and despite overstepping appropriate boundaries, it's my turn.

I want to savor him. I want to feel his lips on mine for as long as I can stand it, because I don't think we'll be doing this again. It's going to complicate things. But this lapse in judgment is all I crave.

The way he's kissing me implies so much more. He wants to taste me, breathe me in, devour me.

I've been wanting this more than I realized.

His tongue swirls against mine, and I've never witnessed such passion before. This is the type of kiss people talk about, when your entire body feels it, that urgent, possessive,

powerful awareness. Maybe it's our hate that's fueling this flame, but it's burning deep within me, and I sense he's experiencing the same heat.

My hand cups the front of his pants, an impressive bulge surprising me. I'm sure my boldness is a shock for him, too.

"Didn't know kissing was such a turn-on for you," I whimper between breaths, unable to let my joke go unsaid.

"I've been wanting to do this for far too long," he admits, soon returning his mouth to mine. "Just looking at you makes me hard. I can't stop thinking about you."

If he fucks how he kisses, I'm going to be in love by the end of the night. The intensity in his mouth, his hands in my hair and running down my back—it's consuming me.

Theo's focus is now on freeing one of my breasts from my dress. He's cupping me in his large hand, squeezing and massaging, adding to the pleasure building up inside me.

I need more from him.

"Theo," I begin, trying to get a word in, but he won't stop kissing me. "Theo..."

"What?" he growls, still groping and peppering kisses on my chest.

"Fuck me in the backseat," I demand.

He finally stops kissing me. He looks into my eyes, and I am overwhelmed with a sense of drowning again. He's going to ruin me, and I'd happily accept my fate.

We're both silent, and maybe he thinks I'm bluffing again. To prove my point, I readjust my breasts back into my dress and squeeze myself between the seats and into the back. It's cramped, but I'm sure we could make it work.

Theo's lips barely part, his breathing ragged and unsteady. His lungs are working overtime, causing his chest to visibly rise and fall.

"Amelia... when I fuck you, it's not going to be in this cramped backseat. And it's not going to be in a public place where you'll no doubt be moaning at the top of your lungs and getting us caught."

My heart skips a beat. The heat between my thighs is almost unbearable.

"Don't leave me alone back here," I beg. My heart is hammering against my ribcage, and I have an aching appetite that needs to be filled.

Theo moves the passenger seat forward with such fury, soon beside me in this modest backseat.

We begin kissing again, this time with no gear shift between us. I moan into his mouth as each kiss becomes greater than the last.

How is that possible? How can two people be so compatible with kissing? It's like we know exactly what we want without having to say it.

Theo's hand finds my inner thigh, and I nearly catch fire. I'm warm, wet, and yearning to be touched in places he's

already explored. But this was supposed to be my turn to please Theo.

But holy fuck, I can't tell him to stop.

Each time his finger slides over my clit, I want to jump on his lap and prove him wrong. Yes, we can fuck in this backseat, and yes, I can make him come, too. And yes, I can do my best to be quiet.

“I know you want my cock, but I'm not giving it to you tonight.”

I want any part of Theo I can get, so I succumb to his touch until I realize I'm being greedy.

“Theo... Wait, stop...” I moan, my selfish ways making me see straight. It's his turn.

“You want me to stop?” His voice melts my insides as he continues touching me, my body grinding into his hand despite what I said. He knows I don't want him to stop. He reads my body language and sees my lower half thrusting against his fingers, not wanting to break the connection that's making my head buzz.

“Yes...stop... It's my turn to...”

I'm so fucking close, and he doesn't stop, and my body needs this more than I need to breathe.

I can't talk, can't think. I close my eyes and let the pleasure build until I reach my peak.

“Tell me, again, that you want me to stop,” he demands.

“I don’t want you to stop.” I must say it ten times in a frenzied breath, my mind spinning out of control as I teeter on the edge.

“You’re going to come for me now. You need to be quiet.”

“I can’t—”

“Yes, you can.”

I moan loudly, on the verge of completely losing all willpower and self-control as my body is hit with adrenaline.

Theo cups his other hand over my mouth as I disobey him by screaming out his name.

It’s the best orgasm of my life. More amazing than the first, which I thought was impossible.

I’m not in the backseat of his Mustang. I’m in another dimension, hovering outside my body as I’m revived by his touch.

Once the feeling washes over me, I’m ravenous.

Theo’s belt buckle is already in my hand and I’m opening his pants like I deserve this gift.

“What are you doing?” he questions, but I hear the hope in his voice.

He’s solid even through his clothes. His pants are tight as they try to conceal an impressive erection I soon get to taste.

“Amelia... Are you sure—”

My fingers wrap around his impressive length as I get an eyeful.

This is better than Christmas morning.



**P**re-cum is already on the tip, and Amelia glides her tongue over it and tastes me.

I shudder involuntarily as I witness the hottest thing I've seen in my lifetime. Amelia is bent down over my lap, ready to swallow me in that sexy mouth of hers.

"It's been a while since I've done this," she admits. "You'll need to tell me what you like."

"You don't have to," I remind her, despite wanting this more than anything.

My dick twitches at the thought of not accepting this rare moment of pleasure from the woman I want it from most.

And instead of replying with she "wants to," or "needs to," she covers me whole and nearly chokes.

It's a dream I replayed in my teenage years. A recurring fantasy that would plague me for hours upon waking up. Her mouth over me, enjoying it, begging to swallow my load.

And here she is now, not a dream, not an illusion, wrapping her lips around me as she welcomes me with an open mouth.



Some classmates walk past the car, but I can't talk. No one notices the classic car backed into its parking spot, let alone the man in the backseat having all his fantasies come true.

I've wanted Amelia to lust after me my whole life, and here she is, savoring and sucking me up. My tip hits the walls of her throat, and my head dips backward as her lips reach the base of my lap.

I always assumed she was a prude when it came to oral sex. But here she is, deep-throating me and keeping up with my forceful rhythm like she'd gladly give up breathing for this.

She stops abruptly, looking up at me with glistening eyes.

"Are you sure you don't want to fuck me right now?" she pleads.

"Oh fuck, of course I do."

Her lips are beginning to swell as she gives me a wicked smile.

"What's stopping you?" she asks, stroking me while looking me in the eyes.

Her thumb plays with my tip as I suppress a powerful moan.

"Amelia... if you don't put your mouth back on me, I'm going to fuck you raw. You can't handle that tonight."

In reality, fucking her without a condom will guarantee I last three seconds, and I don't want her to experience that as our first time. I want to do everything with her, but I don't want it to be in the backseat of my car. I want to take my time

with her. Tease her. Drive her wild with desire until she gives her whole self over to me.

It won't be tonight.

But it will *be*.

My heart is beating furiously as I place my hand over hers so she can stroke me tighter and with more speed.

We're both out of breath, our kissing wild and erratic. We breathe as one, practically move as one.

She pumps her hand and I'm gasping for air, hit with a force that causes me to inhale sharply.

Just as I'm about to come all over her fist, she places her mouth over me. I nearly lose consciousness as she accepts all that I give her. And I give her *a lot*. She swallows everything as I spatter down her throat.

I'm shaking, overstimulated in the best way.

Holy fucking hell...that was unreal. She lingers, ensuring she leaves nothing behind.

Amelia slumps back beside me, her head resting on my shoulder.

"I'm going to fucking destroy you," I warn her.

"When?"


"Soon enough."

As I catch my breath, the possession is circling my insides. I'm already addicted. My obsession with everything Amelia

has instantly created a compulsion that will need satisfying more than she can handle. I will never get enough of her.

If this is any indication of how it'll be when we fuck, I'm a goner.

We are going to ruin each other.

A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a light green rectangular background. On the left side, there is a green pine branch with several needles. Overlaid on the right side of the green background is the text "CHAPTER FORTY" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below this, the name "Amelia" is written in a black, cursive script font.

## CHAPTER FORTY

*Amelia*

The car ride home is silent. I take that back. The car is deafening. The roar of the Mustang is preventing me from talking about the elephant in the room, also known as the oral sex that happened in the backseat.

How are two people, who are hell-bent on wrecking the other's well-being, able to have such intense sexual chemistry?

At some point, Theo unbuttoned the third button on his dress shirt, and I can't help but stare at the passive, laid-back body language he exudes.

His wrist is resting on the steering wheel, completely at ease.

I'm glad one of us is presenting a calm front and not letting the inevitable carelessness of our decisions cause a manic episode.

If this was the movie *Inside Out*, Fear would be waving his arms around my emotional platform, screaming about what transpired. Despite the entire night becoming a core memory that I'll never, ever forget, I can't ignore the anxiety building

within me. It feels like chaos inside my head with Fear taking control of the console and allowing the panic to manifest into more.

What the hell do we do now?

He said he was going to “destroy me,” which implies we will be doing this again. I *want* to do this again. I want to do everything with him.

We’re approaching the house, and before he turns on my street—our street—he pulls along the sidewalk.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asks me while maintaining eye contact.

“I’m still processing what happened. I’m speechless.”

“In a good way, right?”

This is the first time I’ve seen him display any waver of insecurity. It’s kind of cute to see him so vulnerable.

“The best way,” I admit. “I’ve never had an experience like that.”

“Obviously. I mean, let’s be real. I saw your ex tonight. He didn’t look capable of pleasing any woman.”

Theo is unaware I heard all the kind things he said about me to Beckett, and I decide to keep that to myself for now. That might open a door I don’t think we are ready to step through yet.

“It might be a good idea to lay low,” he begins. “Maybe keep our distance for a few days.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t want our parents suspecting anything. If we’re suddenly getting along, it’ll be harder to hide how badly I want to sneak into your room at night and fuck you till morning.”

A ripple of heat furrows into my lower body. He’s being so honest, and I find it difficult to reciprocate. I don’t think I want him to know I feel the same way.

“So criticism is fair game again?” I confirm.

“Just don’t hit below the belt. I’m going to need that area free of any blows.”

“Are you sure about that?”

The accidental innuendo is the perfect closer as Theo steers the car back onto the road, both of us smiling like a couple of freaks who willingly stepped into a room on fire.



**E**ven though the urge to finish what we started in the backseat blasts through me the moment I put my car in park, I have to keep my composure.

I will not give off the impression I'm unable to control my impulses. Because when it happens, it won't be lovemaking. It will be covetous, possessive, and undoubtedly a craving we'll never be able to satiate.

This won't just be a fantasy fulfilled. It will be fate, as it was planned to be.

But fuck, I don't want the fuse to fizzle out. I'm worried if we lose momentum, Amelia will realize how out of bounds we were and regret everything.

She fingers her heel straps as we ascend the stairs to our private floor. She's ahead of me, and I watch each step we take, curious if she's hiding any unease from me.

When we reach the landing, we stand at a crossroads, as we both know we must sleep in our separate rooms.

An unspoken acceptance passes through us, both realizing when we wake up tomorrow, nothing will be the same.



The seven hours I was in bed, I tossed and turned. Very little dreaming happened for me, only replaying the night's events over and over in my head.

When I get out of bed, the heat is already making itself known. You can tell the temperature is going to rise as the day continues.

I recall what I said to Amelia last night. In order to keep up the illusion we are squabbling stepsiblings, I might have to rattle her cage a bit.

Wasn't I shirtless when we were reunited? Let's recreate that moment, shall we?

When I enter the kitchen area, I see my mom sitting on the couch drinking her coffee.

"Morning."

"Hey, Mom."

"Shouldn't you be wearing a shirt? I don't want you to..."

She makes suggestive gestures with her eyes and waves her hands over her chest. We'd be terrible at charades together.

"I don't want you to," she repeats but in a whisper. "Rile up Amelia."

"What?" I burst into a fit of laughter. "Seriously, Mom?"



“You can’t walk around like that. It’s not appropriate.”

“I’m going swimming soon.” And I am. I will continue with my day as soon as I confirm my target is awake and in relatively normal spirits.

“How would you like it if she walked around in a bikini?”

Amelia would never do that because she can barely manage the few seconds she’s exposed getting into the Jacuzzi. I can tell her confidence has diminished. Yet I bite my tongue, because we agreed to be frenemies at the moment.

“Tell me about the reunion. Was it fun?”

“I won’t be going to any more in the future, if that says enough.”

“Did you have a good time? Did Amelia?”

I remember our game plan and respond with accuracy.

“She seemed bored. I feel bad I even asked her to go with me. We didn’t stay long.”

“I see. I thought I heard you two come home late?”

Fuck, I need to think of something.

“We were only out late because Theo abandoned me in the middle of the night. I couldn’t find him,” Amelia jabs as she enters the room, guns blazing.

“Theo, you left Amelia? She doesn’t even know anyone there. I hope you talked to some nice single gentlemen, at least.”

“Not really, but Theo got a business card from a woman.”

“A woman? Who?”

“Some popular girl who now does real estate,” I say.

“She wouldn’t leave Theo alone. Maybe that’s where you were off hiding...”

“You left Amelia to hook up with a girl?” my mom accuses.

I glare at Amelia, and when my mom isn’t looking her way, she laughs and mouths, “Too much?”

“Did you see Seth?”

“I did. We didn’t talk much. We may get lunch soon and catch up.”

“Good, Seth was a sweet boy. I wonder if his mom is still around...”

“She’s not,” Amelia and I respond in unison.

Glaring at Amelia again because why don’t we admit something ambiguous is happening between us, she mouths, “Sorry.”

Amelia grabs the leftover iced coffee she kept in the fridge and takes a sip. “Ugh, this is gross. I may go get some from Roasted. Molly, can I get you anything?”

“I’m okay, I like my good old-fashioned coffee pot.” She shows us her steaming mug.

“Theo, can I bring you back an extra-large coffee shake drowning in fudge sauce?”

“Wow, your treat? That’s so nice of you.”

“No, I’ll take cash. What do you want?”

“Theo, why don’t you go with her? She still doesn’t have her car back. When will you pick it up?”

“Tomorrow,” she says.

“Fine.” I grab my car keys and add, “But you’re paying.”

“Don’t forget a shirt,” my mom calls after me.

When we reconvene at my car in beachy attire, I assume once the doors shut, Amelia will be a floundering mess.

So imagine the shock when she pulls the same move last night, grabbing my unsuspecting face into hers for an eager kiss.

We’re making out in my car as it sits idle in the garage, a decision so goddamn stupid I can hardly believe we’re both in agreement. All we need is for my mom or her dad to walk out and catch us.

“Whatever you gave me to swallow last night,” she mumbles between kisses, “It must have been drugs. It was drugs. I’m addicted.”

My bleeding heart covets statements like that. “Amelia, you sound like a woman obsessed.”

“You make me want to do things I’ve never done to any guy before.”

Our lips join back in another frenzied, hurried kiss. She unzips my shorts with intention. Fuck, it feels so good, her soft

palm against my hardening arousal. The pressure, the tightness in her grip, the way I'm gasping for air with each stroke...

But then I remember where we are.

"Wait, wait. You can't do that here. I want you to, but our parents—"

"No, you're right. I'm being stupid." Amelia's shoulders sag as she wipes away a few pieces of hair from her face.

We come to our senses and disappear down the street.

Amelia suggests taking the scenic way to Roasted. I turn onto Highway 101, not all the way soft because Amelia's sexual alchemy is humming inside the car.

It's a cloudless day with miles of blue all around us. Various shades of coastal gradients and pockets of heat drift through the open windows.

When I'm stopped at a red light, Amelia reaches over and unzips me.

"Umm, what are you doing?" I ask, even though it's obvious.

"Can you shut up and let me finish what I started?"

Except she ups the ante by pulling me out of the opening of my shorts and closing her mouth over me.

"Oh my God." My left elbow is perched on the windowsill while I bring a fist to my eyes.

The light is taking forever, but Amelia is taking her time. I savor each swipe of her tongue and pucker of her lips. A car

pulls up beside me but my game face is undecieving as I stare forward. My other hand rests gently on her hair, guiding her at the perfect speed.

“The light is green,” I inform her, curious to see if she’ll stop.

She doesn’t. I’m driving below the speed limit, and I’m grateful there are no other cars approaching behind me.

“Amelia,” I choke out, because I’ve never experienced something so primal. “Your fuc—your fucking lips...”

This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me, and I can check off road head on my imaginary bucket list.

The approaching light turns yellow, and I could have blasted through it and made it in time, but I’m about to blast into Amelia’s mouth, and I can’t be in control of a car when this happens.

Slowing to a stop, I give her fair warning. “I’m about to come, okay?”

She doesn’t nod or mumble an acceptance, just keeps going until I erupt.

A car honks behind me as the light turns green, yet I’m on autopilot. My lungs are battered and shredded to pieces as each inhale isn’t enough to sustain me.

“What the fuck...” I’m breathless. “No one...has ever done...that...to me.”

*Do I* have some sort of magical fluids inside me? It's a fucking awakening for her. She's acting as though she was a virgin prior to me getting my hands on her, and now she can't control herself.

Parking out front, I ask, "Do you want to go in alone?"

"Why? Does it look suspicious if you come with me?"

"Would it?"

"No, it's fine," she says with a confidence I've never seen in her before.

Locking the car, I follow behind her and spot Tawny immediately.

"Are you working today?" Tawny asks Amelia, while also pretending I do not exist.

"No, I needed coffee. An extra, *extra* large one."

Benny comes out from the back and gives her a wave but gives me a double take.

I'm invisible to Tawny, yet Benny reacts as though an imaginary spotlight is projected on me.

"Have we met?" Benny asks as he offers a hand. "You look so familiar."

"I used to come a lot when Amelia worked here in high school. I'm her stepbrother, Theo."

My confession makes us both shudder.

"That's right. Wow, you grew up...in a good way." Benny says with a smile.

“Thanks.”

“Amelia, you never texted me back about getting dinner.”

“Ah, I’m so sorry.”

“Mind if I steal her real quick to look at the schedule? We won’t be gone longer than a minute,” Benny asks, while also not waiting for my response and dragging her back anyway.

Not only will she be spilling all the gossip to him back there, but I’m left alone with Tawny and some other barista who won’t stop looking at me.

“How have you been?” I ask Tawny.

“Good, and you?”

“Great.”

“Ya know, if you weren’t interested in me, the least you could have done was tell me and not string me along like you did.”

“Wait, how did I string you along?”

The other coworker is multitasking well, making our drinks and eavesdropping like a professional spy.

“You said you were interested in me—”

I never did.

“And you invited me back to your place and we did stuff. You even asked me to sleepover.”

I never did.

“And you ghosted me.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I never said I was looking for a relationship. You can’t base all this on one night we shared together, that’s not fair.”

“Well, I thought you were better than that. You’re kind of a jerk.”

She leaves the counter and heads toward the back of the store to...smoke a cigarette? Poke a few needles into the Theo voodoo doll?

Amelia returns and we grab our complimentary drinks.

“You okay?” she asks as we walk back to my car.

“Yeah, it’s just sad when a woman hates your guts for no reason.”

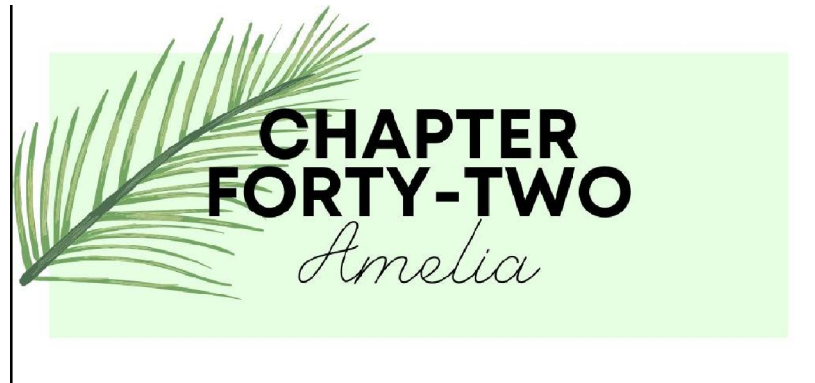
“I don’t hate your guts.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, I mean why would you bring that up if you weren’t talking about me?”

“I was actually talking about Tawny, but wow. What an epiphany.”





**D**amn it. He wasn't supposed to know that. Great, now Theo knows I don't mind being around him.

Last night was kind of...fun. It was nice pretending to get along and being friendly with one another. And seeing him interact with other people like he's not a robot programmed to solely annoy me was a bonus. Plus I can't get over the adjectives he used when he and Beckett were going at it.

*Beautiful, witty, a smart-ass.*

"What?" Theo looks at me like I revealed a huge secret, which I did.

"Nothing, you weren't supposed to know that."

"That you actually *like* my guts? Who's the serial killer now?"

Does he memorize our past conversations? How does he even remember I said that to him in our first week home?

"Are you okay about everything?" he asks.

I appreciate his transparency, because communication issues are where things can get messy fast.

“I never imagined I’d be hooking up with someone so soon after Beckett.”

“Please don’t say his name anymore.” Theo grips the steering wheel and a few veins in his neck are more prominent than usual.

“Did he try to fight you last night? By the time I came back, a huge crowd was breaking up.”

“He tried. He’s too slow. Did you know he has horrible form?”

“No, I’ve never seen him throw a punch before.”

“A successful one, I have no doubt. He missed me by a mile.”

We’re almost home and before we head inside, I ask, “So, we keep this up? Acting as though I—”

“Didn’t ingest more drugs?”

My cheeks blossom into pink blotches. “I think I got you out of my system.”

I didn’t intend to have such a hammering delivery with my statement, but regardless of this lawless behavior we’re exhibiting, Theo has to know it’s all for fun, right?

He’s the one who brought it up in the first place, on our first night home. I needed a rebound, a random guy to help get me over my ex. He’s that guy, and that’s all he’ll ever be.

If my dad knew Theo and I have been intimate in any way whatsoever, he'd flip out. I told him he could trust me, but we didn't establish what he needed to trust me with.

Not hooking up with Theo?

Not making poor decisions?

Not breaking my own heart again?

I think one out of three is fair. I do not plan on falling for Theo, that much is certain.



Later that evening, I look over my calendar and see I have the next few days off.

Benny and I will connect soon to discuss the events he wants to throw at Roasted. While this seems like an exciting new adventure, I'm not about to turn this into a career. If it brings in extra money for Roasted, I'll be thrilled. But my plan does not involve living down here for good.

All the careers in my industry are in LA. It's where I belong, even if my job search is on pause. I look around from time to time to ensure I don't miss any rare posting, but I haven't applied in a while. The whole process is exhausting. Researching the company, tailoring my cover letter to meet their needs, applying for the job, and plugging in all the info on my resume in their required fields. I need a break.

So instead of shopping for a job, I'm shopping for clothes I can't afford.

I'm on my laptop adding yet another expensive item of clothing to my cart when a knock echoes in my room.

"Come in." I review the items in my cart but refuse to press the order button.

Theo pokes just his head in and startles me. "Jesus, you're like Jack Torrance in *The Shining*."

"Are you in the middle of something?" he asks.

I close my laptop and give him my full attention. "No, what's up?"

"Am I ever going to find out what happens to Ned Stark?"

"*Game of Thrones!*" I fling back my duvet to escape the claustrophobic bedding with such force I don't even see my vibrator sailing through the air until it's too late.

Theo dives to catch the pink gadget right as I lunge out of bed. I'm a linebacker when I execute a perfect tackle, forcing us both to the floor. We land in a clumsy pile, my face hitting his chest as Theo absorbs most of the impact. My body is flush against his on the carpet, and I wish I fell into a black hole instead.

Inside his left hand sits the little tool that got me through some tough days.

"Give it!" I demand, trying to break his fingers apart so it's back in my possession.

Wow, he's strong. Even with my two hands working to open his clenched fist, he's still overpowering me with his grip

strength.

“Theo, give it back!” I straddle him as mortification wafts off my skin like an odor.

He’s enjoying this far too much as he puts his free, empty hand behind his head to relax.

I’m unsuccessful with my attempts, and somewhere amid the chaos, my vibrator turns on and starts buzzing.

I’m frozen in horror as we look at his pulsing hand. Theo releases the loudest, hottest laugh I’ve ever heard in my life, but it’s not enough to relieve me of my embarrassment.

Scrambling off his lap, I cover my face with my hands and sit on the edge of my bed.

“This is humiliating,” I whine.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Theo sits beside me and puts his arm around my shoulder.

Except the vibrator is still in his hand, *and* still on, so it whirs against my skin. Theo bursts out laughing again, yet every inch of me cringes and withers up like a dying plant.

“Oh my God.” I throw myself backward onto my duvet and suffocate myself with a pillow.

“Hey, relax.” He removes the pillow and meets me at eye level. “Why use this when I’m across the hall?”

