



Heart's  
Cove Hunks

DIRTY LITTLE MIDLIFE BOOKS 4-6

LILIAN MONROE

# *Heart's Cove Hunks*

THE "DIRTY LITTLE MIDLIFE" SERIES:  
BOOKS 4-6

FORTY AND FABULOUS ROMANCE  
LILIAN MONROE



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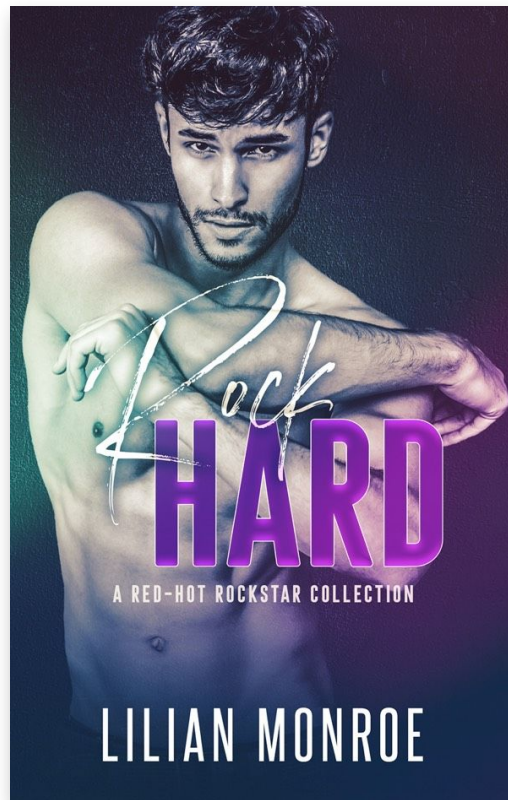
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# *Dirty Little Midlife Disaster*

A MOTORCYCLE HOTTIE ROMANTIC COMEDY

*Trina*

**T**here's a cat in my living room.

Pressing the heels of my palms to my eyes doesn't make the furry little creature disappear, even when the last remnants of sleep dissipate from my mind, which means... Yep. There's definitely a cat in the living room.

“Why is there a cat in the living room?”

My mother looks up from the newspaper stretched over the dining room table in our temporary open-plan rental home, a cup of coffee held aloft in her hand. Her pixie-cut hair is mostly silver, sticking up in all directions in her particular brand of *just-got-out-of-bed* chic. Purple-rimmed reading glasses are perched on the tip of her nose, giving her owl-like eyes when she meets my gaze. My mother blinks, then tilts her head, brows tugging together. Then, she smiles. “Oh, you mean Mr. Fuzzles?”

Patience, thy name is Trina. “Yes, Mom, Mr. Fuzzles. Why is he in the house?”

“He showed up last night when you were out.” She waves a hand, eyes returning to the newspaper. “I'm bringing him to the vet this morning.”

I pause, waiting for her to go on. When she doesn't, I clear my throat. “And after the vet? Where are you taking him then?”

Small, soft arms wrap around my waist. “Can we keep him? Please, Mom?” Toby, my nine-year-old, looks up at me with wide, hazel eyes. “He's too skinny. He was meowing so

loud at the back door and Nana said we could feed him. So we brought him in and gave him tuna. He ate it *all*. The whole can. And a lot of water too. So we went to the store and got cat food and he ate all of *that* too. Then he wouldn't leave. I think he likes us."

I resist the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. "You fed him, Toby, so of course he likes you. He's a cat." My hand slides over the silk of my son's hair as he squeezes my waist again, blinking those big, green-brown eyes at me. I can already feel my conviction slipping, so I glance at the cat again.

More of a kitten, really. He's in a laundry basket with an old towel on the bottom, curled up in a teeny tiny ball, little eyes closed as his paws knead a fold in the fabric. Black fur covers most of his body, apart from the tips of his paws and a diamond-shaped patch on his forehead. He really is quite skinny.

Toby leans his head against my arm. "Please, Mom? Me and Katie will take care of him."

"Katie and I," I correct absentmindedly, hand still sifting through Toby's hair. I glance at my mother, who slurps her coffee. My eyes narrow. "Did you tell the kids they could keep the cat?"

"Hmm?" My mother looks up from the paper, as if she has no idea what I'm talking about. As if we haven't been discussing the