My distress melts away and is replaced with curiosity.

“Or was that a one-time—sorry, two-time—thing that won’t be happening again?”

His deep voice could broadcast sporting events, narrate documentaries—hell, he could tell me there’s a clean-up on aisle three via an intercom at the grocery store. I could listen to him speak all day.

”*Was* it a one-time thing?” Theo interprets my silence as acceptance, so I correct his assumptions.

“I don’t know what this is.”

Before we can say another word, Molly interrupts us in the doorway.

“Oh, I was wondering what was going on up here.” She peeks her head in, but in a much less threatening way than her son.

I put myself in her shoes for the brief moment time slows to a crawl. What scenario is she seeing at this very second?

Theo is lying on his stepsister’s bed. They’re not touching, but they’re discussing something rather important. Their eye contact is broken by the unsuspecting visitor. Even if it appears innocent, they look caught. Guilty.

If I was Molly, my hackles would be raised.

“Oh hey, Mom.”

“I heard laughing and a loud thud. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, Amelia was telling me all about a competitor coffee shop called Better Buzz.”

Theo is quick on his feet, and his insinuation does not go over my head. However, it has zero relevance to what his mom

asked, so I take the opportunity to steer it back to her question.

“Yes, before we were talking about our coffee competitor, Theo was spying on me like old times and tripped inside when I opened up my door.”

Molly gives that all too familiar look like she’s disappointed, and I remember the days when my own mom gave me that same face of discouragement.

“He’s not bothering you, is he?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Theo, give Amelia her space.”

Molly is the kind of stepmom who always seems to be on my side regardless of what Theo did or didn’t do. It’s entertaining to see her think I can do no wrong.

“Glad you’re fine up here.” She turns to leave. “I can’t wait for the Fourth of July party, can you?”

“Heh?” Theo questions.

Has it really been five weeks? My original goal was to be out of the house by the end of June. But we’ve surpassed it, and this party will be here in two days.

“It’s the annual barbeque with the neighbors,” Molly continues. “We’ll have so much food, plenty to drink. We even got more fireworks to shoot off. Everyone loves coming here for the backyard, you know.”

Why yes, I do know, because I’ve lived in this house longer than she has. When my dad got the pool installed, I instantly

became friends with all the cool girls on my block. My parents started the tradition of a massive July 4th pool party at our house. We'd celebrate with an assortment of barbecued food, shave ice, beers for the adults, and an illegal assortment of fireworks to shoot into the sky.

We'd start the day barefoot and end the evening with either dirty or pruney feet, depending on if you were dancing in the streets with sparklers or swimming until the late hours of the night.

For the first six years, I was reluctant to make the two-hour drive down for multiple reasons. One, Theo might be there and I didn't want to see him. And two, I was scared seeing my dad celebrate this old tradition with his new wife would spark a feeling of resentment in me. I didn't want to hate my dad and Molly, but I knew it would be triggering to see him entertain the same guests my mom knew and loved when she lived here first.

Even though I had an open invitation every year, the only time I came down was when Beckett forced us. He wanted to meet my dad and see where I grew up. I never went back after that.

Now I don't have a choice, since this party will be happening right below my bedroom window.

"Want me to supply some complimentary coffee?" I offer.

"We're going to Costco tomorrow to grab everything, but thank you for asking. Theo, Amelia wants to be left alone. Right, hun?"



I get to publicly dismiss him in front of his mom? This is too good.

“Yeah, do you mind? You need to work on invading people’s privacy a little better.”

“You’re such a buzzkill.” Theo waggles his brows at my flushed cheeks as he follows his mom out the door and closes it shut.



Leaving Amelia's room to return to my own, my mom stops me in the hallway.

"You and Amelia are getting along okay?"

"Enough. Why do you ask?"

"Bruce wanted to make sure you two didn't leave on worse terms than ten years ago."

"Is Amelia leaving soon?" I suppress my unease.

"I imagine yes. She doesn't want to be here forever. I'm sure you don't either. Have you thought about what you want to do?"

I'd prefer not to have this discussion right outside Amelia's door on a Sunday evening, let alone in hushed tones. "Can we talk about this another night? I'm going back to my room."

"Sure. You'll be here Tuesday for the party?" she asks as she advances down the stairs.

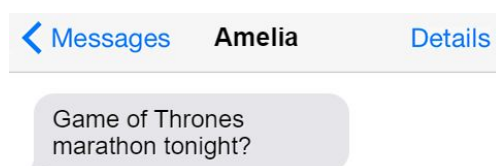
"I don't have anywhere else to go."

A true statement if I ever heard one, with multiple connotations.

“Okay. Goodnight.”

When I return to my room and shut the door, my phone is lit up on my nightstand.

Amelia has texted me.



Is this her idea of Netflix and chill? Even though I’m behind on a lot of American idioms, I am familiar with this one, and it sounds like an invitation into her panties.

I’m cocksure she won’t say no to me when the day comes, but when? I’m not fucking her tonight, on the living room couch, with our parents down the hall.

I respond with a simple, “yes” and change out of my shirt and into—

“What the shit?” I exclaim as Amelia barges into my room. “Did you even knock?”

“No.”

She’s seen me shirtless a handful of times but her eyes trace over the lines on my stomach.

“Can we try this again?” I demand.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I always knock on your door. I’d appreciate the same courtesy.”

She rolls her eyes and remains at the entrance.

“Are your eyeballs okay? They might have fallen into the back of your skull,” I tease.

Amelia scoffs and closes my door when I refuse to say another word.

A moment later, a soft knock resounds on the opposite side.

“Who is it?” I ask like an asshole.

“Theo, shut up and say come in.”

“Mellie, that is not getting you into my room.”

She waits and huffs, “It’s Amelia. May I come in?”

“Yes.”

This time around, the door opens with less purpose and in an even slower fashion.

“Hi, Amelia. What can I help you with?”

“Cut the shit. Let’s go watch *Game of Thrones*.”

Opening my dresser drawer, I pull out a shirt and slip it on over my head. “Fine, let’s go.”

I let her lead the way downstairs and follow behind.

Amelia queues up the television while I make myself comfortable on the couch.

“Where did we leave off?” I ask.

“Tyrion won his trial by combat. Daenerys’s brother got his golden crown.”

“Ah yes, how could I forget that?”

The theme song plays on high volume and Amelia scrambles to turn it down.

“Shit, I don’t want my dad to hear and come out and join us.”

Her shoulder is touching mine, and you couldn’t slide a ruler between our bodies, which is not quite abiding by the stepsibling rule of a mandatory three feet apart.

“If they do come out here, you might want to scoot over,” I suggest.

“You’re right, sorry.” She leaves a couch cushions space worth of distance, and now I feel like a fool for pointing it out in the first place.

Episode eight is done, and I could binge the complete series by that pesky Fourth of July party.

Between the credits and the beginning of the next episode, I turn to Amelia. “Why is Independence Day such a big deal?”

“It is but it isn’t. My dad loves tradition. Each year it surpasses the last party in terms of size and celebration. Neighbors would drive to Arizona or Nevada and bring back illegal fireworks...”

“You hooligans.”

“A house almost caught on fire one year because someone got some faulty roman candles. When my mom died, my dad was too upset to continue it. I guess all he needed was a new wife by his side to get it back up.”

“I’m sorry, you make it sound like it’s not even fun for you.”

“I only came down once and it was a mistake.”

“Why?”

“Honestly? It felt like your mom replaced my mom, like she stepped into her role. It was difficult being around them.”

“Sounds like it won’t be that fun this year?”

“Might be easier since you’re here.”

“Excuse me? What was that?” I scoot closer to her to confirm I heard her correctly. “Do I possess the magical fluids of influence, and things are looking better for us?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You still drive me crazy.”

I know this isn’t a confession of love, but it feels like a milestone I will gladly accept. Perhaps we’re on our way to a proper friendship.

“Since we’re talking honestly,” she begins. “What made *you* come home for good?”

“The short story is I was running out of money. Habitat moved on to a new location, and I decided I wasn’t going to follow them. I backpacked around and learned about new cultures, trading odd jobs for places to stay. My mom refused

to wire me more money, so I knew my time was coming to an end. She did it in the past to get me to come home.”

“Sounds fair. She missed her baby.”

“How come you never came down when I was in town? LA isn’t a far drive at all.”

“Are we doing this now? Asking the hard questions about our past?” Her words are weighted with so much baggage from the last ten years.

“If you’d like. We’ve done more disgraceful things with our mouths than talk about the past.”

Her cheeks blush a crimson color when she confesses, “This could get emotional. For either of us.”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“No, maybe it’s time. This needs to happen.”

“What do you want to discuss first?”

Her voice is hushed when she asks, “Why did you try to kiss me before I left for college?”

My insides cave inward. Amelia came out swinging.

“Fuck,” I huff and take a moment to start over.

My hope for that moment to have been lost to time has been crushed as I accept Amelia’s memory is as sharp as mine. When I tried to kiss her, I misread our situation.

Amelia’s first college semester was approaching, so she began packing early, anxious to get the hell out of there. In her final week at home, she asked for my help with the heavy

boxes. I obliged because I knew our time was coming to an end, and I wanted to be around her as much as I could. Things were always heated between us, but I couldn't deny I was attracted to her from the day we first met. We were at her trunk, trying to make all her belongings fit like Tetris. She made a comment about how it was possible we'd never see each other again.

Perhaps it was wishful thinking, my brain telling me what it wanted to hear, but I thought that was my chance to kiss her goodbye. She recoiled as I made my move. It was a foolish and naive thing to do.

Who did something like that? Assumed his first kiss could be with someone who never liked him in the first place. And with someone as amazing as *her*. I felt like I didn't even know myself. My insecurities and failures as your typical eighteen-year-old kid were about to boil over. The rejection was a deluge of humiliation.

But how do I tell her that without disclosing every other part?

I put it as simply as possible. "I liked you."

It was a secret that wasn't quite a mystery to anyone, the one-sided attraction I felt for her. But now it's out there to pick apart.

"I misread the moment," I admit to myself and to her. "No, that's not entirely true. I was hoping for something between us when I knew nothing was there. I'm sorry. I feel horrible about



it now, putting you in that situation when you clearly didn't like me."

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Please. I knew better, but I was hoping for a miracle."

Her cheeks are pink again, this time from the rush of blood and emotions overpowering her.

"It would have been a terrible kiss," I say to lighten the mood. You made the right move."

A muffled snort escapes her, which causes Amelia to cover her nose with her hands, stifling a stronger laugh.

"I'm serious," I continue, cherishing this opportunity to make her smile. "That kiss could have broken up our parents. You'd have told your dad, and he would have accused my mom of raising a horny little pervert."

"But you *are* a horny little pervert."

"We've established I'm not little, so let's not continue that narrative."

"I didn't know you liked me that much."

"You were the first girl who gave me the time of day. Granted, that time amounted to thirty seconds of sass each morning, but I took what I could get."

"You would have been my first kiss. Remember I went all of high school without kissing a guy?"

"Yikes, even better that you denied me."

“You seem to know what you’re doing now.”

“A lot is different now,” I point out.

Like how we aren’t kids anymore and whatever it is between us isn’t the worst idea in the world.

“Did you hate me because of my dad dating your mom?”

When my mom introduced me to Amelia, she and Bruce had been dating for six months. They didn’t want to rush things in case they didn’t work out. But I knew the moment Amelia and I were forced to get acquainted with each other that she counted me out within seconds.

What the hell did we have in common aside from our parents thinking they could find love the second time around?

“I didn’t hate you,” I begin. “But I was bitter. I had the best dad and here my mom goes replacing him.”

“She didn’t replace your dad. Just like my dad didn’t replace my mom. It’s a different kind of love in a second marriage, I guess.”

“I’m sure you don’t like her being here living in your house.”

“Why didn’t they buy something new? A new house for a new marriage. Why live here?”

“Have you seen your backyard?” I tease.

“I’m serious. Would you want to live in a house where memories were made way before your relationship was established?”

“I wondered that, too.”

“See that corner? That pointy edge on the bricks?”

Amelia directs my gaze to the hearth in front of the fireplace. “Yeah, what about it?”

“When I was little, I was playing there with my dolls. My mom told me to get away from the fire because I was sitting too close. I was a dramatic kid and flung myself backward in a tantrum. The bottom of my head hit the corner and cut it wide open. They had to take me to the hospital to get stitches.”

She cranes her head forward as she lifts the hair at the nape of her neck. A small scar is barely prominent, but I skim my finger along her skin.

Instead of joking with her that she still has the same tantrums from her youth, I want to kiss the scar on the base of her delicate neck. But that’s too intimate for our honest, serious conversation.

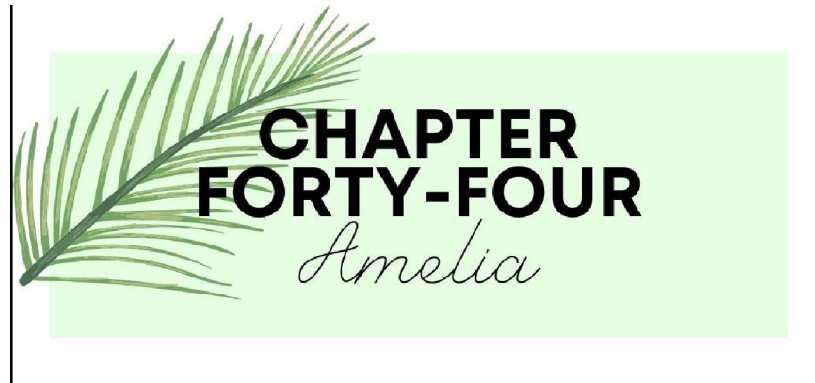
“That had to have hurt,” I tell her.

“This house is filled with memories like that one. Accidents, flashbacks, little idiosyncrasies only my dad and I would know. Why would your mom want to compete with that?”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

There are other troubling things Amelia doesn’t know, reasons why I’ll never open up to Bruce. But I’ve decided if things ever progress between us, she *can’t* know. It would ruin everything, and I’m willing to take the responsibility of keeping that secret safe with me.

“Is there anything else you want to talk about?” I ask her.



“Do you think we were capable of being civil in our younger ages?” I ask. “I’d like to give us credit, but we were eighteen. We were kids pranking each other with bleach in the washer and deleting TV shows.”

“I knew it! I knew you deleted my episodes of *Breaking Bad*. My mom said it had to have been a glitch,” he hollers, pointing a finger at me.

I shush him and Theo lowers his tone and repeats, “I knew it was you.”

“Oh, yeah, that was me.”

“Do you know how horrible it was having to wait for the next episode to come on? You of all people should know how sacred a show or movie is, Ms. Mellie.”

“Well, once we catch up on *Game of Thrones*, maybe we can start *Breaking Bad*? I’ve never seen it.”

”Never seen it?”

“I might have resisted because I knew you liked it.”

“Oh yeah, way too immature to get along as teenagers,” he confirms in his usual mocking nature.

“Coming from the boy who didn’t know how to put a toilet seat down to save his life.”

“I was fully capable of putting it down. I didn’t on principle, to piss you off.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“You haven’t noticed I’ve purposely left it up still? My last attempt to get under your skin?”

I have no idea how to get around this. I haven’t been using the upstairs bathroom unless it’s to shower because I am not doing my business anywhere near that gorgeous man. And when I have my period? Big fat N-O.

“Of course I noticed. I’m choosing to be the bigger person and ignoring it.”

“See, we’ve grown up. We are mature adults now.”

I silently laugh to myself because choosing to handle my personal business in my dad’s downstairs bathroom so Theo won’t find me is indeed the definition of childish.

Time speeds past us when we are getting along. Theo and I have been watching TV and talking for longer than I intended.

I’d rather end the night on a positive note than bring up the nagging question if he’ll ever accept my dad into his life. I’m not expecting them to do father-and-son activities, but it’d be

nice for Theo to acknowledge his existence. Am I being unreasonable?

We handled the death of our parents in our own unique way. I'll never stop missing my mom, but I was able to welcome Molly into my home and support my dad the best I knew how. Theo seemed to ignore their marriage and everything that came with it.

If he needs time to recognize we are his family whether he likes it or not, I will give it to him. "Family" echoes in my brain, and I have to pull back the shame that might be evident on my face. It's another reminder that whatever relationship Theo and I have now—friends, stepsiblings, roommates, inevitable sexual partners—it won't last. It can't last.



It was 3:00 a.m. by the time Theo and I dragged our asses back to our respective rooms. The fantasies dancing around my head all night began with Theo sneaking into my bed and ended with him sneaking out at sunrise.

My greedy appetite is ravenous when a soft knock wakes me up.

I rescind the thought of Theo surprising me in my room because my morning breath is out also waking me up.

"Come in?" I wheeze.

My dad enters wearing his typical summer outfit: a short-sleeved polo and shorts.

“Morning, I didn’t realize you were still sleeping.”

“I need to get up. Aren’t you going to Costco soon?”

“Yes, that’s why I’m here. The truck bringing the rental tables and chairs for the party tomorrow got a flat tire. It’s possible they won’t make it at all. I’m taking a few trips back and forth to pick them up myself. I wanted to see if you’d keep Molly company while she picks up the food.”

Hang out one-on-one with my stepmom? Theo isn’t available for this?

“You don’t have to.” My dad retracts his idea after my brief moment of contemplation, and I’m filled with guilt.

“No, I can go. Is she leaving now? Let me get dressed.”

The benefit of living in a coastal town is you can wear a swimsuit under any article of clothing and it’s acceptable. I grab my bikini and a flowy, strappy dress that reveals my stringy bathing suit top and a fair amount of cleavage.

I’m not a complete nightmare as I stare at my reflection in the bathroom. Nothing some dry shampoo and tinted moisturizer can’t fix. And maybe a hat. And some big sunglasses. When I’m done brushing my teeth, the door I left ajar creaks open.

“Oh, hi.”

“Morning.” Theo groans and extends his arms above his head to stretch. I’m blessed with the sight of the bottom third of his six-pack when his shirt rides up.



“Going to the beach?” he asks as he critiques my laid-back outfit.

“No, in fact, I’m going to Costco with your mom.”

“You...and...my mom?”

“My dad asked. She needs some company and she chose me. Shocking, huh?”

“Are you going to talk about me?”

“Oof, your head grew three sizes.” My lips spread into a smile as I wipe some golden-brown hair off his forehead. “I’m pretty sure we can settle on a topic that doesn’t revolve around you.”

“Don’t go asking about my weaknesses so you can exploit them.”

Feigning offense and pressing my palm to my chest, I say, “I would never do such a thing.”

As I continue to get ready, Theo grabs me by the wrist in a possessive gesture.

“Is this the same beige bikini you wore our first night back?”

“Looks like it is.” I’m grateful I brushed my teeth because my heavy breathing is in line with his face. At least he’s getting the aroma of minty freshness while I stand right in front of him, fighting the nerves trying to make themselves known.

“You’re going out like this?” he confirms.

“Looks like I am,” I echo with an arched brow.

Theo’s unbroken eye contact scans over the amount of skin I’m showing as he reaches backward to shut the bathroom door. We’re now confined to this small space, trapped together as his eyes feed on the sight before him.

He pulls my bikini top to the side and exposes my right breast. He caresses me in his hand as his mouth covers my nipple, sucking and lightly biting.

The blast of endorphins shooting through me is enough to keep me wired until the party tomorrow. I figured he’d let up and travel south, but he remains glued to this spot.

I speak softly in case anyone is nearby, “Theo, are you giving me a hickey?”

“Yes,” he murmurs against my skin. “Almost done—”

There’s a gentle tap-tap on the door, followed by, “Hey, Amelia? I’m ready to go in five minutes. Is that okay with you?”

I’m frozen solid.

Theo’s ears must not be working because even the nearness of his mom on the other side of the door hasn’t caused him to stop or even slowdown.

“Umm, yes I’ll... I’ll be right down,” I blurt out in between moments when Theo’s mouth isn’t maiming me.

“Okay, I’ll drive since I have more trunk space.”

“Okay.” I squeeze my eyes shut and hope it’s enough to block out the thought of her coming in and catching us. But damn, this feels so good.

“Have you eaten yet? Maybe we can stop and get lunch?”

“Uh-huh, sounds perfect.”

I imagine Molly halfway to the staircase when she comes back in a hurry and asks, “Hey, have you seen Theo?”

“Nope, I’m sure he’s around here somewhere.”

“Huh, okay, see you downstairs.”

When the creak of the second to last stair screeches its existence when stepped on, I finally release the trapped air in my lungs and Theo releases his suction.

“What the fuck?” I snap. “Do you want to get caught? Are you crazy?”

“Only a little crazy.”

“You *look* crazed.”

“I don’t recall you asking me to stop. Or forcing my head away.”

“Oh shit, look what you did.” I inspect my skin in the mirror and see a reddish-purple abrasion. “You’re so lucky I can cover this with my bikini for the party tomorrow. Can you imagine me sporting a hickey in front of all my parent’s friends?”

“I had to mark my territory.”

I'm shaken by his avidity. If he thinks men will be lining up around the block to have their chance with me tomorrow, he's in for a shock. The only other man I'll know there tomorrow is Benny, and he's bringing his husband.

"I better get downstairs before she suspects anything. Can you help my dad if he needs an extra hand?" What a simple yet loaded question.

"Yeah, if he asks, I'll help him."

I see the way he snuck around my favor. My dad won't ask because he knows better. Sounds like Theo won't be offering his services on his own accord.

"Okay, well, I'll see you later." I'm quick to make sure I'm decent and covered behind my dress. The splotch is barely noticeable, but if Molly suspects anything, I'll tell her it's an allergic reaction and not the aftermath of her son's tongue.

But fuck, he seems to be good at everything he does. Which has me wondering when the most forbidden deed will take place.



As Molly drives us to Costco, she's the type of woman to hum along with any song on the radio. She's not full-on singing, but she has a gentle, soft voice that sounds untroubled. If only it wasn't *Teenage Dream* by Katy Perry wasn't piercing my eardrums.

That song will haunt me until the end of my days. Her album came out well before I met Theo, but it made its return the summer we lived together. It was the anthem of our never-ending bickering.

“I’m sure Costco is going to be crazy busy,” I tell her.

“I have my list. I always come prepared. I can’t live without my lists.”

This tiny fact seems like something I should already know about her, but I don’t.

“Do you enjoy hosting these parties?” I ask.

“It’s so much fun. I love celebrating America and our troops. Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day. My late husband was a combat engineer for the Marines, and he devoted his life to serving our country.”

I know so little about Theo’s dad, and it feels like crossing a line asking about his personal life, but I’m trying to make a genuine connection with her.

“Theo was close with his dad?”

“Very close. When Don deployed, Theo wrote to him once a week. The turnaround for receiving mail back then was horrible, and oftentimes Don missed a letter or two from the location changes and missions, but they looked forward to conversing via snail mail. He has all his letters saved in a shoe box.”

“I’m glad he has those memories to look back on. To reread the letters.”

“I wish I did. But we had phone calls and the occasional email. They were always short and rushed correspondences because he never had a lot of time to use the computer. I don’t know if Don was allowed to disclose some intel, but he told Theo all about the warfare tasks and demolition duties he completed. To a kid, it was all so fascinating. I don’t think Theo realized how dangerous his job was.”

“I’m so sorry for the way you lost him.”

“Thank you, Amelia. It was not an easy time. As a mother and military wife, you always hoped for the best and knew there were no guarantees. My one wish is that Theo remembers his father as a strong, caring man who loved his family with every bone in his body.”

“I’m sure he does,” I assure her. We don’t talk deeply about his dad, and I realize maybe I need to bring him up so Theo knows he’s not forgotten.

When we arrive at Costco, I tilt my face toward the sun and bask in the intensity of the heat. Tomorrow’s weather will be perfect. I’m hopeful the party won’t have any issues like in previous years.

When I was ten, a neighbor got so drunk he fell into our pool, bringing the tablecloth full of food in with him. The year I was twelve, the house diagonal from us almost caught on fire due to a faulty firework. And when I was fourteen, I thought I’d get my first kiss under the fireworks. Freshman Amelia was quite disappointed.

But I'm an adult now, and there's nothing I can't handle.  
Drunks and pyros? That's kid's play.

Molly and I march down the aisles and check items off her list.

"Is being home as bad as you expected?" she asks.

My body stiffens as I set a tuxedo cake in the cart. "Theo was a surprise. I thought I'd be gone by now, and he and I would be two ships passing in the night."

"I'm sorry about that. He was originally going to come home at the end of June. But when I told him you'd be moving back, he changed his flight."

Molly's flippant confession has me spiraling.

He changed his flight? To see me? Is she serious?

*Beautiful, witty, a smart-ass.*

His compliments repeat on a loop in my head.

"Theo seems to be doing well." It's another presumption. We don't talk about the future, so I'm curious to see how she and her son communicate his prospects.

"He doesn't know what he wants to do. He has a big heart and wants to help people. I think he'll figure it out. He's a smart boy."

My smile hides the questions I have on the tip of my tongue.

What drives him?

What would he want to do as a career?

Does he have plans to move out?

But I keep those questions saved for another day.

Those aren't things I should be asking his mom. If I get the courage and the timing is right, I'll ask him those myself.





**W**hile Amelia is out shopping with my mom, I stay up in my room and browse the internet for jobs. While I loved volunteering and helping people, I need a steady income. It makes sense to research construction companies. That seems like my best avenue, and it's a career that can take me anywhere.

But where will Amelia be? Will she stay in Del Mar? Or head back to LA and never talk to me again?

Each day that passes, my yearning for her increases. Sure, we drive each other crazy, but opposites attract, right? Why am I hesitant to apply anywhere until I find out where she wants to go?

Bruce's car backs into the driveway, and I gaze out my window and see it's crammed full of crap. Folded chairs, some table bases, all things he'll need a hand with.

He's in his sixties and shouldn't be overexerting himself. I'm capable and strong enough to assist with the unloading, but do I want to? If I ever plan on showing an effort, I need to start acting like I can tolerate him.

As I make my way downstairs, I walk through the garage and see Bruce already struggling with the base of a table.

“Hey, do you need any help?” I ask him.

The look he gives me is pure relief, like he was drowning and I threw him a life vest.

“I didn’t want to bother you,” Bruce admits. “But I could use some help with the heavy stuff. I have a bad back and don’t want to throw it out right before the party.”

Of course he has a bad back.

“Point me where you need me.”

“Everything can be taken to the side yard. I’ll set it all up, don’t worry about that.”

To save time, I suggest taking everything out of the car and leaving it in the driveway so he can go get the next load and bring it back. I can carry everything to the backyard while he’s gone, and he can do whatever he needs to do set up for the party.

This plan works well, and by the third and final trip home, everything is where it needs to be and I’ve avoided any meaningful conversations with him.

“Thanks, Theo. The girls are bringing back lunch. Did you place your order with your mom?”

Amelia is the one who initiated the text asking me about food. This feels like a perfect opportunity to see how he reacts to my budding friendship with his daughter.

“Yeah, Amelia texted me, and I let her know what I wanted to eat.”

He doesn't seem phased we are on a texting basis. He looks rather excited that we are getting along. We are behaving like two ignorant adults who don't have the hots for each other.

“I hope Amelia is being nice to you?”

*Nicer than he wants to know.*

“A lot nicer than when I first moved in.”

“I know you don't want to be here,” he begins. “And I get it. Who wants to live with his parents at any age, let alone a stepdad? But I know how happy your mom is with you being here. And it's nice being around my daughter. Amelia hated coming home, too. At least you two have that in common.”

Even with our best efforts to pretend there isn't some unexplained connection pulling us closer, our opposite personalities evoke a feeling of familiarity. I don't know every part of Amelia inside and out, but I hope to learn it before it's too late and she leaves for good.



**W**hen they arrive with a car full of food, I put my muscles to work once more and unload the groceries. My mom brings lunch out to the table we sat at for the barbeque from hell. Another meal as one big happy family. This should be interesting.

“Did you invite any of your friends tomorrow, Amelia?” her dad asks.

“Benny and his husband.”

“When are you meeting to discuss the summer events?” I wasn’t aware my mom knew this information.

“This Friday, I believe. The holiday will be over, and he and I can meet and strategize.”

“I think it’s so great you’re pursuing this.” Bruce puts a supportive hand over Amelia’s.

“This is temporary. If it goes well, I’ll set Benny up to have his own events without me. I didn’t go to college for this.”

“But you might be good at it. You’re so creative, just like your mom. I’m sure it’ll be a huge success.”

“And we’ll go to the first event. Theo, you’d come too, right?” my mom assumes.

*Huh?* “Oh, sure. Yeah.”

“I don’t think I have anything festive to wear tomorrow,” Amelia nibbles on a french fry.

“Me either,” I say.

“Oh, Theo, you’ll be there? I’m so glad.”

“Can’t miss this infamous firework show.” My enthusiasm is forced but at least I’m trying, right?

“Make sure you stay away and let the neighbors handle it. One year a house almost caught on fire,” Bruce tells us. “Last thing we need is you two shooting rockets at each other. The

show starts at 8:30 p.m. Try not to miss it. It's quite spectacular."

"We'll end the night with a bang, don't worry." I stuff a few fries in my mouth to stop my laughter when I see the whites of Amelia's eyeballs expand in my peripheral vision.

"Okay, well I better get back to..." Amelia looks to see if either parent caught on to my double entendre. They're both oblivious. "Back to my laundry. Thanks for lunch, Molly."

"You still have food left." Bruce points to her burger, which isn't even half gone. "Can I have your fries?"

"Take them."

"Thanks for shopping with me. You have such a lovely daughter, Bruce."

"She's a keeper."

Don't I know it.

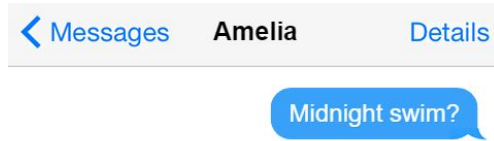


That evening, when the inevitable witching hour hits and our parents retreat back into their chambers to scan their Reader's Digest or whatever reading material they have, I barricade myself in my room and play video games.

It's strange living across the hall from the woman you secretly admire. We could be neighbors in an apartment complex, but we share a bathroom. More like a coed dorm.

When I lie back on my bed, my thoughts are consumed with Amelia. I can't stop thinking about her. How beautiful she is when she laughs, how cute she is when I get under her skin. She's occupying my brain well into midnight. I'm wide awake, no closer to falling asleep than I am internalizing all the desires I'll never be able to express.

Grabbing my phone, I send her a text.





I have no clue if she sleeps with her phone on silent. I'll let fate intervene and decide if she and I are meant to spend this night together.

My heart skips a beat as I wait for the three tiny dots to appear and signal her reply. Her response is delivered before I have a chance to second-guess sending it in the first place.

Midnight swim?

Sure. Give me a minute, I'll meet you out at the pool.

Hopping out of bed and into my swim shorts, I decide tonight will not be *the* night.

While sex in a pool could also be crossed off my bucket list, people will be over in twelve hours with the intent of swimming. Amelia might drive me absolutely wild, but I do have some manners.

A midnight swim is kind of harmless, but I'd still be scared shitless if Bruce caught us.

While I'm trying to decide whether I want the pool lights illuminated, Amelia makes her discreet entrance outside.

"Couldn't sleep?" She walks over in the same beige bikini, and the darkness is playing tricks on me once more. I've never seen her fully naked; the illusion before me is almost too much.

"Nope. Did I wake you?"

"No, as luck would have it, I was also wide awake."

Pointing to the light switch, I ask "Want the lights on or no?"

Why do I feel like her answer might dictate how our night will go?

"Keep them off," she tells me.

"Okay."

It was a balmy eighty degrees today, so the water temperature should be perfect even if we're swimming under a dark sky and full moon.

"Why were you awake?" Amelia asks as we place our feet on the first step.

"I wish I knew. I used to get insomnia a lot but it hasn't returned until now. I think it's stress related."

"What are you stressed about?"

Holding my breath because I'm captivated by the delicacy of her face, I watch the short pieces of hair that didn't make it



in her bun glide across the water in the shallow end. Amelia is stunning, and I can't find my voice.

"Sorry." Clearing my throat to buy me an extra five seconds, because I need all the time I can to appear poised in her presence, I confess to her something I haven't admitted aloud. "I'm scared to lose my mom, too. I lie awake at night imagining these horrible scenarios. Freak accidents, an incurable disease, morbid things that make me sick with worry. That can't be healthy, right?"

"That has to be so hard. I felt that way about my dad a few months after my mom passed, but maybe not as severely. Does it help to know you're not alone? Would you rather talk, and I can listen?"

"Listening is nice. I don't have many people to talk to about this. I don't know why we never commiserated together. We could have been a nice support system when we were missing our parents."

"We can be that for each other now? It's never too late."

She closes the distance, and I skim my palm along the water so the tiny waves can hide the ripples my heartbeat is creating.

"You're right."

The moon's reflection against the dark pool water ebbs and changes shape as our bodies slip below the surface level.

"A guy I met gave me some words of wisdom that have been difficult to live by."

"What's that?" she asks.

“The best way to ruin today is worrying about tomorrow.”

“Do you worry a lot?”

“What’s your going rate again Ms. Mellie?”

She splashes some water at me, and I let it spray my face without objection.

“Quit it. I’m trying to help,” she adds.

“I know, I’m kidding. I do need to see a therapist, but I have no health insurance.”

“I had such a great plan before I got fired. Look at us discussing adult things like healthcare.”

“We’re old.”

“We’re not *that* old.”

“I don’t know about you, but I feel like I’m in the same place I was at eighteen, except now I’m burning bridges and opportunities.”

“I know this is so cliché, and I promise I didn’t steal it from a movie, but it’s never too late to start over.”

“Ehhh, are you sure you didn’t steal that?”

She splashes me again, except this time, I duck underwater.

When I emerge, Amelia has a look in her eyes that has me questioning the “no sex in the pool” rule I implemented minutes earlier.

“What?” I ask, wishing I could read her thoughts.

“Nothing. I still get weirded out that we’re both back home again.”

“I know, I don’t plan on staying here long.”

“Think you’ll move out of California?” she asks.

“I don’t know. I’ve never lived on the East Coast. Always wanted to see what’s so great about it.”

“With all that snow? I couldn’t do it.”

“Beats the seasonal wildfires and earthquakes here.”

“The freaking earthquakes. True, you’d be far from the San Andreas Fault. But you’d also have to deal with tornadoes.”

“I can handle storms. I had a hand in reconstructing part of a village that got destroyed by a hurricane.”

“Were you always handy? I don’t recall you tinkering with things in our younger years.”

“Tinkering?” I torment for the sake of being annoying.

“You drive me crazy.”

“It’s what I do best. But no, I was never into fixing things. My dad taught me about tools but not the skill set to use said tools. And with Habitat for Humanity, you didn’t need experience. They were amazing and taught you everything you needed to know.”

“Think you’ll look for a job revolving around construction?”

“Maybe, it all depends on...”

*On what Amelia plans on doing.*

I'm not an idiot, and I know I can't follow her like a groupie, but I like being around her. I like that we are adjusting to living across the hall from one another.

"Uh, depends on what I can find." I recover well but the suspicion and scrutiny are evident on her face. "Anyway, why were you awake? Plotting how you can get the neighbor to set your house on fire this year?"

"I want to leave, but not *that* bad. I would still be devastated if anything happened to the house. Even if your mom changed some things."

"Did she change a lot?"

"I mean." Amelia's lips are pressed together like she didn't intend on saying something uncomplimentary, yet she continues. "Yes. It's crazy how different it is. I understand life goes on but—never mind."

"I'm sorry." I was fixated on the fact when my mom married Bruce, it was her way of wanting a new life. I didn't think she'd change Amelia's memories, too.

"Fuck our parents," I joke while flipping the bird at the dark house.

"Fuck 'em."

There's a moment of silence, and I wonder how long she'll want to stay out here.

“You know, when my dad told me he had a surprise for me when I got home, I thought they were having a baby.”

“I’m sure knowing the surprise was me, you’d have wished for the baby, huh?”

She stifles her laugh with a hand over her mouth so the whole neighborhood isn’t aware of our existence. Everyone is asleep and dead to the world, and it’s like we are infinitely alone in our midnight tryst.

“Now that we resemble two adults who can get along, you’re not so bad.”

So many unspoken emotions pass over both our faces as she swims closer to me.

“All you had to do was give me a chance, wicked stepsister.”

“Theo, I just had the urge to kiss you, can you please not kill the moment?”

“But bickering can be so fun with you.”

She groans as she dips below the water. When she reappears and wipes her eyes, I’m nose to nose with her.

“You wanted to kiss me?” I confirm.

“Maybe.”

“What are you waiting for?” I mimic the same words she whispered in my ear the night I almost pulled her onto my lap. Except this time, she doesn’t hesitate.

She jumps onto my body and wraps her legs around my waist and arms around my neck.

I lower our bodies into the water so only our heads are visible in the dark. She's light as a feather in the water, and my chest feels as weightless.

Fuck, she tastes so good. Her breath is minty, and I'm turned on by the fact she brushed her teeth, as if she predicted something sexual would happen out here.

*No sex in the pool.*

We've broken every nonexistent rule, what's one more? Maybe everything happening below the surface doesn't count. She's grabbing at my lower half, and I'm untying her top and throwing it onto the grass. The feel of her buoyant chest brushing against my firm pecs makes me weak.

"Am I fucking you tonight?" I ask, unsure how far she wants me to go.

"You better."

I feel like she inhales my entire soul with the kiss that follows her demand.

Her greedy hands reach for my shorts and practicality weighs in.

"Wait, we can't do this in the pool," I manage to say.

Ensuring her legs are still wrapped around me, I carry her to the entrance of the pool and ascend the steps. The change in

gravity does nothing except her clenching her body tighter to mine.

Our first time wasn't supposed to be in her wide-open backyard, but fuck expectations. I'm gulping for air as she continues kissing me, like maybe if we have a split second to rethink this idea, we will put a stop to it.

But I don't plan on delaying the inevitable.

This was bound to happen, and Amelia finally knows it.

The closest thing to a bed out here is the padded chaise lounge, so I drop her body onto it and hover over her.

"I don't have a condom," I groan.

"We don't need one. I'm clean and have an IUD."

*Fuck yes.*

I drag her bikini bottoms down and remove my shorts. While I enjoy foreplay, I need to be inside her. I can't wait another minute.

Amelia's eyes are wide and her mouth is hanging open as she takes in how hard I am.

"I hope you fit," she whispers.

"You'll make me fit."

Pushing closer to her, I want the glory of eye contact when I enter her. To see her face light up, to watch her gasp and inhale air that will never be enough.

"There's no going back—"

“Goddamn it, Theo, fuck me already.”

We’re as obnoxious about to fuck as we are getting along. I’m torturing myself waiting for her approval, and I have it. Neither is backing out now.

The tip goes in, and she shudders. Fuck, she’s tight. This will take a minute.

“You okay?” I confirm.

“Yes, go slow.”

I’ll do whatever she wants. But once she accepts all of me, I won’t be able to ease up.

With each thrust in, I get a little deeper. The last thing I want is to hurt her in any capacity, so I keep my rhythm gradual and read her body language. Her lower half relaxes, and she begins releasing soft moans with every drive forward.

“Oh my God, Theo, this feels so good.”

“I’ve barely started.”

My index finger finds her sensitive area that’s already swollen and warm. I can tell the difference between pool water and her personal dampness, and I’m going wild. The fact she’s so wet for me makes me count to ten so I don’t prove I’m also capable of coming under a minute.

Her bare skin on mine is taunting me. I’d give anything to be as loud as I can, but the reality is we are outside and fucking on a lounge chair.



We get a rhythm going and Amelia uses my shoulder to conceal each moan escaping her mouth. They vary in volume and surpass the last in terms of excitement.

“Theo, this is too good,” she whispers, and I’m unable to utter my agreement.

I’m focusing on not shooting my load too soon because I never want this to end.

“Do you like being on top?” I ask so I can get a moment to collect myself.

“I’ve never been good at it,” she admits.

Flipping her over in a quick swoop, I’m lying on my back as she straddles me.

The unobstructed view of her chest, down to her navel, and her glistening lower lap make me tense. She’s beautiful. Every inch of her is perfect.

“What feels best for you?” she asks.

“Rock your hips in a circle. I’ll stabilize you.”

She does exactly that, and I might pierce the air with a scream of my own. Fucking hell, I will never be able to let this feeling go. I’m addicted. My hands hold her by the ass, and I maneuver her so we feel each movement to its depth.

Our flow is precise and she barely needs my help, so I rub my thumb against her clit.

“Fuck, fuck... Theo, what is that feeling?”

Oh, she is about to experience a different kind of orgasm.

I'm hitting her g-spot, I can tell by the angle as I sink into her. She's going to shatter, and I don't trust her silence during this new feeling she's about to experience. Her body hunches forward as she grinds into me, and I'm able to silence her cries in time.

It's possessive the way I grab her face, putting my palm over her lips and the other holding the back of her head. And yet, she keeps twisting her hips and riding me, lightly sinking her teeth into my fingers.

"Oh fuck," I curse, because I'm the only one capable of speaking. Her muffled orgasm is the best sound I ever heard.

I've built up an all-consuming pleasure inside me that I can't fight much longer.

"Don't wear a dress to the party tomorrow," I say between pants.

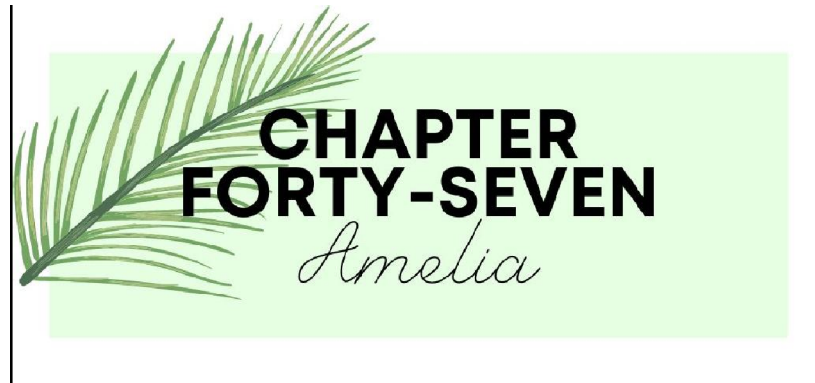
"Why?"

"I'm going to be dripping down your legs all day."

Fuck the fireworks, I'll combust right here and see stars of my own. Amelia's body shimmers above me with sweat and perspiration. My mouth is all over her breasts as I suck and bite, hitting my peak. We're putting on a show of our own, and I'm about to give her a glorious finale.

"I'm coming," I warn.

My hands grab her ass cheeks, and I force her down hard on my lap as I bury myself deep into her.



**C**ollapsing on top of Theo in complete exhaustion, our breathing is synced when my chest meets his.

“Fucking Christ, Amelia.”

What are words? I wish I knew, because I have never felt so detached from reality.

Theo and I had sex, and it was the kind of sex you never give up. I’m supposed to live across the hall from a man who would willingly give that to me anytime I wanted?

The sexual tension, that cosmic connection...

How are we going to hide this from our parents?

The word *rebound* flitters among the stars I’m still seeing.

He’s merely a distraction. But when his hands close over my back, and he holds onto me in this passionate embrace, I feel as though I’m falling.

Falling in love or falling apart, only time will tell.



Our fears are reversed as we are adults sneaking back *into* the house, as opposed to teenagers sneaking *out*. But it's dead silent as we tiptoe up the stairs.

It's the night of the reunion all over again. Do I go back to my room and he goes back to his? How would I feel if he wanted to sleep with me again, this time not against his will?

"I'm going to go to my room now. I feel like you might freak out and need some time to process—"

"I'll be fine," I assure him

"You're not regretting anything yet, are you?"

"No."

"Okay, if you need to talk about it, you know where to find me."

"I promise I'll be fine. I'll see you at the party tomorrow."

"I'll be there."



My assumptions about tossing and turning all night were so far from accurate. I assumed I'd be overanalyzing everything that happened between us, but I slept like a goddamn baby. Deep slumber, no dreams, refreshed as hell.

There's already a commotion happening outside my window, and when I remove the blankets from my body and plant my feet on the carpet, my lower half is sore. As Theo

predicted, I'm reminded of our dalliance from hours ago as my inner thighs are sticky.

My dad waves at me from the pool as I glare out my window. He motions for me to open my balcony door.

"Morning," he says to me like I'm Rapunzel in her tower.

Waving back and shielding the sun from my eyes, I greet, "Morning! What are you doing?"

"Spraying down the patio furniture and cement. Do you like my outfit?"

He does a spin in his fire engine red shorts, and I laugh when his feet get tangled in the hose. He's every Tom Hanks father character wrapped into one.

"We don't need an accident to start this day!" I shout.

"Come down soon and help me."

He proceeds to spray down the lounge chairs, including the one that assisted us last night. We could have gotten caught. The chances were slim, but we can't be that senseless. If it happens again, which I hope it does, we can't be doing this out in the open.

Closing myself back in my room, I open my closet and riffle through the clothes I have hanging up. I never intended to settle down here. I figured I could live out of my suitcase, and I'd be on my way before I had a chance to wear everything I packed.

Boy was I sorely mistaken.

Scanning through the clean items, I settle on light-wash, frayed jean shorts I forgot I had. I have a blue bikini, so I'll wear that under a sheer white tank top. Someone has to have a red bandanna I can borrow. Or if it's anything like previous years, someone will bring props and items for a photo booth. I'll snag a cheap pair of red sunglasses.

But first, I need to shower.

The last thing I wanted was to revive the pipes with a late-night spray down. Old Amelia would have been disgusted sleeping in that...dampness.

However, this morning I waltz to the bathroom like a new woman.

Setting my clean clothes on the counter, I prepare for the inescapable questions I'll be bombarded with today. The neighbors will want to know everything I've been up to these past few years, and I'm not ready to give them a blow by blow of all my shortcomings.

In reality, I care less about my unattained goals and more about hiding the fact I'm a floozy who slept with her stepbrother. Benny will know right away if something scandalous is afoot, so he will be the best judge of character.

When I'm downstairs, Molly is wearing a tie-dye shirt and jean capris. It makes me do a double take, because it looks like something my mom would have worn.

"Hi, hun! You look perfect."

“Thanks.” I look down at my simple attire and wrangle my hair into a messy top knot.

“It’s going to be hot today.” She pours me a red beverage and adds a blue and white straw to it.

“What’s this?”

“A Kool-Aid refresher.”

“Thanks, I haven’t had this in forever.”

“Remember Theo was obsessed with it that summer? I feel like I was always buying him more. Ah, I forgot about the flowers. I’ll be right back.”

When she’s out of the kitchen, I grab the vodka bottle from the freezer and add some to my drink. A little buzz won’t hurt. After today, I’m going to cut it off until I find a steady job.

I’ve set an email alert to notify me of any career related postings as they pop up. And so far nothing has come close to what I’m qualified for. But I’m hopeful.

Molly returns carrying bouquets of blossoming flowers for the tables outside.

“Those are beautiful. What are they?”

“This white bunch is gardenias and freesias. These blue ones are a scattering of hydrangeas and delphiniums.”

“They smell amazing. Do you need any help?”

“That would be great. Can you grab the blue one and follow me?”

As we leave for the backyard, my ears perk up when Theo's door closes.

*Don't be awkward, Amelia.*

Molly arranges the tables so they look perfect with the bouquets.

Theo joins us outside wearing nothing but navy blue shorts.

His dirty blond hair has grown in nicely since our first day back, and the longer pieces in the front fall effortlessly into his eyes. I'm powerless as I reach to brush them away. But my hand obeys, and I give a simple wave instead.

"Morning," I begin, doing my best impression of someone who didn't have her world rocked on that very chair hours ago. "I didn't realize when you said you had nothing to wear today, that meant no clothes at all."

"I'm wearing shorts. You're lucky you're getting that."

Molly registers her son's lack of attire and gasps, "What was my rule about wearing clothes around Amelia?"

I look at her in horror. "Oh my gosh, what *rule*?"

"I mean, I didn't want Theo walking around like he's at a singles mixer. It's not appropriate. You're his stepsister."

A guffaw erupts from my throat, and I clear it with a cough.

"Can you put a shirt on? At least for when the guests arrive?" she requests.

Theo does a military salute like he's been dismissed.

"Sorry, Theo knows better."



“I got dumped like two months ago, I think I can handle myself.” Wow, between arriving home and the blur of living in a hotel for when I had nowhere to go, I can’t believe I’ve survived this long without Beckett.

But then I remember Scarlet, his fiancée, and how Theo is the one person who knows this detail. Normally, I would tell my dad everything, but I’m distancing myself from him and confiding more in Theo since I’ve been back.

Theo returns with a white shirt and a glass of Kool-Aid.

“Mom, you spiked this? Good for you.”

“No?” Molly questions as she looks at his drink.

“Ahh, that’s mine.”

Dashing to Theo’s side to reclaim my drink, I trip on the hose my dad was using earlier. My feet stumble right as I crash into Theo’s arms.

He drops the drink to the floor after it has successfully spilled all over our white tops.

“See, this is why I always suggest plastic cups by the pool.” My dad appears, always the logical one.

It bounces near our bare feet, and I laugh at the mess.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—” But before I can finish my sentence, Theo scoops me up in his arms and carries me over to the pool.

I don’t have to put on a show as I laugh hysterically. “Theo, no! Stop!”

I'm kicking my legs like a child as he stands at the edge of the pool. Our parents laugh along with me, and my dad eggs Theo on.

"Throw her in!"

"My phone is in my back pocket," I shriek, because, priorities. I can't afford a new one right now due to water damage.

He manages to support me while using one arm to fish it out of my back pocket, tossing it on the grass.

I'm holding on tight so he can't drop me into the water without coming in with me.

Benny enters the side gate entrance with his husband right as Theo leaps in the air.

I'm still enveloped in his arms, holding on for dear life when the butterflies in my stomach come crashing down as we hit the water together.

"I give it a six," Benny's husband, Chase, judges as we rise for air.

"I give it a nine," Benny says with a conspiratorial smile. And okay, he must know right off the bat something is up between me and Theo.

My dad and Molly clap as we come out of the shallow end.

"The party has started," she cheers.



As the hours pass, more friends arrive and join us in the backyard. Everyone is wearing festive red, white, and blue attire and drinking.

I'm able to keep my distance from Theo in case the sexual tension is as palpable as I believe it to be.

Most of the guests hanging out in the backyard are enjoying themselves with a plate full of food. A few are on rafts in the pool while the rest of us mingle on chairs and catch up on lost time. I've been able to disguise my misgivings as an opportunity to start over, and I've told the story so many times, I'm beginning to believe it.

When I get up to refill my glass inside, Benny corners me.

"Spill. All of it. What the hell is going on with you and that, that—I can't even form words—hunk?"

"Nothing. And keep your voice down." I peek over his shoulders to make sure no one can hear our conversation.

"Girl, don't lie to me. I see the way he looks at you."

"How is he looking at me?" I ask with fondness and curiosity. I have blown my cover now.

"I knew it." Benny and Chase high-five each other.

"I can't talk about it now, but yes, some *things* happened."

"That boy looked like he wanted to carry you over the threshold of your new home, the way he was holding you." Benny fans himself off with his hand.

My heart begins beating erratically.

“Ha ha, okay, funny.”

“I’m serious. Like you two are newlyweds and he’s whisking his bride off into the sunset.”

Chase ambles over and now I’m sweating.

“Are you okay? You’re all red.” He and Benny are both flapping their palms to conjure up some air while I catch my breath.

“I’m—I don’t know. Anxious.”

“Go get yourself something to eat,” Chase suggests.

“Good idea.”

“They have some wieners over there,” Benny points to the grill, and when we glance the direction he points, Theo is standing in our line of sight.

Benny and Chase break out in hysterical laughter.

I flee their sides as I stave off feelings for my stepbrother. Walking to the stairs, the other side door of the house is open, and my dad is talking to one of his friends.

No one senses my presence, so I eavesdrop on their conversation.

“Amelia is so resourceful,” my dad begins. “She will find something. I know she will. Coming home was her last resort.”

“She’s lucky to have supportive parents,” the other voice says. I don’t recognize who it is, probably a neighbor I haven’t seen in years.

“Molly was so excited to have her back. And her son, Theo. I know we’ll never be the typical nuclear family we each had before, but we love having them here. It’s so nice.”

“And you’re not...worried?”

“No, I already had that talk with Amelia. Nothing will happen beyond a friendship. She might be an adult now, but she’ll always be my little girl. I trust her.”

Oh fuck.



**A**melia seems to have disappeared. She should be by my side as we humble ourselves with our new living arrangements.

“Have you seen Amelia?” I ask my mom, who is balancing a plate of watermelon slices.

“No, ask Bruce.”

“That’s okay.”

“Theo, my goodness it’s a simple question. It’s not like you’re asking him to adopt you. Stop it.”

It’s the first sign of cynicism from my mom and my body tenses at the reprimand.

“I know that, but—”

“But nothing. You’re an adult. Act like one. We’ll discuss this later.”

She leaves once the food has been replenished, and I’m no longer in the mood to celebrate America’s birthday.

Amelia's Honda is being blocked by a few cars that decided to park in the driveway illegally. She hasn't left, so the other option would be her room.

Her door is open an inch, and I knock lightly on it before poking my head in.

"Oh, hi!" She shuts her laptop with purpose and sets it next to her on the bed.

"What are you doing up here? Watching porn?"

"Ew, gross, you think I'd do that with a bunch of people outside my window?"

"Who knows, you shut that with such tenacity, what else could it be?"

"I was shopping for clothes I can't afford. What are *you* doing up here?"

"I got bored."

"And you're not used to that by now?"

My lips spread apart, and her eyes are fixated on my mouth.

"Wanna go for a drive with me?" I ask.

"Sure."

I open the garage once we are buckled in.

She notices all the parked cars blocking our exit. "Looks like we won't be able to fit."

"I've been in tighter spots, hang on."

Putting my right hand on the back of Amelia's chair, I turn my head and put the car in reverse. She's flushed at the double entendre, and I turn the wheel with accuracy. I would rather get run over by Bruce's Ford Explorer than damage my Mustang.

"Theo, Theo, careful!"

"I see it."

My side mirror, while infinitely smaller than the standard ones on cars nowadays, is a millimeter away from scraping along someone's Mercedes.

A neighbor pops up from the side yard. "Where are you two off to?"

"That's the guy that fell in the pool years ago," Amelia mumbles as she rolls down her window and cranes her neck out. "Going on a drive."

He stumbles to the driver side and runs his hand along the hood.

"This is one good looking car you have."

"Thanks." I wonder if Amelia can smell the alcohol on his breath from her seat.

"How fast have you taken her?"

He's referring to my car like she's a woman, and normally I'd be annoyed, but I want to end this conversation.

"I've gone about 120?" I surmise.

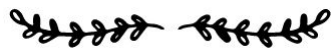


“120? Woooooie! That is fast. Y’all be careful now, ya hear?”

“Yes sir,” I respond, as though he’s a police officer pulling us over.

He tips his hat to us and proceeds to eat shit as he stumbles in some nearby bushes. Amelia claps her hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

As soon as the kids in the street are a blur in the rearview mirror, I peel out of the neighborhood.



Most of the drive along the coast is spent with our windows down and the music on high volume. It’s difficult to hear over the loud engine, which is why our eardrums are rattling. But it’s a comfortable stillness, void of conversation.

When a song by Paramore comes up on my shuffle, Amelia squeals.

“You like Paramore?” she asks.

“Yeah, I like their old stuff.” I roll up my window so I can hear her voice more clearly.

“We have more in common than I realized,” she reveals.

“Because we like some of the same music?”

“Among other things.”

“Like?” I am forcing her to point out why we might be able to pull off more than a friendship.

“We’re both witty and have a great sense of humor.”

“That’s accurate. Go on.”

“We have similar interests.” She sticks her hand out her window and weaves it through the air. “TV shows, coffee, sneaking out of parties because the crowds are bothering us.”

“We also have incredible chemistry.”

I see the moment it dawns on her how, even if we deliberately push each other’s buttons, we could make this work. And I catch the flash of disapproval soon after.

“You’re driving so fast.”

“I’m going the speed limit. Just feels fast in this car.”

“You’re passing everyone,” she counters, like I’m going 90mph in a 35mph zone. “Can you slow down a little bit?”

I proceed to drop the speed to 10mph once I see no one in my rearview mirror. My effort to make her laugh causing an opposite reaction.

“Theo, I’m serious. Stop messing around.”

There’s no grab bar in this old car, and she’s clutching her knees like she’s on an off the rails rollercoaster.

“Okay, I’m sorry.”

What is with her? Is she picking a fight with me because that’s the only way we know how to get along, as ironic as that

sounds. Is she realizing how compatible we are and freaking out?

It takes her ten minutes to release the death grip on her legs. Her fingers splay out, and her body relaxes. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, why?”

“You seem...tense.”

“I’m fine,” she repeats.

This isn’t the kind of silence that’s agreeable. I roll down my window and hope the air filtering in is also filtering out the jitters that are torturing Amelia.

“What was one of your mom’s favorite movies?”

As expected, her body sinks back into the seat and she props her feet on the dash with a comfortable ease.

“She loved dramas that got her pulse going. *Sleeping With the Enemy. Misery. Primal Fear.*”

“Never seen them.”

“You were too busy fixing the car with your dad, huh?”

“Whenever he was home, we’d try to have a project going. It gave us an excuse to hang out, but he didn’t always have to talk. Some missions he’d come home and didn’t have a lot to say.”

“I can’t imagine the horrors he saw over there.”

“And all the shit he had to do to survive.”

She rests her hand on mine and squeezes. The smallest sign of affection from this woman fills in all of my hollowed-out spaces. How do I confess to her she has this power over me?

“We better get back before the fireworks show,” she suggests. “I don’t want my dad wondering where we’ve been.”

I want to argue that it’s only 5:00 p.m. and we have plenty of time before it gets dark enough to let them off. But because I’m incapable of saying no to her, I turn the car around and head back.



When I park in the driveway, the drunk neighbor is in the same spot he was when we left: face down in the bushes. Amelia jogs to his side and puts her finger under his nose.

“He’s just passed out.”

“Gerald! There you are, goddamn it.” A woman dressed as Uncle Sam makes her way from the side entrance and approaches the man. “I can’t take him anywhere. Wake up, damn it.”

She nudges her husband with her toes, and he stirs in his drunken slumber.

“This isn’t the worst thing he’s done,” Amelia speaks out of the corner of her mouth when I’m by her side.

“He’s a damn fool,” the lady confesses. She must have heard us. “Go on, tell him what he’s done to ruin the parties.”

“He’s the one who fell in the pool and brought the food in with him.”

“And?” the wife encourages.

“And he got second degree burns once because he didn’t wear sunscreen.”

“And?”

“Oh, one year he tripped on a pool noodle and cracked his head open.”

I’m trying to keep a straight face, but when the woman tends to her blacked out husband, I turn to Amelia in horror.

“Honey, you forgot to mention when I found him passed out in your parent’s bed.”

“Oh yeah, that, too.”

“And you let him leave the house?” I pinch my lips together and expect her to lash out.

“His ass needs to go home. Darling, do you mind helping me?”

I’m able to get Gerald upright, and he’s coherent enough that his wife can assist him on the walk across the street.

“We’ll see ya for the fireworks!” she shouts as she and her husband stumble to their house.

“Wow,” I say with a straight face. “I shouldn’t have spiked the Kool-Aid.”

Amelia gasps. “Theo, did you?”

“Well yeah, you did it first.”

“But that was only my drink. I didn’t do the whole batch.”

“Ehh, sounds like it was worth it.”



When everyone meets at the end of the cul-de-sac to watch this infamous fireworks show, I scan the crowd for Amelia. She’s near her dad, and he’s directing everyone to stand back while Gerald lights them. Of all the people... Gerald? Thankfully, he has sobered up. I hope.

There’s nothing wildly romantic about fireworks, but I want Amelia by my side when they are shot into the air. To see the excitement in her response. Or so I can shield her eyes when Gerald accidentally blows his hand off.


Something feels wrong. I saw it in the way she physically responded to all the points we made in the car. How there is some unexplainable *thing* happening between us.

Maybe she regrets having sex. Maybe she’s also developing feelings. Perhaps we are both combating the irresistible urges that seem to be following us everywhere we go.

My subconscious has been ignoring the little detail that she’s fresh out of a breakup. I’m the one who suggested a rebound, but maybe anything that involves passion at any level is too much too soon.

Our eyes meet for a brief moment before the sky is lit up with bursts of white and gold. Instead of smiling her way, I

turn back to the endless night that carries so many possibilities  
and hope the universe is arranging a happy ending for us.



**CHAPTER  
FORTY-NINE**  
*Amelia*

**W**hen Friday comes, I'm grateful for my dinner out with Benny to discuss the events for Roasted. And while I'm sure he will be begging for gossip, I don't have a clue what's going on anyway.

We meet at a restaurant near the ocean, and Benny has his notebook and pen ready as I approach the table.

"What is that?" I point to his drink.

"An Aperol spritz. Wanna try it?"

"I'm okay, thanks. I'll stick to water tonight."

"You're not..." He rubs his stomach to indicate a baby bump. "Amelia, you're not—"

"No, I'm not pregnant. We had sex one time and I'm on birth control. I need to cut back on my drinking."

"You're going through a breakup and quarter-life crisis. I think it's acceptable to have a drink or two."

"I know, but I feel like I'm keeping the garbage men employed with all the bottles I'm recycling each week."



“I hope you don’t think I’m going to ignore that bit about how you hooked up with the boy next door version of Jax Teller.”

“Jax Teller?”

“Charlie Hunnam. *Sons of Anarchy*.”

“Never watched that. Maybe we can add it to the list.”

“A list? You two are hanging out so often that you need a list?”

“It’s been a crazy summer.”

“That boy has fulfilled every teenage dream. You were his first crush. He had a horrible way of hiding it back in the day, but now? He had hearts in those baby blues of his.”

I stuff the complimentary bread down my throat so I’m unable to answer.

“Can we please change the subject?”



**B**y the end of the dinner, we have tentative plans for an adult-themed event after hours. We will be showing the movie *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. We may not have the Hawaiian vibes as seen in the film, but Del Mar has some exquisite beaches. Plus who doesn’t love a good comedy?

As long as the attendees keep their alcoholic beverages off the sand, we can pour whatever we want. The obvious drink of choice would be mai tais, to go along with the tropical theme.

But Benny and I brainstormed and came up with bloody marys (a nod to the *Dracula* rock opera the main character is composing) and chocolate turtle martinis (a pecan whiskey, crème de cacao, and butterscotch schnapps, in honor of the Turtle Bay resort they vacation at.)

Benny is working out the logistics with the city while I prepare flyers to leave around town. We hope three weeks is enough notice to give the customers. We have no idea what to expect, but are hopeful we'll get a turnout so it's not a total waste of funds.

I researched restaurant data, and liquor sales tend to create the largest profit margins, so even if we don't see the general 65-70 percent output, a smaller event with any payout is a win.

Plus it's our first one. There will no doubt be some hiccups along the way. My goal is to set him up with a few ideas that he can organize all on his own once I've found a new job.



When I park my car in my usual spot, Theo's light isn't on in his room. He must be asleep.

My dad must have left the kitchen light on as a courtesy before locking up. It's not usual for me to come home at this time, so I appreciate the thought.

It's only after I turn the light off that I'm able to see the glow of the Jacuzzi.

So that's where Theo is.

Checking the time on my phone, I see it's 9:45 p.m. Instead of changing into my bathing suit, because I have no idea if he's in the mood for company or not, I walk outside and give him a simple wave.

"Hey," I announce while sitting on the edge of the exterior.

Theo looks sexy as ever. His hair is damp enough to keep the long piece pushed back, which gives me an unobscured view of the eyes I've sunk my entire being into. His gaze is as effective as defibrillators.

"Hey."

"You're not naked in there, are ya?" I joke.

"I bet you'd like that. How was your night out with Benny?"

"We got a lot accomplished. Our first after-hours movie night will be in three weeks."

"You're sticking around that long?"

It's a strange thing to say—not exactly supportive, not entirely unkind.

"I'll be there even if I magically get a job by then. Think you'll make an appearance?"

"Not sure if you remember, but your coworker hates me."

Theo joins me on the edge, but his masculine legs are hanging in the water whereas I am sitting crisscrossed. My hand skims the surface along the bursts of bubbles, and the temperature is tepid.

“No time to heat it up?” I ask.

“It was a last-minute decision. Plus it was in the eighties today. Coming in?”

“I might go up to bed soon.”

“Okay, I was planning on getting out soon anyway.”

I hand Theo his towel and watch him dry off. He rubs the terry cloth fabric against his soaked board shorts before wrapping it around his waist.

He unties his trunks and lets them fall to his ankles. The towel does its job and he’s skilled at removing his clothing without flashing his package. While I appreciate his modesty, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.

The same mantra that has been running on a loop kicks back up again. *Sex with Theo was a one-time thing. Your dad trusted you. Your heart cannot handle another disaster.*

We’ve never addressed our midnight escapades, and while days have elapsed, this isn’t the ideal hour to discuss what is going on between us. But that tingling sensation is hitting me in all my sensitive areas, and the view before me is hard to reject.

The way he’s ogling me in the shadows of the backyard feels like animalistic behavior. Predatory, but in a way that excites me, not intimidates me.

Is the sexual tension obvious to him even if we didn’t say anything suggestive to each other?

“Going inside?” he asks when I find myself lingering, willing to keep the conversation going so we don’t have to separate.

“Yes, sorry. Go ahead, I’ll lock up behind us.”

He steps through the door with the towel still around his waist while his shorts remain outside.

The house is secure, and I let Theo walk ahead. I don’t want him watching me second-guess every thought going through my head.

I want to spend more time with him tonight, in any capacity he’d give me. But I’m keeping that to myself.

“You okay?” he whispers, bending lower so his face is at my level.

We’re standing at the base of the stairs as his eyes bore into mine. I feel as though he can see through to my soul, and despite all the uncertainty surrounding us, I sense the mutual craving.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I assure him.

When we both reach the top landing, he walks ahead of me, dropping his towel in the middle of the hallway. To have the confidence he does, it’s beguiling. He’s casting a spell, and I’m captivated by the way he opens my door and enters my room without an invitation.

Each step is taken with careful consideration.

One foot forward.

*Yes, I want this to happen again.*

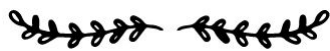
Brief pause.

*Will this become a routine?*

Another step forward.

*One more time, that's it.*

I will get him out of my system...starting tomorrow.



**W**hen my alarm goes off the following morning, I roll over in bed and give Theo a gentle shake.

“Hey, I need to get ready for work.”

“Mmm,” he mumbles with his face smashed into my pillow.

“You can’t be in here. You need to go back to your room.”

I’d sleep in my bed, too, considering Theo has a full-sized mattress where his feet hang off the edge. But we fit together well in my queen size.

“Nooooo!” He’s a cranky teenager being forced to get up for school.

“Theo, we might get caught.”

“Okay, okay.”

We each rise out of bed, and I remember he’s naked.

“Shit, Theo, you need clothes.”

“As long as the lights aren’t on downstairs”—he groans and stretches his impressive arms like he’s flexing his biceps

—“I’ll walk right into my room and no one will know I was between your thighs all night.”

I peek out my door and I tell him, “You’re in the clear. Go now. Please.”

“All right, all right.”

When he’s safely inside his own room, I get ready for the day and remember to leave the note under his door on the side project I was working on.

I’m using the doorframe like an invisible string holding my posture up. He’s not supposed to be inside my room, inside *me*, but the ability to see right from wrong has failed me up to this point.



I go back to sleep even after Amelia leaves for work. It would have looked suspicious if we were both up at the same time.

Bruce seems oblivious to me because I've made it that way. But my mom has finally picked up how I'm avoiding her second husband. I know that look she gave me at the party won't go without reprimand. She's probably waiting for the opportunity to talk to me about it.

Before I leave my room to shower, I see a piece of paper that was slid under my door.



Theo-

I know you don't have health insurance, but if therapy seems like something you want to look into, I found some county-funded mental health services available. You can also pay a small donation fee to students practicing at the local university. I did find one therapist who is highly rated and willing to accept clients pro bono. I understand if it feels like a forced choice, but he's reputable and has experience with military families. There are some nonprofit nationwide online networks, too, but I wasn't able to get an appointment so I put you on a waitlist if that ends up being a right fit. Hope this helps.

Amelia

My hands shake as I read.

I didn't know where to start, logistically and metaphorically speaking. I knew I needed to see a therapist for all the issues I'm avoiding, but I never knew how to get the ball rolling.

Amelia left me information on the opposite side of her note.

Her intentions are so sincere that I get choked up. I'm fucking falling for my pain-in-the-ass stepsister. How did I let

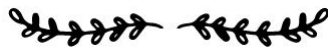
this happen?

An unrequited crush in my teenage years has morphed into something out of my control. We may have sexual chemistry, but fuck if she doesn't rile me up in all the best ways.

I'm crumpling the paper from holding onto it so tight.

"Fuck."

I get started right away and call the number to set up an appointment.



When I head downstairs to make myself some lunch, it's as if my mom had a tracking device put on me the moment I leave my lair.

"Do you have a minute?" she asks while she sets a fresh vase on the table. She prepares a weekly arrangement, and this bouquet is as beautiful as the last.

"I guess." Maybe this will be a good chance to feel her out and see if she suspects anything.

"Bruce is out running errands so I figured now is a good time to have a chat."

"Okay."

She pinches her lips closed, and I watch her fingers tremble. "I wish you'd be more respectful to Bruce while you're living here."

"I'm doing my best, Mom."

“I’d appreciate it if you’d try harder. I have no idea how much longer you plan on being here, but you make it awkward at times. You’ve been short—even with me. That’s so unlike you.”

“Do you think it’s easy for me to see you married to someone else? Dad never should have died over there.”

“Theo.”

She comes to my side and puts her hand over mine.

“The military is a dangerous profession. His position was full of risks, but that was part of his job. I’m not asking you to replace your dad with Bruce. I wish you’d give him a chance.”

She pauses when I have nothing useful to share without making this worse.

“Seems like you gave Amelia a chance?”

“How so?”

“You two can finally be in the same room without a referee.”

“We have a common enemy.” I’m being sarcastic, but she catches the irony.

“At least Amelia is better at faking her sincerity if she doesn’t like me.”

I sigh. “She does like you, I’m kidding. I’ll do better.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

“Anything else?” I’m not in the sharing mood so I keep the therapist information to myself.

“Think you’ll see Seth? You had mentioned he was interested in getting together.”

“He texted me a couple days after the reunion. I haven’t responded yet.”

“Might be nice to have a friend again.”

Lately, Amelia has been the only friend I need. I’ve been able to tell her things I’m neglecting to tell my own mom.

“I’ll text him back.”

“Good.” My mom looks around the kitchen and remembers something. “Bruce and I are going out to dinner tonight. Want to join us?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Please? Meet us for a drink at the bar beforehand. You don’t have to stay the whole night. Amelia can come, too. We’ve all been meaning to go out, the four of us.”

“Yeah okay, if she goes, maybe I’ll go.”



**I**nstead of texting Amelia what her evening is like, I stop by Roasted and ask her in person. Along the way, I solidify plans with Seth to meet for drinks. I’m not jumping at the chance to meet as soon as possible, so when he suggests at least two weeks out, I’m fine with it.

He has a life—a family, a job—and I have nothing. The chance to reconnect will be nice, but I’m also not going to

pretend we are best friends again.

I'm sure Amelia can hear my arrival as I circle the front of Roasted looking for a parking spot. When I walk in, I can see her recalculating her greeting.

She's excited but also reeling it back in.

"Hey, Theo."

She looks as cute as she did back in high school. Her simple black shirt with the Roasted logo in the corner, her clean face, the messy bun on the top of her head... She's as captivating now more than ever.

"Hey, busy day?"

"I'm helping Benny in the back with little details for the movie night. My shift is over in three hours."

"Mind if I order some coffee?"

"Of course not. That's why you're here, right?"

"Yes, and to see if you'd join me for drinks with our parents tonight."

"Our parents?" she asks while she prepares my coffee. I didn't even have to confirm my order; she already knows what I like.

"My mom invited us. I said I'd go if you were coming."

"Tonight?" she confirms.

"We don't have to."

I'll consider this a test to see if I'm capable of being friendly with her dad.

"We can go. I mean—yeah, if you go, I will."

"Sounds good."

She hands over my coffee and whispers, "It's on the house."

"I don't want you getting in trouble." I lean into her face and even with the overpowering aroma of coffee beans floating around us, I can smell her shampoo.

"Benny told me he trusts my discretion." She winks.

"Do you have something in your eye?"

"What the hell! Do you memorize every conversation we've had? How do you do that?"

Yes, I do remember every word she says to me. I replay our conversations in my head and commit to memory each important detail, every joke, anytime she gets my heart rate going. It's impossible not to when she's near me.

I accept the free drink when a group of people come in behind me.

"I guess I'll see you at home." And then I wink.



**T**awny and I are slammed with group after group. I've been so distracted with making coffee that I barely comprehend Theo showing up. I have no idea what to expect from this because I'm too busy perfecting drinks for needy customers.

"I wanted this with coconut milk."

*You never specified that.* "I'm so sorry, let me make a new one."

"This isn't hot enough. You need to redo it."

*Fine, how about third degree burns on your tongue.* "I'm so sorry, of course I'll make you a new one."

"My daughter dropped her chocolate milk, is there any way \_\_\_"

*Tawny can mop that up.* "Oh poor thing, let me make her a new one."

"This tastes like shit."

*You're the one who ordered it.* "I'll make a new one. Try this."

Proceeds to make the exact same drink the same way and the customer is pleased this time.

Between the customers who can't be bothered to put their phone call on hold while they order, or at least give me eye contact, to the bulky man who orders fifteen blended drinks for his youth sport's program without so much as a dollar tip, or the pre-teens who brought in buckets full of sand on their shoeless feet and blasting music from their stereo, I'm exhausted.

But it was the interruption I needed because now there's a lull in our day, enough time before my shift ends to overanalyze how catastrophic tonight might go.

When the phone rings, I'm too preoccupied to answer.

"Roasted, this is Tawny, how can I help you? Yes, she's working right now, would you like to speak with her?"

Tawny sets the phone back in the cradle as confusion wrinkles her forehead.

"What?" I ask.

"Someone keeps calling asking for you."

"A guy?" Beckett is the first person who comes to mind since I blocked his number.

"No, a woman. She's called for the past week, but it was always times you had already left or on your day off. Then she



hangs up when I confirm you're here today.”

“Strange.”

“Very. Bathroom break. You're good?”

“I'll restock and call you if it gets crazy again.”

I prepare a shot of espresso so I can get through this last hour. I'm on edge and unaware of the reason.

What the hell could that phone call be about?

The espresso is kicking in, so I sip on some water. My dad will be able to tell if I'm acting differently. And he can't know I've broken the one request he asked of me.

A good-looking couple walks in and I offer my best jittery smile.

“Hi, welcome to Roasted. How are you?”

“We're good, thanks for asking. Can we get two medium iced coffees with cream and toffee nut syrup please?” the man requests.

“Sure thing. Names?”

“Sam and Harper,” he says.

“Love your order. I used to drink that all the time in high school.” I ring them up and he leaves a generous tip. “Thank you, that's very sweet.”

“This place is so cute,” his girlfriend tells me.

“First time in?” I ask as I multitask by chatting and making their drinks.

“Yeah, we’re heading down to Coronado. Our first trip together as boyfriend and girlfriend.” Harper beams. “But we really needed caffeine.”

“You came to the right place! Let me upgrade ya for first time customers.”

I prepare two large iced coffees instead and hand them over with a smile.

“Thanks for coming in. Enjoy your time in Coronado.”

They leave smiling, and I appreciate Benny letting us spoil the nice customers from time to time. It helps with word of mouth.

But when the door opens and a new customer enters, I’m hit with an invisible blow to my lungs. My pulse is beating rapidly in my chest, and the intensity is scaring me.

*Scarlet.*

“Hi, do you remember me?” she asks as she approaches the counter.

My mouth is dry, and I can barely open it to get a word out.

“Yes, you’re Scarlet.”

“I wanted to stop by and talk to you. Do you have a minute?”

I look around, and there are too many customers inside. I yell to Tawny in the back, “Mind if I take a quick ten?”

I can’t see her, but I hear her loud response. “Sure!”

“Let’s go sit out back,” I suggest.

While she follows me to the secluded tables with an ocean view, I go over the many reasons why she stopped in.

She has to be here to tell me she's no longer with Beckett. We are two women who were bamboozled by the same man. Shit, maybe this is one of those situations like in *John Tucker Must Die* when all the exes gang up on the cheater so they can get revenge. Are there more of us? Why else would she take time out of her life to visit me here?

I hate being ambushed.

“What do you want to talk about?” I ask.

“I know you are Beckett's ex. And I know he was cheating on me with you,” Scarlet offers.

Oh that mouthful of air I gulped down... that won't feel good later. She needs to swap those three words around. He was cheating on *me* with *her*.

“I broke up with him when I found out about you,” I tell her.

“And you were dating for two years?”

“Four.”

Now it's her turn to stay silent as she nods her head to accept his other lie.

“And you had no idea he'd be at the reunion with me?”

“No, I didn't know a thing about you. He didn't tell me, and I didn't want to know.”

“Were you happy with him?”

“I thought I was,” I admit. The way she’s interrogating me and tossing questions like tennis balls to dodge is rather jarring. “But I know now he wasn’t the right guy for me.”

She doesn’t look as grief-stricken as I expected for someone who got confirmation her fiancé is a cheating bastard. She will find someone better.

But when she puts her hand on the table, her engagement ring blinds me when it hits the sun just right. Is that normal when you break up you get to keep the ring? Why is she still wearing it?

“You don’t want Beckett back, do you?” she asks

“Hell no. Is that why you came here? To make sure he ends up alone? He will, don’t worry.”

“What do you mean?”

“A guy like him doesn’t deserve to have a happy ending.”

“Amelia, I think you’re mistaken. He and I haven’t ended our engagement.”

“Wait, what? Are you serious? But you will break up with him, right?”

“I love him,” she admits, and the sincerity in her voice is real. She’s not joking.

“But he cheated on you! He was with me first. He was sleeping with us both. He hasn’t even been honest with you.”

“He’s my soulmate.”

A chuckle that sounds more like a childish giggle comes from my mouth. “Your soulmate?”

I’m full of inappropriate laughter, and I’m aware of how callous I’m being, but I can’t help it. I figured I’d have someone to gossip about Beckett with. Someone to air out our dirty laundry to see if we had matching sets. Forget the idea of us conspiring to bring Beckett down like *The Other Woman*. Sounds like he’s coming out of this happier than me. How?

“This conversation is over,” I tell her as I get up from the table. I’m never this harsh with anyone, but I owe this woman nothing.

“Amelia, I know it sounds crazy I’m staying with him, but —”

“You don’t have to defend yourself. It’s your life. He’s no longer in mine, you have that cheating bastard.”



When I get home, I run up to Theo’s room to spill the news. My hand is on the door handle before I remember I can’t barge in like I own the place. Knocking with the back of my hand, I wait for Theo to give me the go ahead and come in.

“Yes?”

“It’s me, can I come in?”

“Who’s me?”

Rolling my eyes, I open the door anyway, completely uninvited.

“Whoa, hey, hey!” He’s in the process of pulling his boxer briefs up, and my eyes focus on his lower half. Nothing I haven’t seen before, but I’m still voiceless.

Theo rushes to the door and shuts it behind us.

“Do you think that’s smart, hiding me in your room?” He’s aware of my insinuation but doesn’t care about the implication.

“I got the note you left me.”

Tilting my head to look him in the eyes, I reply, “Oh, oh yeah that.”

“That has to be the nicest thing someone has ever done for me. Thank you, Amelia.”

He cradles my face between both of his hands and squeezes my cheeks with light pressure before placing a delicate kiss on my lips.

It’s the type of kiss that opens the door to so much more, an unspoken invitation that this could lead to whatever we want it to. And even though my body is screaming to progress this, he *is* only one article of clothing away from being naked, we have to leave for dinner shortly.

“I have to get ready for dinner, but I had to come up and tell you something.”

“What is it?”

He doesn't appear ruffled that the heat between us spikes so high it feels like we are in purgatory. He's absorbed in my words.

Suddenly, I don't feel like telling him about Scarlet, not right before we have to pretend with our parents there isn't something hanging over us.

"Just that..." I clear my throat as I take in Theo's simple appearance. He's tanner since he's been home, and his olive skin accentuates the strong ocean blue resemblance in his stare. It's like gravity pulling me in, waiting for me to immerse myself.

"You didn't get in trouble for my free drink, I hope?"

"Ha, ha, no. No, Benny doesn't care. I wanted to thank you for coming tonight. I'm sure this means a lot to my dad."

"You were the bargaining chip. I wouldn't be going if you didn't."

"Hopefully it won't be a waste of your time."

My dad's voice is loud from the first floor. "Amelia, you up there?"

"Shit." I scurry out of his room. "Hey Dad, what's up?"

Hanging my body off the top of the stairs, our eyes meet just in time that my exit could have come from my own bedroom.

"You're coming tonight?" he confirms.

"Yeah, I still need to get ready, but I'll come for appetizers."

He does an embarrassing little jig that makes me snort.

I cover my eyes. “Please don’t ever do that again.”

“This is great. Want to drive with me and Molly or—”

“I’ll take her.” Theo appears behind me, fortunately fully clothed.

“Perfect. We’ll leave earlier and get a table in the lounge. Let us know when you’re ready to go.”

This might be more uncomfortable now than it was when Theo met me for the first time. At least then I didn’t know what he looked like naked.

We have to be on our best behavior. I cannot give off the impression I have done exactly what my dad confided in me not to do.





I never would have agreed to this if Amelia wasn't coming along. But I need to work on my relationship with Bruce, and I think I can handle an hour in his company. Consider this the nice hour, but I'm playing with Amelia's dad.

She doesn't take long to get ready. We're not going anywhere super fancy, but she wears some wedge-type heels that pair well with her jeans and sleeveless top. Her delicate shoulders hold up two straps that are tied in a modest bow. She looks exquisite.

"Ready?" she asks me.

She's standing beside me, and even with the shoes giving her a three inch advantage, I tower over her. The magnetism is a reminder I would do anything in my power to protect her.

"Yep, after you."

When I find a parking spot, Amelia exits the vehicle and announces, "I'm not drinking tonight, by the way."

"Any reason why?"

"I need a clear head. I can't be buzzed and slipping that—"

“I’ve given you two types of orgasms?”

“Shh, yes. That. Exactly that. I’m not taking that chance.”

“Fair enough.”

I find my mom right away, even before she starts waving her arms in the air to signal their location.

“She’s so embarrassing sometimes,” I mumble under my breath as we walk toward them.

“You should have seen the little dance my dad did when he found out I was coming tonight. Talk about humiliating—hi guys!”

The transformation from shit talker to sweet stepdaughter is effortless and comical. Bruce reaches out a hand as my mom gives Amelia a hug.

I give him a firm handshake similar to one I would offer a potential boss.

My mom, Bruce, and Amelia are doing most of the talking, so I sit back and speak up when necessary.

“So, did you ever connect with Seth?” my mom asks.

“Yeah, we’re getting drinks.”

“That was his best friend growing up,” she tells Bruce. “The reunion was fun? Get any good gossip about your classmates?”

“Did Amelia tell you that—” Before I can complete my sentence and mention how her ex-boyfriend made a cameo with his fiancée, the heel of Amelia’s wedge stomps my foot.

Why doesn't she want her dad knowing this?

"He won the raffle and got two free nights there," Amelia interrupts.

"Did you reconnect with any old crushes?" my mom asks.

"No, one girl gave me her business card. Hannah. That's about it."

"What? You're telling me a good-looking man like yourself didn't leave with a handful of dates on your calendar?"

"Daaad," Amelia whines. "That's kind of personal."

"I'm sorry, I figured you'd be fighting them off with a stick."

My mom laughs at his compliment as unease creeps into Amelia's features.

"I'm not interested in dating. Timing doesn't feel right," I admit as Amelia checks a text alert.

"Hey, no phones, please. Molly and I finally get some time with you two—"

"Oh my God!" she blurts out.

We all wait for the shocking news that could be anywhere from a celebrity dying to Roasted catching on fire.

"Damian, my old coworker, he texted. Said he heard a company similar to my old one will be posting an ad soon for a position I'd be perfect for. He's giving me the head's up because his friend works in HR there."

"Down here?" I ask.

“No, up in LA. This is amazing.”

For once, Bruce and I are on the same page and experiencing the bittersweet taste of this complex moment. Neither of us wants her to leave, but this is still her dream, and she’s not going to be a barista living at home forever.

“Holy shit, this is so exciting,” she gushes.

My mom is the only one happy for her as she gets out of her chair to give her a hug. Like this tidbit of information has already sealed her fate and she’s ready to pack her bags to leave us all behind for good.

The necessary energy to make small talk drains out of me when I realize what this means.

I’m sure I resemble the typical moody persona they are used to, but Amelia is on top of the world and unaware of how impacted I am by this news.

I’m happy for her, for this opportunity. But I also know my time is running out, and I’ll have to tell her how I feel sooner or later. I don’t see her jumping at the opportunity to bring me along with her.

Amelia is so blissfully unaware of my change of attitude that on the car ride home, she’s thanking me for being so talkative with her dad.

Sure, I gave him eye contact for the first time in weeks, and I answered any question he had for me, but I didn’t go out of my way to connect with him like I had planned. The potential job opportunity threw me off my game.

“Your mom is so lovely. I mean it.”

“Thanks, she really likes you.”

“I meant to tell you,” Amelia begins, and I hope it’s not about the text I’ve been avoiding. “Scarlet came into Roasted today.”

“My old classmate? Beckett’s fiancée?”

“Yeah, I was certain she was there to admit she threw her ring back in his face. But no, she was there to make sure I didn’t ruin their future together and come back asking for a second chance.”

“Wow, they deserve each other. They sound unstable and scared to be alone.”

“Maybe she wanted to see it on my face and not over the phone, but I’m still shocked this happened at all. I’m surprised how unbothered I am about it, but how is it fair a man like that is getting a perfect ending? It doesn’t work like that.”

I don’t want to shatter her hopes and point out this isn’t a movie. Happy endings aren’t guaranteed for everyone, and sometimes, the villain gets his redemption.

“Why didn’t you tell your dad? I didn’t realize it was a secret.”

“I don’t know. Ever since I’ve been home, I feel like I’ve been keeping a lot from him.”

“Hopefully he didn’t sense something happening between us—I mean, that something *has* happened between us.”

My save is convincing enough that maybe she won't pick up on the fact I am slowly falling in love with her.

“He definitely didn't suspect anything. Think your mom did?”

“No way. I think we are in the clear.”



**A**gainst my better judgment, Amelia and I have been sleeping in the same bed for nearly a week. Some nights all we do is sleep beside each other, but most times we can't keep our hands off each other.

It's become an unspoken routine that I fear she will break any day now.

She got her shift covered today because tomorrow she has an interview for that position her coworker told her about.

I've been helping her with questions because, despite my fears she will return to LA without a backward glance in my direction, I want her to achieve every dream, even if it doesn't include me.

We're floating in the pool as we finish up another round of the expected questions.

“What was your favorite movie trailer you made?” I ask now that she feels prepared enough. I'm tanning the front of my body as I lie face up on a watermelon raft.

“This thriller called *Happily Never After*. Sounds cheesy as hell, but there were enough good scenes where I pieced it together and made it look crazy suspenseful.”

“Never heard of it,” I tell her.

“It got a Razzie award. The biggest accolade of my career.” She does a spin in an inflatable donut.

“Well, I’m certain you’ll kill this interview. Not because I’m coaching you up, but because you deserve this.”

“Thanks, Theo.”

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to go get ready for my drinks with Seth.”

“Oh yeah, that’s tonight?”

Drifting toward the steps, she follows my motion and paddles after me.

“Not excited?” she asks when I give her an unenthused face.

“I’ll have to come clean about us, at the very least,” I tell her.

“Oh right. What will you say? That it was all for fun or that we broke up?”

“Haven’t thought that far yet.”

“You can say whatever you want. I won’t mind either way.”

“Good to know.”

I’m standing on the concrete as Amelia looks up to me in her raft. My body is blocking the sun and casting a shadow



over her face. She shields her eyes with her hand so she can see a little better.

“Have fun tonight. Thanks for helping me.”

“Of course, I bet we won’t have to practice again.”

“Yeah, I hope not.”

I take this as my cue to leave, even if her voice is manifesting uncertainty. I can’t be her voice of reason right now. Because I don’t want her to leave.



**G**assing up the Mustang to head north, I contemplate how this night might go.

Seth and I are different people now. There’s a slim chance if our falling out never happened, our friendship wouldn’t have lasted through the different stages of life anyway. College. Careers. Marriage. Kids. We may realize we have nothing in common as adults.

I visualize Seth from the night of our reunion. He’s a grown man now with a wife and baby waiting at home. While I have no clue what he does for a living, I can bet it’s more lucrative than what’s sitting in my bank account.

He’s already here, and I sneak up on him like old times.

Seth grabbed a table in the bar and his back is turned as he watches a baseball game displayed on all the televisions. He’s in a tall barstool as I wrap my arms around him.

He gets up to give me a proper hug, and we hold onto each other for longer than usual. I thought I'd have my emotions in check, but I'm getting choked up now that I'm here.

"It's so good to see you." Seth's eyes are glossy, and I feel better knowing I'm not the only sentimental one here.

"You, too. You look great."

"Me? You want to talk about me looking great? Please. I can see why you and Amelia are a thing now. I wouldn't be able to deny you, either."

"Damn, getting right to it huh?" I laugh.

"Come on, I saw the way she looked at you at the reunion."

"Really?"

"She was all over you."

Uncertainty is controlling my every thought. I don't want to admit we were faking, and I feel like I can sneak around this without outwardly lying.

"A lot has changed in the last ten years."

"Is it love yet?"

Fuck.

"I've had a thing for her for so long..."

"She has to know already. Remember that time she was taking out the trash at Roasted, and one of the bags ripped? We watched on as she nearly burst into tears. You went over and helped her clean it all up."

“Wow, I don’t remember that.”

“She had to have known you loved her.”

“It’s a delicate situation, what’s happening between us. Our parents don’t know.”

“I was about to ask how her dad is handling the news, *stepson*.”

His look displays the level of snark I’m familiar with giving Amelia.

“He would fucking kill me. I don’t want him finding out until we figure out what’s going on.”

“Amelia looked good.”

Now he’s offering a look like he wants to elaborate.

“Go ahead, say it,” I give him permission.

“She looked *really* fucking good. Like wow, dude. If only ten years looked that good on me.”

“Hey, you’re still a catch.”

“My hair is thinning in the front, do you see this?” He cranes his neck forward to reveal a receding hairline.

“I can’t even see it.”

“Bullshit. You’re such a bad liar.”

“Show me some photos of your wife and baby. This is crazy. Tell me all about them.”

Seth proceeds to show photo after photo of his wife and the spitting image of her but in baby form. From how they met, to

the surreal birthing story, to how he's managing a family now.

"She's adorable. Eight months old?" I ask.

"Yep, her name is Karen."

I have to hide my horror with a cough.

"Karen? Cool name."

He cackles. "I'm fucking with you. Her name is Ally, and I love her to death. Best thing that ever happened to me."

Even if we're in different places in our lives, it's like a day hasn't passed as I reconnect with my old friend.

And I even let it slide that Seth turned into an Angels fan. When we were little, we were diehard Dodger fans. Watching him root for the wrong team on the TV above the bar is blasphemy.

He also got pineapple on his pizza, another sacrilegious notch against him. The teasing is brotherly, and before the night ends, I realize this is the kind of connection and friendship I was missing.

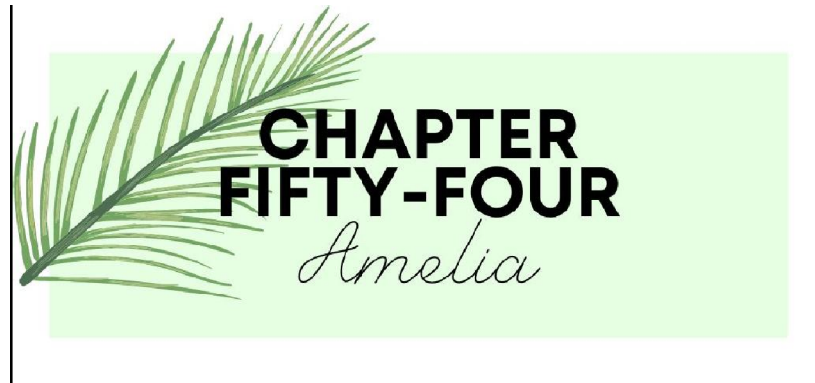
I don't want our childhood stories to be the only thing I have left of him. I want to create new memories with Seth and not confess to my mom tonight that he's "some guy I don't know anymore." I need to make an effort this time around and let the past go.

He and I both made mistakes but are willing to forgive and forget—two things necessary to build a foundation for a new

kind of friendship. And something I swore I would work on now that I'm home.

I'll be seeing more of him as time allows, and I promise him even if life gets too busy, I'll attend his daughter's first birthday party so I can meet his family.

A lot can happen in four months. I have no idea where I'll be and what I might be doing, but at least I know I'll have an old friend by my side.



**O**n my drive up to LA for the interview, Lucille talks to me the entire way, preparing me with facts and sales numbers like she has it all memorized. She’s a lifesaver.

“Remember to smile when you talk, it helps,” she suggests over speakerphone. “And call me after to let me know how it goes.”

“I will, thank you for everything.”

“Good luck.”

I’m up there with plenty of time to spare, and I’m grateful I got the earliest time slot. I like being the first so they know they already found their candidate.



**T**heo has been quiet through text messages, so when I get home and see him sitting in the kitchen for lunch, my stoic face reveals nothing.

He’s careful with his words when I set down my purse. “How did it go?”

“I killed it!” I exclaim. I think I even do a jump in the air that’s quite unlike me. “Theo, I did so well. That was the best interview I’ve ever done. They were so impressed.”

Now it’s his turn to display an unflappable reaction. “I knew it. I’m so proud of you.”

He’s happy for me, I know he is, but he also looks... defeated.

What could that be about? Because he knows I’ll be moving back to LA and whatever is going on with us ends? He knows this won’t last—it *can’t* last. It’s the mantra I’ve been repeating in my head. He has to be reciting it, too.

“When will you find out you got the job?”

“They said they’ll have an answer no later than tomorrow. I’m going to be glued to my phone waiting for that call.”

“You deserve this, Amelia. You do. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.” I’m catching my breath, high off the excitement of one of my dreams finally coming true.

I wanted a career that gave me a purpose, that challenged me, something that wouldn’t feel like “work,” and I’m so close to checking that box again.

“Want to go out and celebrate?” I feel like spending money.

“I have an appointment with my therapist soon, actually.”

“Oh, wow, you do? That’s great. How is that going?”

“Yeah, it’s only my second session. But I like him. Thanks again for getting all the information for me.”

I watch as he washes his plate off and sets it in the dishwasher. His body language is throwing me off because it's so opposite of the sweet, supportive words he's saying.

"Is everything okay?" I place a palm on his shoulder.

"Oh yeah, preparing myself for an afternoon unpacking all the baggage in my head."

"Okay, come find me if you feel like talking about it later. Or we can go swimming?"

"Will do."

He leaves the kitchen, but the strangeness of the exchange lingers long after he's gone.

If I get this job, I will still help Benny with the movie night, which is a little over a week away. Everything is about ready, but I feel jittery knowing there's a possibility I might not be working with him again.

I'll miss Benny, and I'm trying not to jinx myself with the lucky hand I've been given, but I have a good feeling about this. I'm emotional that my time in Del Mar could be coming to an end.

Even if Theo's indifference is obvious, I end the evening feeling confident.



**T**heo returns home from therapy but still avoids me. I'm not upset he didn't want to hang out—it's a rather



blurred line we are toeing, and we didn't establish any rules to throw off our parents. But I assumed wrong.

Either way, before closing my eyes to sleep, I open up my email to send the follow-up thank you letter to my potential new boss.



I've never been to a therapist before, let alone make recurring appointments for the future. Even though I told Amelia I like him, I'm hesitant to open up to a stranger. It'll take time for me to reveal the deep feelings floating around me with no tether.

I think with the necessary effort to put into this, I'll eventually be able to talk about the death of my father and everything that came with it. My mom moving on without me, the stepdad I haven't accepted, the stepsister I all but love, and my life that is so different from what I imagined it could be.

Amelia and I went up to our individual rooms and spent the evening alone behind closed doors. I'm avoiding her until we find out the good news tomorrow. Maybe my detached behavior isn't as obvious as I imagine, but if we hang out tonight, it'd be too difficult to hide. The reality lies in her decision to stay or go.

And why *would* she stay? She has no clue how I feel, and I have nothing to offer her.

Around 10:00 p.m., my door creaks open.

No knock, no warning, but I see Amelia standing in my room.

I'm the one that usually sneaks into her bed in the middle of the night—she has a queen-sized mattress, after all—so seeing her here excites me.

“Amelia?” I mumble in the dark.

“I didn't get the job.”

“What?” I peel back the top sheet and I'm at her side right away.

She's crying, her face shiny and wet in the sliver of moonlight reflecting in my dark room.

“You didn't? How do you know?”

“I went to send a thank you email, and I saw it sitting in my inbox. I never checked because I expected they'd call me tomorrow. But they already told me no.”

“Oh, Amelia,” I sigh, wrapping my arms around her lower waist while she nuzzles her face into the crook of my shoulder. She's racked with heaving sobs, and we're both unable to talk.

What would I say anyway? I'm so sorry? That won't make an ounce of difference for her, and who wants to hear another lie that something better might come along?

She's on the verge of hyperventilating, and I hold her tighter so she knows it's okay to crumble; I'll keep her upright for as long as she needs.

“Hey, sweetie,” I begin as she catches her breath. “Let’s go to sleep. We can handle this in the morning. Okay?”

She nods her head, oblivious to my term of endearment. Instead of letting her lead the way to her room, I scoop her up in my arms and carry her to her bed.

Setting her down gently, she looks up to me as I cover her in her sheets. “Can you stay? Please?”

Bending down to wipe a fresh tear off her reddened cheek, I answer, “Of course. Whatever you need.”



I spent most of the night making sure Amelia was okay. It took her a while to calm down and finally succumb to sleep, but I was wide awake for hours after, trying to figure out how I could help her.

But I came up empty handed. There’s nothing I could offer her that would make her situation better. It’s a harsh reality to accept that I’m useless.

She stirs in her sleep, and I keep my arm around her for as long as I can before she tosses and turns into another position. Her faint cries as she dreams about a better life are painful to hear.

I have no idea what comes next for her. Was this her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and it’s gone?

Anger will be the expected emotion when we wake up, but I didn’t realize it’d consume her the moment her eyes opened.

“Why is this happening? I did so well. I can’t freaking believe this.”

I rub my eyes and summon the energy to match hers. “What exactly did the email say?”

“They had chosen their candidate but to keep applying if other jobs come up. They won’t come up, not at their company.”

“Maybe they already had someone in mind since they decided so fast. Sometimes companies have to interview anyway to show they had the position open for external candidates.”

“But that’s so unfair. Don’t give me hope. I thought this was it for me.”

Amelia’s close to shouting, which is fair given the circumstances, but I interrupt her so I can remind her where we are and how she’s dressed.

“Keep talking, but I’m going to open your door. If someone came up, it wouldn’t look so good... how we are.”

Amelia looks down at what little clothing she’s wearing. A pair of cotton panties that show off her butt cheeks and a thin enough tank top I can see her nipples poking through.

“Right. And you inside my sheets would cause a mutiny.”

She pulls her shirt over her head and when she exposes her bare chest, it sends a blistering wildfire of heat throughout my body. As I swing the door open, Amelia and I register the same instant footsteps are approaching.

“Shit,” she whispers, and motions for me to hide in her closet.

“Put a shirt on,” I demand because being in her room isn’t a faux pas, but being in her room while she was naked from the waist up sure is. Plus it might be my mom looking for me, and this house isn’t big enough for me to be missing so early.

Amelia understands my nonverbal reasoning and grabs something off her messy floor right as I lean my body against the doorframe.

Bruce rounds the corner while Amelia slips a T-shirt over her head. *My* T-shirt. I must have left it in here from some other night and never collected it when I went back to my side of the house.

“Hey, you’re both up early,” Bruce acknowledges.

My arms are crossed on purpose as a sign of defense. Maybe he’ll think he’s interrupting an argument rather than me sleeping in her bed all night.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

“No, everything is not okay.” It takes a second for Amelia to realize her shirt is, in fact, not her shirt. But she hides the shock well. “I didn’t get the job, Dad.”

“What? They already called you? No.”

“They emailed me last night. I ran into Theo in the hall and was telling him.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry.”

He enters her room for a hug, and I wonder if the sigh that came from his lips is filled with relief. His daughter will be sticking around longer than intended.

“This isn’t how the real world works.” I expect Amelia to stomp her feet into the ground.

“What do you mean?” I ask as they end their embrace.

“I should have gotten that job. The timing was perfect. Everything was lining up for this to be the job for me. But no, I’m working at the same place I was in high school, and my ex is getting married to someone who willingly accepts his infidelity. How is that fair? My life is so far from where it’s supposed to be at my age. Nothing turned out the way it should have. Nothing.”

“Beckett is getting married?” Bruce gasps. He *is* behind on the gossip.

“Yes. I kept praying it was all a huge joke. This has to be a joke, right?”

Bruce turns to face me, and I mirror the same baffled expression. I’m not about to admit I know every detail and he doesn’t.

“There will be another job coming up—”

Amelia interrupts him with an abrasive tone. “There won’t be any other jobs, Dad. This was *the* job. I’m shocked that one was even posted.”

“But, I’m sure—”

“No, you don’t understand the industry. I’m going to be serving coffee for the rest of my life.”

“There’s nothing wrong with—”

“Dad, stop!”

I’m familiar with her snappy tone, but I’m typically the one on the receiving end. Even Bruce is shocked he’s getting a taste of the back-talk usually set aside for me.

“Maybe you can—” I begin, but she interrupts me with the same aforementioned anger.

“I need to be alone.”

“Okay, if you need to talk to any of us, we’ll be around,” Bruce offers.

Walking back to my own room, I’m able to read her well enough that I decide she can come to me when she’s ready.





**N**o one bothers to ask me where I'm going when I make my escape in a hurricane of rage. Even with the slammed doors and huffing and puffing to my car, everyone leaves me alone. Smart move.

I arrive at Benny's house after texting him I need someone to talk to. Theo has been my confidant as of late, but I can't confide in him now.

Benny lives so close to the ocean that I can taste the sea salt in the air when I park.

He and Chase wave from their balcony, and he directs me to the stairs along the side of his beachy cottage to join him. This isn't my first time here, but the familiarity of the house I remembered is gone.

"Did you extend the front porch?" I ask as his husband hugs me.

"We've done a lot since you've seen it last," Benny says.

"Mimosa?" Chase offers.

“I’m okay. I need to be sober so I can figure out what the hell I’m going to do with my life.”

“We’re so sorry you didn’t get the job,” Benny declares. “I won’t even make my selfish joke about you being here longer. I know how badly you wanted this.”

“Nothing else might come up?” Chase inquires.

“It could, but I’m not counting on it. I’m shocked I even got the interview. Do you know how difficult it is having this dream in your head and failing?”

They’re sympathetic and frown at my rhetorical question.

“Why is this so hard to accept? The rejection?”

“It’s never easy feeling like you’re not good enough. It’s okay if you need to feel that for a while.”

“Thanks, Benny. I’m sorry to come over here and ruin your brunch.”

“We love having you here. We only have mimosas; no brunch food to provide.”

“I can make some eggs?” Chase offers.

“No, no, don’t do that. I’m going to admire the view, and when you’re not looking, move into one of the rooms in your house.”

“If that gets you to stick around, by all means. Chase sure isn’t using the home gym we got installed.”

“Excuse you!” he sasses.

“I don’t even mind sleeping among the dumbbells. I don’t need a lot of room.”

“You’re telling me being in the arms of that hunk isn’t good enough?”

Benny has a point, and I was hopeful the conversation wouldn’t turn to this.

“How do you know we’re sleeping together?” I question.

“You live across the hall from each other, how could you not?”

“He’s a rebound, that’s it. He can’t be anything more than that.”

“Why not?” Chase is asking the hard questions, and Benny claps for his courage.

“He’s my stepbrother,” I remind them.

“You didn’t even grow up together!” Benny’s voice blasts through the air and scares away a seagull perched on his roof. “You’re acting like you grew up together since diapers. Honey, you are a grown-ass woman. If he is who you want, go for it.”

“Okay, let’s say Theo and I tell our parents we have hypothetical feelings for each other and *maybe* we want to see where it goes. I’d send my dad to an early grave with the heart attack he’d be hit with. He’d keel over at the thought. I already promised him I wouldn’t be doing exactly what we’ve been doing.”

“Promises are meant to be broken.” Benny’s eyeballs are locked with mine as he sips his mimosa.

“The dynamics are already delicate as is. You don’t find this too taboo?” I look at Chase for his opinion.

“No. You already spent ten years ignoring each other. If you decided to give this a chance and ultimately broke up, you’re both familiar with leaving each other behind. It’d be awkward for your parents, sure, but what if you were each other’s soulmates? You’d never know without giving him a chance.”

“You don’t think your dad would want you happy?” Benny gulps the rest of his mimosa.

“I’d be happier in LA.”

They are both silent, and I hate having to defend my stance. Maybe this is my cue to leave.

“I need to get going,” I tell them.

“No, you’re mad. Don’t go,” Benny pleads.

“I need to pick up some things for the event on Friday. I want it to be perfect.”

“It will be perfect. Don’t leave mad. Please.”

“I’m not mad, I’m frustrated.”

“That’s the same thing,” Benny laughs.

“I’ll be okay. Thanks for listening to my problems, you guys. I’ll see you soon.”

“Anytime, love.”



Once again, I'm avoiding going home. I don't want to see my dad and hear his cheerleader attitude and how I'll find something better.

I'm sure Molly would be the same, but worse. I don't want optimism right now. I want realism, and maybe a crystal ball so I can see into the future. I can't be at Roasted forever.

The event is in a few days, and it's the only thing keeping me from quitting and truly returning to my teenage ways of sleeping all day and ignoring my responsibilities.

I'm one stubbed toe away from losing it and unleashing hell.

When I walk into the house, it's quiet. Everyone's cars are parked, but they must be hiding from me for good reason.

I don't even care if I'm being a dramatic, whiny princess. That was my dream job. My optimism is gone. What hope I had from the movies I fell in love with has ended.

I am not meant to have the ending I envisioned.



Everyone avoids me like the plague, until the morning of the event when I force myself downstairs for breakfast.

"Hi, Ames, how's your morning going?"

My dad's cautious attempt at feeling me out is obvious only to me.

“Fine, I’m excited to get this night over with and see how we do.”

“Did a lot of people RSVP?” Molly asks.

“Yes, but like any party, I guarantee a lot won’t show up, and even more will who didn’t get back to us.”

“We’ll be there,” my dad announces as he holds onto Molly’s hand.

Theo enters the kitchen as I open a pack of his Pop-Tarts that got shoved to the back of the cupboard.

“Did you ask if you could eat those?” he questions me as I read his tone.

Is he kidding? Is he serious? I don’t know the protocol since we’ve been ignoring each other and sleeping in our own rooms.

But when he winks at me, my bated breath is freed from my full cheeks. Okay, he’s teasing me, like always, and I can handle this.

“Oh, did you want these?” I wave them in his face like he’s allergic but craving them regardless.

“No, they’re all yours.”

“You sure? We can split them. There are two.”

“Please, no. The smell alone is making my blood sugar levels rise.”

“I’ll take the other.” My dad puts out his palm, and I hand him the other half of my brown sugar cinnamon.

“The box is practically empty,” I exclaim.

“Oh yeah, that was me,” my dad confesses. “I might have had a midnight snack here and there.”

“Bruce! That’s so bad for your cholesterol. You know what your doctor said.”

“What did your doctor say?” I interrupt Molly before she can elaborate.

“I’m fine. I have to take it easy on the red meat. That’s all.”

I don’t believe him. “Are you sure nothing else?”

“I swear, honey.”

“Swear on Mom.”

It slips out, a pinky promise assurance a scared child would make. But that’s how I feel as I stand on two wobbly legs, terrified my only living parent could be sick.

“I swear on your mom. I do need to watch my diet, though. No more sugar.”

He hands back the Pop-Tart and I exchange it for a banana.

“I need to get ready for tonight. Theo, were you planning on coming by?” I’ve put him on the spot, something I would have done prior to our misdeeds.

“Were you expecting me there?” His response is typical, like we are two indecisive adults who can’t choose an emotion and stick with it for a day.

But he also puts *me* on the spot, making me disclose my objective.

“I mean...if you have other things to do, you don't have to.”

“He's going,” Molly decides for him.

“Great, sounds like I'll see you all there.”





**CHAPTER  
FIFTY-SEVEN**  
*Theo*

I drive alone and park two blocks away due to the craziness of full parking lots. When I walk up to the entrance, I feel like a celebrity attending a movie premier.

I'm curious if Benny and Amelia planned for this many people. The insanity and rush of excitement truly feels like an Oscar red carpet moment. There might not be any seats left, not that I planned on watching the movie from start to finish. I'm here for support.

It costs \$2 to enter, an inexpensive excuse to see the woman I'm pining after.

The back of the building looks like it was transformed into a brand-new venue. There are comfy chairs and a mini bar set up, with a huge screen projecting the movie.

My mom and Bruce are snuggling together as they watch. Everyone is enthralled and laughing, and those who needed an excuse to drink have the chance to do so stage right. A group of adults are gathered in a cluster as they sip on Hawaiian drinks.

I'm so proud of her for pulling this off. This isn't even her area of expertise and she still did a fantastic job.

Benny materializes from the shadows and pulls me into the back of the coffee shop. "You made it."

"You have a great turnout. Did you plan for all these people?"

"Yes and no. We're making it work. I'm a vulture watching everyone to make sure they don't put so much as a baby toe in that sand with their drink. That will get us fined for sure. Can I grab you anything? I can even make you some coffee?"

"I'm okay, I was seeing if Amelia was around..."

And speak of the devil, she enters the same door we came from and has a look of surprise.

"Wow, you came."

We exchange an awkward hug that resembles one divorced parents would give in front of their kids.

"You can do better than that," Benny encourages.

Before Amelia can offer me a better embrace, someone comes crashing through the same back door.

"We're almost out of vodka!" he frets, and I think it's Benny's husband, Chase. I saw him at the pool party.

Amelia gasps. "I am so glad I planned for this."

She goes into the fridge and pulls out two bottles that were hidden in the bottom shelf.

“You are always prepared. No wonder Benny loves you.” He gives Amelia a quick kiss on the cheek before he disappears again.

“Pretty sure the cost of entry has already paid off the rentals. We’re doing really well,” Benny says.

I can tell he cares about Amelia, and I wonder if he’s in the same scenario her dad and I are sitting in: we don’t want her moving back to LA.

“I’ll give you two a minute.” He winks at me and leaves out the same door.

“How are you?” I ask, unsure where we left off.

The back and forth can be fun, but it’s also exhausting trying to remember if we’re pretending to hate each other or are getting along in secret.

“I’ve been good. Glad this night is almost over. I can relax again and concentrate on finding a job.”

I want the dynamic between us to remain cordial, so I don’t break her disillusioned heart and remind her she might have to branch out of her industry.

“Do you need a ride home?” I offer.

“If you wouldn’t mind? You might have to stick around for twenty minutes after Benny, Tawny, and I clean up.”

“Sure, I could even help, if you needed it.”

“That’d be nice, thank you. Can I make you anything? I can grab a mai tai for you? Make a coffee blaster shake?”

“I thought those weren’t on the menu anymore.”

“Pretty sure I could make one for old time’s sake.”

“Why not. For old time’s sake.”

She keeps the lights dimmed but could probably make these drinks in the dark.

When the blender quiets down to an insufferable stillness, I seize this rare moment of solitude.

My palms cup her cheeks, and I inhale when our lips brush against each other. She’s the oxygen that’s been withheld from me, and I crave her like any starving man would. Amelia breathes me in like she, too, has been yearning for this but had greater self-control.

Before I know it, my hands are roaming over her body, propping her up on the counter as we kiss with a magnetism I can’t explain.

Anyone could walk in on us, and while Benny did confirm he’d give us some time alone, the risk is fueling my desire. I want to taste every inch of her one last time, because I sense Amelia will be ending this sooner than later. I’ll take whatever she can give me.

“I need more.” I’m panting, out of breath, out of my mind with an irresistible hunger I need appeased immediately.

“Back corner. Cameras don’t reach that area.”

Carrying her with her legs wrapped around my torso, abandoning the shake I was never going to drink, I hoist her

around the shelves and pin her to the wall.

As much as I want to fuck her, we don't have the luxury of time right now. We'd be given a five second delay if anyone were to walk in, but I don't think either of us is willing to take that uncertainty.

My fingers feel underneath her dress for the straps of her panties, and I yank on one side and tug them down her legs. I bend at my knees to pluck them off the ground and tuck them in my back pocket. It'll be my parting souvenir.

While I'm down here, I flip up the front of her dress, pressing my palm on her lower stomach and forcing her flat against the wall.

I separate her legs when I grab her ankle, maneuvering it so one thigh rests on my shoulder.

"You good?" I confirm as she balances on one leg.

She nods her head and waits for the moment I make my move.

My pressure is soft at first, knowing we don't have a lot of time but not hitting her with too much right away. I circle over her and the heat between her thighs makes me wish I had the ability to stop time. I leave long, dragged out grazes with my tongue, using a free hand to spread her open with my fingers. Her entire body reacts, twitching any time I make brief contact with the area she wants me at most. But I tease her, licking around her and only visiting for a brief second before I'm elsewhere.

I fucking *own* her. She's wetter than ever before, so I increase my speed and press into her harder as I suck and slide my whole mouth over her. She trembles every time I rub against her clit, the up and down motion of my tongue sending her body off the deep end. I want to dive in with her, so I keep up the same movement, feeling her lower half contort and seize like it's about to erupt.

She suppresses her moans, but I hear every stifled sigh or squeal when I focus my attention on making her come. She is so close, and I wish I could make this last forever, tease her and play with her, bend her over so I can get one final chance inside her. But I have to make this quick, and I suck hard and slow on her until she bursts.

"Theo," she whispers, her ankle dangling near my back and forcing me closer. "Theo... I'm com—"

She doesn't finish her sentence, but instead writhes her lower half into my face, whimpering as my mouth devours her.

Coming out from under her dress, I suck in my bottom lip and savor her taste. I keep her panties in my pocket and watch her collect herself.

"You good?" I ask again as her chest heaves with weighty breaths.

"Fuck..." she gasps, stunned I can still accomplish such a rare feat.

She wipes her hairline, not exactly enough time for her to begin sweating from the heat, but more so because she's still

delirious with pleasure.

“I need to go back out there,” she says. “Umm, you’ll still give me a ride home?”

“Of course.”

“Okay... Okay. I’ll find you later?”

“Sure.”

She hurries past me as I walk to the front of the counter and collect the milkshake.

Taking a small sip, I’m hit with a deluge of memories. It tastes exactly how it did ten years ago: sweet and delicious. Exactly the same as the woman who made it.



**B**enny approaches and whispers in my ear, “How strange, the cameras malfunctioned for like ten minutes.”

I offer him an image of innocence as I flatten out the front of my dress. I’m bare under here, and I don’t need a cool breeze offering everyone a glimpse at my southern regions.

Drinks weren’t served for the last twenty minutes to give guests an opportunity to recuperate from the strong pours. So during the last ten minutes of the movie, Benny, Chase, Tawny, and I prepare everything to be hauled inside.

“Lord, that was fun,” Benny exclaims once everything looks as it was prior to this evening. “Need a ride home?”

“If Theo is still around, he offered.”

“Did he leave you stranded? I haven’t seen him,” Tawny points out.

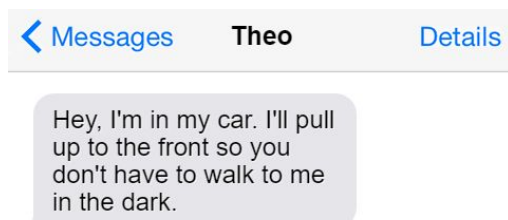
“He was around the front picking up the trash some assholes left,” Chase informs us.

“That boy. What a doll. Just like old times.” Benny gives me a sickly sweet smile. “Except back then, he did it with a



scowl on his chubby little face.”

My phone beeps from my purse, and I check the incoming text.



“Looks like my ride is ready. We’re all good, yeah?”

“Yep, go on. Be good. I’ll see you Thursday morning?”

“I’ll be there.”

Theo’s car approaches, and my heart plummets into my intestines. Fuck, what are we doing? I can’t make up my goddamn mind around him. He makes me want to do things where we have the potential to get caught, and part of me *wishes* we would. I need the reminder that this is not who I’m supposed to be having a rebound with. Anyone but my stepbrother.

When I make my way to his car, I see him getting out of the driver seat and into the passenger side.

“Hey, is someone else driving us?”

“Yes, you.”

“Me?” My entire chest has already gone through an ambush with the stunt we pulled. Now he wants me to operate his treasured car? Commence an unsteady heart rate...now.

“Thought you’d want to feel how powerful and fast this thing can go.”

I’m mumbling under my breath, something along the lines of: ohmygodohmygod. I was curious how this car would handle, but never imagined driving it myself.

“You’re good, right?” he confirms once I sit in the driver seat. He’s asked me that three times, and each time I answer, I’m misleading him. No, I’m not good. I’m going out of my mind with worry and wonder and basically every emotion there is because he elicits that from me.

“Yes,” I nearly croak. “What if I crash? What if I can’t handle it?”

“I’ll be right here, don’t worry. It’s late anyway. We’ll take the coast home.”

“Okay.”

I turn the key—something I haven’t done in years thanks to advanced technology on most vehicles nowadays—and the roar of the engine makes me jump.

“It seems louder in the driver seat, I know. Couple of tips: this car isn’t equipped with an anti-lock braking system like your Honda. Be mindful of your speed and don’t slam on the brakes. And turning out when starting at 0 mph is tough, so I’ll help you.”

The absence of power steering is making itself obvious as I creep out into the street. I’m grateful for Theo’s assistance and

his strength. But soon enough, we're on Coast Highway, and I'm having a blast driving this insanely fast car.

"This is so fun!" I shout as we remain parallel with the beach to our right. The coast is barely visible in the dark, but once in a while you see the whitewash of a wave bursting as it breaks.

"Aside from my mom, you're the only other woman who has driven this car."

My heart is back to doing that erratic beating again.

"Is that okay?" I ask.

"Why wouldn't it be? I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't okay with it. My dad would have loved to see it running again."

My bare ass is on the cool leather seats, and I remember my underwear is in Theo's pocket.

"Are you ever going to give me back my thong?"

"I'm holding onto it as a memento."

"Memento?"

"Since we like to avoid talking about the heavy topics, I'll come out and say it. I know whatever going on between us is about to end. I think you know it, too."

His boldness and honesty causes a lump to form in my throat. I never wanted this to happen, what's going on between us. But I'm also not ready for it to be over.

"What do you mean?" I need him to elaborate.

“I really like you, Amelia. I have for a long time. Probably since the day I first saw you. But I’m aware of what you think about our...situation. I know we can’t keep going like this. That’s why I wanted one last taste—”

I swerve the car into an empty parking lot that overlooks a cliff, remembering not to stop too abruptly. Our bodies are jerked to the side anyway, thanks to the unfamiliarity of the steering.

“One last taste of what?” I urge him to continue now that we are stationary with the car turned off.

“You want me to say it?” He looks me in the eyes when I nod my head yes. “I wanted to taste your pussy one more time.”

I’m ashamed of the sound that leaves my mouth. It’s more of a moan but has a hint of a growl somewhere in there. Either way, I climb across to his side and straddle him as best as I can.

Yes, space is limited, but Theo’s deep voice talking about something so off-limits has my head spinning.

“Say it again,” I demand, my lap on his, a bulge forming below me. I grind into him because the temptation is pushing me closer to the edge.

“I’d fuck your pussy right now, if you’d let me.”

Both our hands reach for his zipper but he beats me to it.

Arching my lower back so I can relieve some pressure from his lap, he doesn’t bother taking his shorts off. Theo frees

himself through the opening of his boxers.

And God bless him, he's already rock hard and ready to go.

We're alone on this scenic overlook, and I'm pretty sure we're both aware we may not be for long.

I have a fist around him and slide his tip along my entrance, my wetness coating him. I don't lower my body onto him yet, but he grows harder in my hand as I tease him.

"You're going to fucking kill me," he groans. "You are so goddamn sexy, you know that?"

My chest swells as waves crash in the distance, the thunderous booming below us nowhere close to drowning out the steady flow of my heartbeat alongside Theo's.

I sink myself onto him, covering him whole.

"Ah, fuck, Amelia."

Neither of us is holding back as we work my body up and down, sliding in and out as the anticipation grows. I feel drunk. All my senses are overloaded. I'm dizzy with want as my heart thrashes inside my chest.

"I can't get enough of you," Theo huffs while he pulls my dress strap down to expose my breast. "Fuck, I want to taste every inch of you right now."

He covers my nipple with his mouth, sucking and biting me. My body responds well, sending waves of heat to the tips of my fingers and leaving me covered in warmth.

I'm unable to contain my screams. He increases the pressure and bites me harder, sending me spiraling. His thrusts are more powerful, too, and I fear we may shatter from the climax.

"I don't want you to come," I tell him. "I don't ever want this to end."

"Well, fuck, don't say things like that. I'm really close."

We stop talking, unable to do anything except hold the rhythm of our two bodies in motion. The intensifying desire builds as we both ignore the aftermath of what may come.

"Oh my God, I'm right there." Theo pinches his eyes closed. "Fuck, I'm so deep in you. Fuck, I'm going to come."

His hands grip my ass, and my body shakes as Theo is hit with an intensity I've never seen. Seeing him disoriented below me, catching his breath as he's smothered with satisfaction, I feel powerful. I've never felt like this with a man, but seeing Theo react this way, because of what he and I did together, it's addicting.

And I don't want it to end.



I didn't plan on confessing my feelings for Amelia because I knew it wouldn't change anything for us.

Unless she expresses reciprocated feelings, which I don't see her doing, we have to continue this weird friendship in front of our parents.

And I don't know how to tell her I want more from her without being rejected again, ten years later.



The following morning, a knock at my door startles me from sleep.

“Come in.”

My mom enters the frame and whispers, “Morning, sweetie. We made breakfast downstairs. Amelia went to Roasted and got us all our favorite drinks. Mind joining us?”

I keep to my classic attitude. “Yeah, I guess. If I have to.”

In reality, I am jumping at the chance to be around her like we don't have to hide in the dark.

Grabbing a shirt and my swim shorts, I head downstairs to see a huge spread of food on the table.

“We wanted to celebrate Amelia’s first event,” Bruce informs me.

“Guys, it was one tiny movie night. You didn’t have to do this.”

She’s wearing her bathing suit as well, the typical Southern California uniform when it’s midsummer and always beautiful out.

“I got you your iced coffee.” She hands it over, and fuck if I’m not reeling when our fingers touch.

“Thank you,” I begin. “Did you uhh, spit in it?”

“Theo!” my mom scolds.

“It’s okay, it’s an inside joke,” Amelia tells them. “No, I would never do such a thing.”

She wiggles her eyebrows at me, and I sense a happiness in her. Was it the sex last night? The success of her movie night?

“When I went into Roasted, Benny was there and already calculated all the sales and stuff. He’s so good with numbers.”

“That’s great. How did you guys do?” Bruce asks as we all grab food to pile on our plates.

“After the admission price, paying for the rentals, supplies and alcohol, we did really well. I’m sure most of it came from the drinks, but he gave me a thousand dollars.”



“For one night? Ames, that’s amazing,” Bruce congratulates.

“Yeah it was so unexpected. He already wants to plan a second event soon. He thinks we’d get even more in attendance.”

“Amelia, that’s wonderful. So does that mean you’re staying down here for a little while longer?”

Bless my mom for asking what I’m too afraid to.

“I haven’t thought about it in detail, but maybe a little bit. I’m still checking for jobs in LA, and I keep hoping something will come up. I’m only interested in film-related careers.”

The three of us are silent and take a sip of our coffee in unison, like we are robots programmed to let her keep up this fantasy of hers.

“I’m going to swim after this. I need to get some vitamin D.”

“Mind if I join you?” Amelia asks me.

“Sure. Yeah, if you want.” My nonchalance is comical. Fuck yes, I want her joining me.

“Thank you for the coffee.” My mom gets up from the table and shakes her empty cup. “Bruce and I may run to Target. Need anything, sweetie?”

“Shaving cream,” I answer with a blank face.

Amelia bursts into laughter, and our parents look at her with confusion.

“Sorry,” she catches her breath and continues. “Another inside joke.”

“Look at you two,” Bruce exclaims. “It is so nice seeing you get along. I never thought this day would come.”

Does he realize “getting along” also entails getting inside her pants? Would he still be as excited?

“Thanks for breakfast.” I turn to Amelia. “I have to do some stuff upstairs. But I’ll be outside in twenty minutes?”

“Okay, sounds good.”



**A**melia and I retreat to our rooms and after following up on a few things, I exit my room the same moment she does.

“Well hello.” We meet at the top of the staircase. She stands in her bikini while I’m just as exposed in my shorts. Maybe I’m looking too much into this, but her self-conscious ways have dissolved since our first night together in the Jacuzzi. She walks around me barely clothed with a freedom I didn’t see on day one. Maybe I’m filled with magical fluids of influence *and* confidence.

“After you,” she offers.

“No, after you. I insist.”

“No, I insist.”

“You drive me crazy,” I admit as I turn to head down first.

Before I take a step, Amelia jumps on my back so I can give her a piggyback ride.

“You’re lucky we’re alone, young lady.” Her ankles hook together near my belly button. I run a hand along her smooth shin and she giggles.

“I see where my shaving cream has been used.”

“Don’t drop me.”

“I would never do such a thing.”

I do, however, sprint down the stairs and out to the pool, all the while she bounces behind me screaming and laughing.

Our bodies plummet straight into the water. Our familiar rafts are still floating in the deep end, and I push the donut toward Amelia as I flop onto the watermelon.

Her head is poking out and she rests her arms over the sides while I lie on my stomach, our faces a foot apart.

I remember how it feels like a lifetime ago when we were preparing her for her interview, in similar positions now but still feeling worlds apart.

“You’re in a good mood,” I tell her.

“Am I?”

“You sure seem like it.”

“Maybe the rush of last night is still coursing through me.”

“Are we talking about the event or me fucking you in my car?”

“Both.”

“You’re so cute when you’re uncomfortable.”

“Stop saying things like that,” she laughs.

“Why?”

“Because”

“Because?” I look at her to see if I can guess which words will leave her mouth next. “Because?”

“Because... I’m... dammit.” She drops below the water and reappears like she had to cleanse herself before her confession. “Because I like you, too.”

“Is that so?” I could stay afloat with the air trapped inside my lungs. I’m terrified to breathe out because I might lose my mind with this revelation. And before we can discuss it further, the sliding glass door opens and my mom peeks her head out.

“We’re back. Didn’t take us long.”

Now it’s my turn to drown myself. Goddamn it, my mom has to ruin everything.

“Mind if I join you?” she asks.

*Fuck.*

“Yeah, sure, Mom.”



**M**olly joining us was a blessing in disguise. I wasn't completely ready to explain to Theo what my feelings encompassed. Because I don't even know. I enjoy being around him, I have fun with him, and Lord knows we have all the sexual chemistry we need, but that doesn't change our situation.

Is this purely a distraction from my breakup? In normal conditions, I would never feel ready to commit myself to another man so soon after, let alone risk my heart with someone as hot-and-cold as my stepbrother.

So while Molly sunbathes on a lounge chair, Theo and I float on our respective rafts and try not to flirt too much.

And typical me, when I feel as though we need to talk about this, I disappear.

I'm Julia Roberts in *Runaway Bride*, abandoning all responsibilities because I'm terrified of continuing the conversation.

“That’s enough sun for me today,” I tell them. “I’m going upstairs to take a nap.”

“Enjoy it, hun.” Molly waves goodbye, and I towel dry under Theo’s gaze.

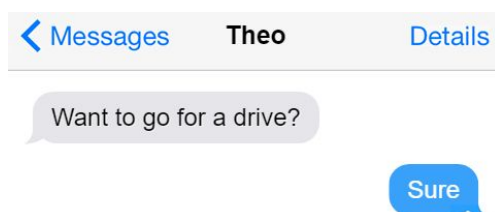
He watches me leave, and I know I won’t be able to avoid this topic much longer.



**M**y room is my sacred space, and I’m grateful no one bothers me up here.

Theo knows not to address the issue while our parents are home because even if we did talk in my room, I wouldn’t feel comfortable laying it all out there.

So when he texts me around 10:00 p.m., my heart flutters. I was expecting this.



We meet in the garage and agree my car wouldn’t wake up the entire neighborhood, so I get behind the wheel and drive toward the beach.

“Want to take a walk?” Theo suggests.

“Sure.”

It’s the only word I’m capable of right now. I park along the coast and we remove our shoes.

I follow behind him, and he turns to me and asks, “Are you okay?”

“Sure.” My answer doesn’t even make sense. I have a mini Amelia on each shoulder and I don’t know which one to listen to.

The optimist whispering in my ear: See what happens. You deserve to be happy.

The realist shouting in my other ear: You’re not ready to date again! You’re close to falling apart over a rebound. You’re. Not. Ready.

“I have an awesome idea,” Theo announces.

We drag our feet through the soft, luscious sand until we hit the part of the beach that is denser and easier to walk along.

“What’s that?”

“We should get an apartment together.”

“What?” I shriek.

“I connected with Hannah, the one who does real estate in Hollywood. She gave me her card at the reunion?”

“Uh-huh...”

“She has some contacts in San Diego, and I’ve been emailing a contractor. He needs someone who understands behind-the-scenes stuff. Lots of growth opportunities. I can explain more, but it sounds perfect for me.”

“Live together, though? I don’t plan on staying here forever. It’s not part of my plan.”

I'm reminding myself to breathe and allow a moment to think before I speak.

"You haven't found anything in LA. Why not see how the events work out? You made great money."

"This isn't my dream." So much for thinking before I speak. "I'm not meant to be doing this. I'm not meant to stay here in Del Mar."

"But I'm here. I'm in Del Mar."

"Theo..."

"We already live together. Why is the idea of an apartment off-limits?"

"Theo, we can't live together. Not like that."

"Doesn't it make a difference I have feelings for you? Don't you feel the same way?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

I don't know how to answer him. What is there to say? He can't really be asking this of me, of us.

"Wow, ten years later, and I'm still not good enough for you," he says with a sigh.

"What are you talking about?"

"Was I just a rebound?"

Each time a new wave crashes on the strand, I'm reminded of the time I'm letting slip between us without an answer.



“I *was* just a rebound, wasn’t I?”

“I don’t know what you were. Or are. I don’t know! Our parents are married, Theo. We can’t move in together. Are you crazy?”

“I’ve never felt like this before. I don’t want to give you up.”

“If my dad found out we’ve slept together...” I’m stumbling over all the words I wish to say but can’t express. So I argue the biggest of them all. “What if you broke my heart?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“But what if? Their marriage could be affected, and I don’t want to do that to him. They’ve been through enough.”

“Do I make you happy?” he asks.

*Of course he does.*

“It won’t make a difference,” I say instead.

His eyes are glittering with tears, and I can’t take the heartbreak written all over his face. There are too many emotions swirling around us, and I’m being pulled apart by anger and confusion. Seeing him cry is sending me off a cliff.

Theo begins pacing the sand with clenched fists over the top of his head.

A spray of ocean water spatters across my face. The tide is rising the longer we are out here, and maybe it’ll sweep us up and wash us out to sea as a finale to our conversation.

“We need to get back,” I whisper to him, closing the distance between us.

Placing my hand on his forearm, he flinches at my cold touch.

“Please, please give me a minute.”

I can’t tell if he’s crying or trying to catch his breath, but we’re both frozen still.

He snuffles and wipes at his nose like he’s not familiar with this action. It’s clumsy and rips me in two.

During his silence, I decide to put things into perspective.

“Do you think your mom would approve of this?”

“If I told her how happy I was, yes.”

“And you think my dad would be supportive if we lived together?”

“Fuck what your dad thinks!”

“Excuse me?”

His rejection has transformed into anger as quickly as the newest swell is about to crash. Our ankles are getting wet, but I remain rooted in place.

“I know I make you happy. Why do you care what he thinks?” Theo argues.

“Well, I sure care how you’re talking about him like his opinion means nothing.”

“His opinion *does* mean nothing.”

My level of frustration is about to match his, maybe even surpass it.

“What is so wrong with my dad?”

“We’re not talking about this.” Theo’s pacing again, and with each stride, he kicks up bits of sand that cling to my legs.

“What is it? We all know you don’t like him.”

“Amelia, just stop.”

“Did he hurt you?” I question.

“No.”

“Did he hurt your mom?”

“No. Can you stop? We’re not doing this. Not here and not now.”

“Did he say something horrible about your dad?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?” I’m running out of plausible reasons. “You’ve never liked him. It’s been apparent from day one. Does he have some addiction I’m unaware of? Gambling? Alcoholism?”

“No, Amelia, stop.”

“Did he cheat?”

“Yes!” Theo shouts.

“Oh my God, he cheated on your mom?”

“No,” he pauses. “He cheated on *your* mom. Our parents were having an affair long before they met at the support

group.”

I feel sick. I’m going to throw up.

“Fuck, Amelia. Why did you go there? You were never supposed to know.”

Theo grabs a huge rock and heaves it into the air. The sound it makes when it hits the ocean is muffled. My world is spinning, and every sense is failing me.

“You’re lying,” I whimper, unaware I’ve begun to cry. Tears are running down my cheeks, and I can barely see. Theo is a blur as I back away. He steps toward me but I wave him off.

“No. Do not come near me.”

“Amelia…”

“Where’s the proof?” I shout, certain Theo has nothing substantial to back up his accusations.

“My dad sent a letter to my mom and said he couldn’t handle the news of her affair, and that he was extending his contract. We didn’t get it until a month after he died, and I intercepted it in the mail before my mom had a chance to read it.”

Theo’s crying with me, tears running down our cheeks like there’s an endless supply we had on reserve for this exact moment.

“No one knows I know except you.”

I’m shaking my head like I might be able to rattle my eardrums hard enough to drown out Theo’s words.

“He was fucking gutted, Amelia. He needed time before he could come home and face her. So he extended his contract, and ultimately went on a mission that ended up being his last.”

A wave of nausea hits me, and I throw up in the sand.

“Don’t you wonder why they got married so fast? They already had a history together! I think they ended things once my dad found out. But they reconnected at that support group, unaware they each lost the spouse they were cheating on.”

My body spasms and is hit with more retching.

“Amelia...” Theo is by my side, rubbing my back.

Slapping away his hand, I cry, “Don’t!”

I’m hunched over, sobbing near my knees, in denial he’s speaking the truth.

“My dad would never cheat on my mom,” I sob. “They were happy.”

“I thought my parents were, too.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I didn’t know how to. You already hated me.”

I’m hollowed out and empty. The wind could blow me over.

“Take me home,” I demand.

“Can we talk—”

“Please?”

Theo nods his head with a conflicted stance. Even though I have tunnel vision, I watch as he debates putting his hand on

my lower back or around my shoulders.

Everything is foggy when I plop my soulless body in the passenger seat. I can't drive now.

It's hard to imagine your parents making mistakes, let alone a colossal one like this. To imply imperfections are possible in the person you looked up to most means they are not superhuman like you thought. My dad cheated on my mom? Did they even love each other when she died? Did my mom know what was going on?

I don't register the drive home. I'm unsure if Theo tried to make conversation or if we sat in silence the whole way.

I want to burst into my dad's room and shout accusations at him. How life will never be the same for me no matter how many times he apologizes. Did he think I would never find out? How could he? His actions weren't just deceitful toward my mom but to me, too. He cheated on our *family*.

How will I ever forgive him?

My opinion of Molly changes in an instant. I'm judgmental, hateful, and turn into the worst version of myself.

How could she pretend like she didn't ruin two families' lives?

I enter the house, and Theo follows closely behind.

He's my shadow, and I want to scream at him, too, to give me some damn space.

I hate everyone. All I want to do is cry myself to sleep and pretend this night never happened.



**A**melia shuts her bedroom door with such vitriol I know it's my sign to leave her be.

She'll be processing this new information, and I guarantee she'll be breaking down the same way I did when I first found out. And I don't want her to be alone like I was.

I make it until 1:00 a.m. before I leave my room to check on her. I wasn't sleeping anyway.

Walking up to her door, her faint cries are unmistakable.

Turning the knob, she doesn't jump at my presence, doesn't kick me out, doesn't move from her curled-up spot in bed. And she doesn't object when I open up her duvet and snuggle into her.

I want to tell her I love her, and that I'll be here for her as she processes this. As her broken heart heals, as time fixes everything like it always does, I will be waiting for her.

But for now, her tears soak the shared pillow and I hold onto her tighter than I ever have.





I don't remember falling asleep, but apparently, I'm dreaming about being on a boat.

We're moving and rocking back and forth, unstable on these rough waves. My blood pressure increases as I attempt to balance myself.

It's only when I feel more shaking that I comprehend Amelia's efforts in waking me.

"Earthquake," she gasps as the entire room is hit with an aftershock.

She's grabbing onto my biceps as the clothes in her closet sway on their hangers. I'm shirtless, but I might as well be wearing a suit of armor. I cover her with my body in case anything falls on us.

And as if it never happened, the earth stops.

If it weren't for the random items that fell on her already messy floor, I'd think I dreamt it.

"The freaking San Andreas Fault." Amelia is grabbing her throat like she got the wind knocked out of her.

"That was terrifying," I say, not realizing how much scarier it was about to get.

Amelia's door flies open and her dad storms in hollering, "Ames, are you okay?"

No knock, no announcement, just pure terror on two faces staring back into the eyes of a man who just went from alarmed to enraged.

“What the hell? What the hell is this?” Bruce shouts. He immediately calls for my mom to come witness what is obviously their two children canoodling in their worst nightmare imaginable.

I’m shirtless, in my boxers, when my mom enters the doorframe.

She covers her open mouth with her hand, and I’m afraid her eyes might fall out of her sockets.

“How long has this...” Bruce looks like he might throw up. “Been going on?”

It’s his turn to avoid eye contact with me. Perhaps I deserve that.

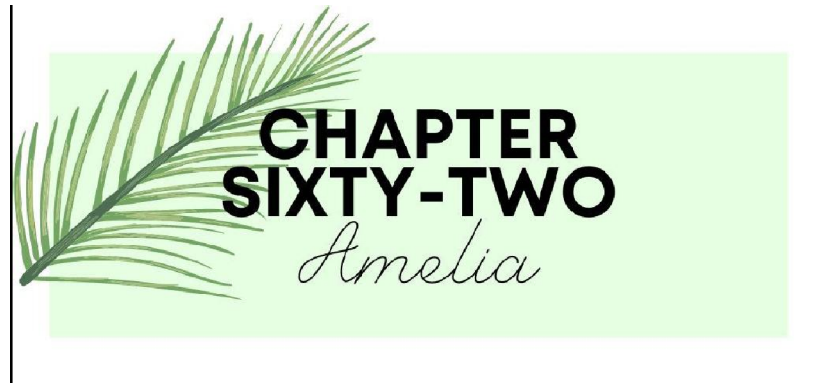
“Why do you care?” Amelia snaps.

“Excuse me, young lady? You are my daughter. He is your stepbrother.”

My mom’s eyes are glossy, and I’m unable to speak. It’s two against two, except they are fully clothed and acting as though they are incapable of making mistakes. We are caught, barely clothed, yet draped in debauchery with slack-jawed faces.

Of all the things Amelia could reply with, she settles on: “How long were you cheating on Mom?”

A live grenade has landed in the room, and we are all about to be destroyed.



“How long?” I repeat.

“Honey, this is not the time or place—”

“Stop! I can’t believe you two.” The tears are pooling in my eyelids as Theo puts a gentle arm around me. “Standing there judging us when you committed the ultimate betrayal.”

Molly is also crying as she asks, “Theo, did you know?”

“I’ve known all along,” he admits stiffly.

“I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?” my dad asks.

“Anywhere. I have to get out of here.” I grab the giant suitcase I came with and throw random stuff inside.

“We need to talk—”

“I’m not capable of having a conversation with you right now. You cheated on Mom. And you’re playing house, in the home I grew up in, with your *mistress*?”

I know the unkind words escaping my lips are only making this situation worse. No wonder Theo had a grudge against my

dad. It all makes sense.

Molly exits my room in tears, and my dad stands unsure if he needs to comfort her or shield me from the man I've been sleeping with.

My dresser drawer is open, and I throw in a handful of clothes. I have no idea how long I'll be gone, but I pack like I'm leaving for good.

"We all need time to cool off," Theo declares.

My dad is furious at the suggestion, like how dare this womanizer give *him* orders.

"Theo, are you coming?" I look at him as he sits in my bed, blankets covering his lower half.

"Oh, umm, yeah?"

"Then go pack your stuff."

My dad follows after me as I grab some toiletries in the bathroom. "Where will you go?"

I've come full circle. I started out packing a bag for my inevitable return home after witnessing infidelity. Now I'm packing the same bag, fleeing the house upon learning of more infidelity.

Theo uses this freedom to escape to his room before my dad can catch him in his boxer briefs.

"Can you talk to me? Please? I loved your mother very much—"

“But not *enough*. You didn’t love her *enough*. You didn’t love your life *enough*. You didn’t love the family *enough*. Something was missing, and you cheated on us. How could you do that?”

I don’t think I’ve seen my dad so emotional since my mom’s funeral, which feels disingenuous now that I have the missing pieces. Dads never seem to cry, but mine is now.

“Amelia, can you please stay? We have a lot to talk about.”

“No. I need some time to process everything. You and Molly need to as well. Theo and I have been together for a few weeks, and I have no idea where this is going, but I feel like I owe it to myself to give him an honest chance. And I can’t hear your disapproval right now, not when you know nothing about honor and integrity in a relationship.”

My dad lets me go, and Theo meets me in the hallway with a backpack over his shoulder. Who knows what he packed, but he follows me downstairs where his mom waits for us at the front door.

Her cheeks are soaked with tears, and my typical empathetic nature has to be suppressed. She’s remorseful and sorry, and I want to hug her and comfort her as much as I want to slam the door in their faces.

How were they able to keep such a secret? How could they act like everything was genuine and real between them when Theo and I were first introduced? All the lies.

Theo and I leave the house without another word exchanged.



It's his idea to see if L'Auberge has any rooms available, since he has two free nights won from the reunion. We're in the middle of summer, and the likelihood is low, but it's midweek and maybe the universe is looking out for us.

We park in the same area, the location where everything changed for us. It's surreal seeing how far we've come since, and how much has been impacted by our foolish decisions.

The man at the front desk informs us they have a one-bedroom suite available, a little too spacious for us, but we'll take anything. He has to check the condition of the room to ensure it's clear of broken glass or any casualties from the earthquake, but the upcharge will be waived due to the hotel having to shut down a few facilities for the interim.

"Thank you." I hand over my credit card to hold on file.

Theo and I haven't said much to each other, and it's only when the hotel room door closes behind us that I burst into a stifled sob.

He's by my side before the first tear has a chance to make an appearance.

But once I'm in his arms, everything I wish to say is drowned out by his quiet, "Shh" as he rubs my back and lets the words hang unspoken in the air.



Theo lets me cry for hours. Time spent wiping my eyes, unable to speak, devastated at the realization of what our parents have done. He doesn't ask questions, doesn't offer advice. We sit in silence until I'm ready to speak.

"How could you come back knowing what you knew?" I ask.

"My curiosity overruled the bitterness I had bubbling inside me. I was used to pretending I knew nothing of their indiscretions. And I wanted to see you. It had been so long, maybe time was the crucial piece in starting over."

"There's not enough time right now to mend what my dad broke."

"I know it feels like that, and I've had more time to accept this, but we will get through this."

"We?"

"Did you mean what you said to your dad? About giving us a chance? Or were you trying to get under his skin?"

"Both," I answer him honestly. "I'm terrified, Theo. Yes, I want to see where this goes. But what if that is not enough? I just got out of a relationship. What if things don't work out?"

"Why do you assume we'd fail? What if we don't? What if we end up happier together than we've ever been?"

"That would be a great ending."



We both change positions so we are facing each other while lying on our sides.

“Maybe it’s my own fault for not telling you sooner,” he says. “But, I couldn’t. I was scared it would ruin what was already happening between us. I took this as a second chance, and I didn’t want to waste it. For the first time in forever, I’m excited about my future and the possibilities. We can create any ending we want right now.”

“I thought my life was in LA,” I murmur.

“Maybe your life is supposed to be with me.”

My heart has been ripped apart and put back together in that simple statement.

“You don’t even know how you’ve impacted me, do you?”

Shaking my head, he continues.

“Amelia, you’ve given me the confidence to stand on my own two feet, even if I don’t know what path I’m walking. You helped me find a therapist so I could deal with the trauma I’ve been ignoring. I want you by my side during these unpredictable times. To support me, challenge me, and maybe even love me in spite of the mistakes we’ll make together. You’ve grounded me, and I’m a better man because of you.”

“Love?” It feels like all the oxygen in the room just disappeared.

“I won’t get ahead of myself, given the circumstances we are in. You know I’ve never loved living here, but I’m grateful

for this second chance because when you're in my arms, you feel like home."

Swiping a tear from my eye, I'm amazed I have any left in me.

"I don't know what to say," I tell him.

"Maybe don't shoot me down, that's all I ask."

How can I feel happy and broken all at once?

"I was resisting this, resisting you, because I promised my dad I wouldn't let anything happen."

"When was this?"

"In the first week. He was worried this would happen, and I reassured him we didn't even like each other enough to give it a chance."

"And now look at us."

"I'm sorry I said those mean things about your mom."

"It's okay, I've had more time to work on forgiving her."

"Have you?"

"It's a process. I knew I wouldn't be able to make any strides unless I was seeing her consistently."

"It all makes sense. Why you left. Why you hated my dad. Why you hated me."

"I didn't hate you. I didn't know how to process the betrayal I felt. I was a stupid kid who thought ignoring my issues would make them go away."

“You mean we can’t do that now? Pretend we never knew our parents were unfaithful?”

“Believe me, I tried. It didn’t help. Why do you think I’m seeing a therapist?”

“Does he take two for one?” I halfway joke, knowing I’ll need someone to talk to as well to find a semblance of hope in all of this.

“I hope my mom didn’t know before she got sick. It’ll kill me.”

“Will you ask your dad?”

“I don’t think I will. I would rather not know. Gosh, I can’t even choose her side in all this, be there for her, show her support. She’s not around, and it’s a strange awareness I’m grappling with.”

“How so?”

“It’s going to sound heartless.”

“Say it. I’m sure I thought it at one point.”

“Regardless if my dad was having an affair, she would have died either way. What happened after was out of my control, but that doesn’t mean I can’t feel betrayed.”

“I’ve wrestled with that thought many times. My dad didn’t have the same fate. Their affair is what put him in danger. He never would have stayed over there an extra day if he knew he was coming home to a faithful wife.”

“Oh my gosh, Theo. I’m so sorry.”

He rubs my arm with his thumb, and I sink deeper into him. I don't know what I would do if we weren't at the place we are in, me being able to confide in him, rely on him, be a friend.

"I hate my dad, but I still love him. He's my dad. And your mom—I mean, we were never super close, but I like her. How were they able to pretend the way they met wasn't a complete lie?"

"My mom adores you, if that means anything. You're the exact woman she wishes I'd end up with."

"Don't tell me this." I begin to cry again, an internal tug of rope pulling me into different sides of darkness and light.

How will I ever be able to forgive my dad? The timing is what's killing me. This happened so long ago, way before my mom was diagnosed, way before I even knew who the hell Theo was. Nothing changes, knowing this information. He reconnected with Molly at the support group I suggested he go to. He didn't know she was there.

But the deception is at the forefront of my thoughts.

It feels good knowing Theo and I are together through this, that I'm not handling the news alone. We're a team, us against the issue, and I'm thankful he's by my side. I just wish the issue wasn't with our parents.

"Do you hate me for telling you?"

"No," I answer. "I wish it didn't come from you, but I don't hate you. My dad should have sat me down and come clean."

"Wish you knew sooner?"

“I don’t know. If you would have told me at seventeen, I have no idea how I would have reacted. Maybe it’s better I found out now because we might have a chance at moving on. I don’t think I could have in those days.”

“You think you and I can move on from this?”

“Gut reaction is no, but realistically, with time, I think my heart knows it’s possible to forgive.”

“We don’t have to forget entirely. I’m trying to find some insight and meaning throughout this. Maybe I can be a little grateful this happened because it brought you into my life.”

“I’ve been ignoring a lot of feelings I’ve had for you. I figured it would be a fun little fling and one of us would push the other over the edge and we’d end it. But I’m so glad you’re here with me now.”

He kisses the top of my head, and the clashing of emotions is a lot to take in.

“I’m emotionally exhausted,” I admit. “Can we go get some food and hang out on the balcony and watch the sunset?”

“Amelia, are you asking me out on a date?” Theo squeezes me and pokes at my sides.

It’s the playfulness I desperately need at this moment.

“Yes, yes!” I yelp and wiggle around. “It’s a freaking date.”



**W**e order room service—a luxury I indulge in anytime I stay in a hotel—and eat on our balcony. The sun dips below the horizon, and we wait for a new day to begin.

It's a surreal moment, being in Theo's embrace without having to hide our feelings from each other, and I cherish this calming moment.

We are a flawed, blended family. And I know it's not typical, the way Theo and I feel about each other, but sounds like no relationship is perfect. It's impossible for a couple to never make a mistake, and I carry that in my heart when we go to bed.



**F**or the two nights Amelia and I stay at the hotel, we barely leave the room. We guard our time here and relish the stolen moments we're alone.

Neither of our parents check in on us with a simple text, as they are no doubt coming to terms with the news that their adult children are intimate with each other.

My mom always wanted me and Amelia to get along—maybe not to this degree, but it was difficult resisting the attraction. I'd like to think this was inevitable, but who knows what would have become of us if we continued to avoid the other.

As Amelia processes the news I've been withholding for years, I know the distraction will come to an end, and I'll have to confront my mom with what I've been suppressing.

Therapy won't solve all my problems, but it's shown me how to address the pain and how to forgive myself for wasting time being so hateful.

Being around Amelia and seeing how she lights me up, in all the best ways, and in ways that irritate me, it's a reminder that I can feel multiple emotions at once. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

But I do wonder what this revelation will mean for us.

We might be on the same page, but that doesn't mean our story continues. She might talk to Bruce and realize we wouldn't last anyway. And while Amelia was sleeping beside me in the hotel, I was up all night wondering what the hell is in store for us when we go home.

I tried to use some of the tactics my therapist gave me. Like organizing my thoughts and preparing myself in the ways I can. I haven't decided on taking medication yet to treat the sleep issues, but I'm open to it if this worsens.

We can't avoid home forever, and we decide we each need to have a conversation with our parent, one-on-one.

This has been a long time coming for me. Even if my mom is upset I caught feelings for my stepsister behind her back, I think she will be more supportive of us than Bruce will.

At least I'm hopeful for that.

"I'm going to be sick," Amelia declares once she parks her car in the driveway.

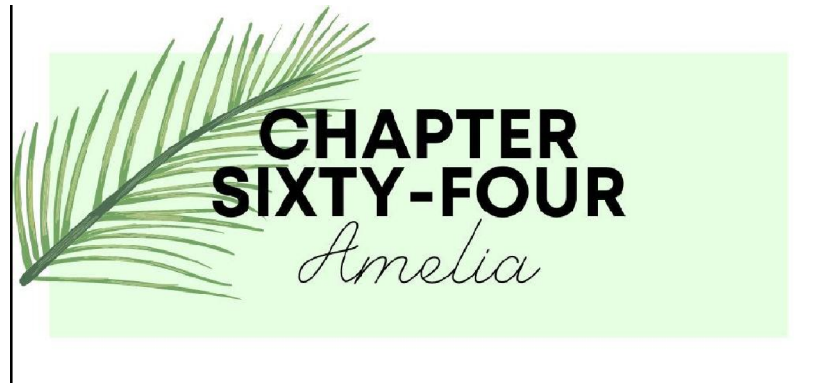
"Out which end?"

"Oh my God, can you please not talk about diarrhea with me right now."



She's fighting a smile, but I can see the panic in her eyes, the way her hands shake when she grabs her phone in the cup holder.

"It'll be okay, I promise." My hand is on her shoulder, and we each take a deep breath as we exit the car and enter the house.



I find my dad at the kitchen table, and the look on his face makes me want to run into his arms sobbing like I did when I was a toddler who fell off her bike.

“Hi, honey. I’m glad you’re home.”

“Can we go outside to talk?”

He nods. “I would like that.”

Theo enters the house as my dad and I sit at the patio table. Molly’s car wasn’t out front, and I hope she returns soon so he doesn’t have to sit in dread for too long.

“Where should we start?” My dad, the strong protector, is currently restless and sweating at the temple. I’ve never seen him so nervous in my life.

“I don’t want to know if mom knew you cheated. I can’t handle the answer, and I’d like to believe she didn’t. Either way, I hope she left this world knowing her husband loved her. That we all loved her.”

A tear falls down my dad’s cheek and he whispers, “I did love her. I’ll always love her.”

I concentrate on my breathing instead of lashing out.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth about you and Molly? Please don’t sugarcoat it.”

“I don’t know. Maybe because I thought the past didn’t matter and we should focus on the present and our future. I was selfish. I admit that. I didn’t want you to hate me.”

“How soon after did things end with Molly when Mom got sick?”

“Maybe six months?”

“Why did you cheat?”

“Marriage is very hard, Amelia. That’s not my excuse; I’m not blaming that. But it’s a lot of work, a lot of compromise, a lot of challenges that sometimes never get resolved. I was unhappy. And I made some choices that I regret back then.”

“Would you have ever told me if Theo didn’t?”

He flinches when I speak Theo’s name, and I’m not looking forward to his turn to interrogate me.

“I don’t think I would have. I know that sounds horrible, honey. You knowing now wouldn’t have changed a thing in the past. It is what it is, as brutal as that sounds. And I’m sorry for the hurt my actions caused.”

My eyes focus on a leaf being blown around our backyard. Anything to distract me from the tears pooling and waiting to release.

“Can you forgive me?” he asks.

“With time, yes. This isn’t something I’ll forget by tomorrow. Even though you’re right, nothing changes with me knowing, I think it’s the betrayal that hurts the most. That’s not the father-daughter relationship I thought we had.”

“I understand. I’m sorry, Ames.”

I close my eyes as the tears rush down my face. “You were all I had left, and you lied to me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s going to be the hardest part, Dad. Absolving you of something so...deceitful. That you were able to keep something so monumental from me and let me believe we were a happy, cohesive family. I just got cheated on, Dad. Do you even know how badly that hurts? What infidelity does to someone? It stays with you, makes you feel less than. Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

“Yes, I do. I’m so sorry, honey.”

“And you were so upset with Beckett for hurting me. The hypocrisy is killing me.”

“If you give me a chance, I will make it up to you. It’ll take time, but I promise I will.”

“It’s a start.”

I’m not looking forward to his cross-examination. Who knows where he’ll begin, what he’ll ask first. I’m unnerved with how the rest of this conversation will go.

“I only have one question for you.” He grabs my hands and holds them in his.

“Okay.”

“Does Theo make you happy?”

“Yes.” The tears are flowing even more. Of all the things he could have gone with, I didn’t expect this. “He drives me crazy, too. I’ve been pretending the feelings weren’t there. I know I promised you. But I can’t help it.”

My dad nods his head, digesting my news.

“This has been very hard on me, Amelia. I’m terrified it won’t work and he’ll break your heart. Theo could be anyone, but he’s my stepson, and I would never forgive him if he hurt you. And what that could do to my relationship with his mother is frightening.”

“I understand. And I’m sorry for that.” I echo the similar phrase my dad offered me. “But I never felt this with Beckett. I have no idea what will happen, but I don’t want what little chance we had at trying to end because of fear.”

“This won’t be easy for me.”

“I know. I’m sure it’ll take some time for us all to adjust to this.”

“But we *will* adjust.”

He squeezes my hands, a simple gesture that makes me believe we will get through this. It won’t be without struggle and acceptance, but the possibility is there.

“If you’ll excuse me,” my dad rises from his chair. “I need to find Theo and talk to him.”

“Um... Will it be... Uh, what will you say?”

“I’ll be nice, I promise.”



**M**y mom hasn't returned home yet, so I sit on the couch until Amelia and her dad are done talking. I haven't heard any yelling, so maybe it's going well. I'll give them this moment they need to repair the damage the truth has done.

Bruce returns from outside, his face a shade of red that isn't because of the sun. He's flushed and visibly upset.

He approaches me with caution as I stand up to meet him.

"Theo, I'm—" Bruce brings a closed fist to his mouth as his eyes become glossy. He clears his throat to find the courage to continue. "I'm truly sorry for everything that happened with your dad. I'm sorry you've been sitting with this for years. And I'm sorry we never gave each other a proper chance. If you're capable of making my daughter happy, I will support this. It won't be easy for me, but I'll stay out of your way."

"Thank you, Bruce."

I didn't realize how much I needed that apology from him. A weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and I'm also on the

verge of crying. It's been an emotionally charged week, and I didn't think I had any tears left in me.

But one manages to sneak through, and I catch it with my finger before it's obvious we are two grown men crying. Nothing to be ashamed of, but I'd like to give off the impression I'm composed at the moment.

"Your mom stepped out for some food, she should be home any—"

Before he can finish, my mom enters the room with a bag from In-N-Out. She sees the two most important men in her life, both with tears in their eyes, and she drops the food to the floor.

Her hands are in a prayer position as she covers her face, all of us incapable of dry eyes in this house.

"Sweetie." Her arms open for a hug, and she receives me with unease.

"We need to talk," I whisper in her ear.

"Okay, okay."

The trek upstairs feels like I'm walking to the electric chair. I'm panicked and scared, even if this day was bound to happen.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew?" she asks once my door is shut. "Jesus Christ, Theo. How could you keep that inside you for so long?"

"I'm seeing a therapist to figure that out."



“A therapist?”

“Yeah, I’ve only had a few sessions with him. I wish I had the answer. I figured maybe if I didn’t confront you about it, you wouldn’t confirm it. Even if dad said it was true in his letter.”

“What letter?”

I’ve kept some important documents in a box in my closet, so I pull it out now and flip through until I find the one that forces her to relive the tragedy all over again.

Her hands tremble as she holds it, and I support her with my own so the words don’t shake off the page.

“His...words. I can hear his voice telling me, and I—I—”

She’s hyperventilating, the memories hitting her harder than I expected. She reads the letter again and again, crying harder than the last as she spends a solid five minutes running her fingers over his handwriting.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I never would have shown you this if I knew you’d react this way.”

“Losing your dad was the hardest thing I ever went through. The timing of it all was horrible. I never thought I’d recover from it.”

“What happened?”

“I came clean to your dad over a phone call.” My mom is incapable of catching her breath between the sobs. “It was killing me. He knew something was wrong. I had to end the

affair, but the damage was done on our end. We couldn't salvage what I destroyed. Gosh, I didn't know Dad sent this. I wish you'd told me. I wish I would have been honest with you. I hope I haven't ruined the chance to make this right."

"This won't be something I will forgive you for overnight," I inform her. "I'm still devastated Dad never came home after hearing your news. I miss him every day, and I'll always feel like you and Bruce were partially responsible. But I know therapy will help. And me moving out will help, too."

"You're moving out?"

"It's time for me to get my own place."

"Are you staying in the area?"

"Yes, I accepted a position at a construction company. I'll be able to afford rent on my own, and I think it's best for everyone that I leave."

I'm aware my mom hasn't even given me her blessing to date her stepdaughter. To be honest, I don't need it.

I will always love my mom, and I know time will be able to repair things words cannot, but I also know I don't need to accept her betrayal and forgive right away. I'm going to take my time to ensure I heal properly.

"I love you, Mom. I always will. But a break might be necessary while I begin this new phase of my life."

"Are you cutting me out?"

“No, but I think I need to set some healthy boundaries for now, something I should have done when I came home. It’s still hard for me to see you with someone other than Dad. I know I’ve had time to accept it, but it’s still brand new to me since I ran away from it all.”

“I understand. I can tone it down, too. I never meant to hurt you—”

“Mom, you’re allowed to be happy with your second husband. Don’t hold back on my account. But I think this is a long time coming, and it will be good for us.”

She’s still crying, and I know this is breaking her apart. The letter. Her finding out I’ve known all along. Me moving out because I’m struggling. My relationship with Amelia.

“Aren’t you curious about Amelia?” I ask.

“Oh please, I’ve known from the day you returned home something was up. You think I didn’t hear my son sneaking out in the middle of the night? Me waking up and seeing your swim shorts in the backyard when they weren’t there at dinnertime?”

“You knew?”

“I saw the way you looked at her from the first day you met. And then I saw the way she looked at you when you returned home. I turned a blind eye.”

“Wow, and you’re not mad?”

“Mad? No. Surprised? Also no. I’m cautious. I don’t want anything happening to either of you. I adore Bruce’s daughter,

and I want what's best for you. You both deserve to be happy.”

“I think I love her, Mom.”

“I knew that, too.”

Her sadness has morphed into tears of joy, and I feel comfortable ending our conversation here. This won't be the last one we have. There will be some traumatizing sessions in my future, and I know I will be dependent on her to help me with the closure I'm seeking.

But I leave my room lighter than when I came in.

My tolerance for Bruce will grow. Not overnight. This is something I'll need to work on, too. I'll add it to the list, but I am hopeful, with time, we won't even remember how it was before.



Theo and Molly return downstairs as my dad and I try to salvage the food that spilled out of the In-N-Out bag. I'd be lying if I said I didn't eat some fries straight off the floor.

It's awkward as all hell as the four of us are reunited in the same room. And thanks to my dad, he makes it worse.

"Family hug?" he suggests.

"Oh my God, Dad? Really?"

"Group hug! I meant *group* hug!"

"Bruce, you ruined it, honey. No." Molly waggles her pointer finger, and I burst out laughing.

Maybe Theo was waiting for my reaction to all of this, because he cracks a smile and claps at the unintentional dad joke.

"That was good," Theo compliments.

"Well, thanks. Have you two eaten yet? Our burgers are cold and the fries are soggy. Molly, maybe we should umm—"

He gestures with his head toward the garage, his eyes leading the way.

“Oh yes. We’ll go get fresh burgers. Theo, text us your orders. We’ll be back in a while.”

A not so subtle way of giving us all the necessary moment to reconvene and discuss what happened behind closed doors.

They both leave in a hurry, and soon enough, Theo and I are alone in the kitchen.

“Did your talk go okay?”

“Let’s go outside,” he suggests.

Theo leads the way, and I follow behind like his shadow. Did it not go well? What did my dad say to him? What the hell is going on?

Theo strips out of his shirt, pulling at the collar and slipping it over his head.

“What are you doing?”

“Going swimming.”

“Now?”

“Yeah, are you coming?” He’s naked for a brief moment before he grabs his swim shorts that were left outside. He laces them up and waits for my answer.

“I’m not wearing a bathing suit.”

Wrong answer.

He gathers me up in his arms and hauls me over to the edge of the pool.

I'm shrieking and snorting and kicking my legs like a kid. "Theo, don't do it!"

But he does. And I want him to. For as long as we live. I want him driving me crazy, making me laugh till my stomach hurts, annoying me, holding me up, falling with me, and loving me.

We disappear below the water, and when we surface, an entire conversation is said with one look. We have a lot to talk about, a lot to plan, a lot to look forward to.

But for now, we embrace each other and kiss like no one is watching.

When we separate, my arms still wrapped around his neck, I say, "I'm sorry I wasn't your first kiss."

"Don't be. It wouldn't have been very memorable."

"Maybe you'll be my *last* first kiss?"

"You better not mess this up then."

Because bugging him is what I do best, my fingers pinch a wad of muscle, and I twist.

"I'm kidding," he laughs. "You probably will mess this up. But so will I. Let's promise we'll be patient as we figure this out together. Deal?"

My forehead meets his, and my words are delicate against his lips.

“Deal.”





**W**hen we're all gathered around the living room, which now has brand-new couches that are as ugly as they are comfortable, Theo nudges me to speak first.

“We’re pregnant!”

I’m waiting for my dad to march out of the house and into a time machine to go back and prevent this from happening. Maybe even burst into tears because he’s not ready to be a grandfather yet.

But as I watch my dad and Molly’s faces change into Cheshire cat creepy smiles, I’m alarmed.

“We don’t mean to steal your thunder,” my dad begins, looking at Molly as she emphatically nods her head in approval. “But Molly is pregnant, too.”

My eyes dart straight to her stomach. How did I not notice the baby bump when we first came in? She has to be five months along. How has she been hiding that from us? But within an instant, her tummy grows to double the size.

And then it keeps inflating. She's having twins, no triplets—wait! Sextuplets? She's giving birth to a football team of linebackers! Her stomach is obscenely large and might burst like a balloon as it expands the width of the room.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” I howl as I jolt awake from a horrible nightmare.

Theo comes to my side and rests his hand on my chest.

“Amelia? Are you okay?” he asks in a half-drowsy state.

“Yes, bad dream.”

“Which one? Where you and my mom are pregnant or when we find out we're twins separated at birth?”

“The pregnancy one. This time your mom's stomach blew up like Violet when she turned into a blueberry in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.”

Theo turns on the lamp, suppressing a laugh. By the time our bedroom apartment is illuminated, he has a straight face to show his support.

“My mom isn't pregnant. You're not pregnant. And we are not biological siblings,” he tells me for, quite possibly, the tenth time this month.

“Ugh, I'm sorry. Why does this keep happening?”

“It's okay. These nightmares will end soon.”

“I don't know which one is worse.”

“I can always get you pregnant right now if you think it would help.” His hand reaches under my shirt and he rubs his

palm along my lower stomach.

“It’s 3:00 a.m., are you crazy?”

“Crazy for you.” He leaves a delicate kiss on my lips.

“Go back to sleep.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you, too.”

We rest our heads on our new pillows and relax into our new king-sized mattress. Technically everything in our apartment is new. We had nothing to bring to this empty space we call our own, but we’ve made it into the kind of home unique only to us.

It took some time for all of us to welcome this new reality: Theo and I living together and our parents not being upfront and truthful about their marriage.

As Theo and I have discussed numerous times, no relationship is perfect. We’ve all learned a lot from the past three months, and we’ve discovered how powerful acceptance can be.

There are times when it’s a shock for our parents seeing us affectionate with each other. They are familiar and comfortable with the bickering and petty arguments. But that happens, too. Let’s not forget Theo is the biggest instigator of all time and loves pushing my buttons. But the day he stops is the day I’ll start to worry.

My dress is hanging on the back of my closet, the dark blur a reminder of the seventh event we are throwing at Roasted. Things have only gotten better. It's fascinating seeing this new creative side of me. I'm not saying I'll never get back into the film industry, but for now, I'm happy where I'm at.

Roasted has been highly successful and profitable, I don't even have to work behind the counter any longer. Benny came to me with the idea of adding a second Roasted north of Del Mar. The income is nowhere close to what I'd need to invest yet, but when the time is right, he wants me as a business partner.

Theo is also doing well in his new career. He's working his way up, and we know it could potentially be a lengthy process, but it's a great company and the time he puts in will be worth it.

Our parents have the house to themselves again, but we make an effort to have dinner there once a month. It was difficult at first for everyone. A simple talk to clear the air didn't magically take our lives back to normal. My dad is still harboring some expected apprehension, waiting for the inevitable downfall that I don't see happening. But we've made some good strides in a positive direction.

Molly and Theo have had a few steps forward, a few steps back. I know therapy is helping, but it's been hard on him, reopening a wound he thought had scabbed over and disappeared. I've been by his side during his sleepless nights,

and he's there for me when I'm trembling in sweat because, "What if we are somehow related?"

Spoiler alert: we're not.

Life has a funny way of working itself out. My dreams didn't change, but the path to achieve them did.

I wanted a career that gave me a purpose.

I wanted a man who loved me unconditionally.

I achieved both those goals, they just look a little different than I imagined.

There is no guarantee life will be filled with unending happy moments. This is why Theo and I are committed to working through our issues and remembering unhappy times are inevitable in life. When everything is easy in a relationship, you don't grow or learn. I know Theo and I will progress into better versions of ourselves as we overcome challenges together.

For the longest time, I wanted a happily ever after no matter what it cost. But now? I don't. I'd rather have a messy love that evolves with time. A dependable kind of love that will bend and coil to shape our needs that may change as we get older.

We still have a lot to learn about each other, but I'm willing to reacquaint myself with the man who drives me crazy on a daily basis. I enjoy the bickering because then we get to make up, and that's the best part.

I was in a constant state of fear for the first month after we moved out. What would my dad and Molly change next? It took me all this time to realize it didn't matter anymore. A house is just a house. We carry the memories with us as we move around and establish a new home.

Theo and I have some memories of our own to create. And we're only getting started.

## Acknowledgments

Wow, book number two! I truly thought I'd never write another book after *The Acts Of Life*, let alone so fast, but here I am.

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Okay, now I'm almost done. The last person I thanked in the acknowledgments in *The Acts Of Life* was my son, Will. So this will be a new tradition for every book I complete. You are my sweet, darling, adventurous, curious, lovable, no-fear toddler who I love seeing grow every day. You're two years old and have zero fear- of strangers, of heights, of exploring. I hope you hold onto these attributes all through your life. And once again, you can't read this book, either. Maybe when you're eighteen. Maybe.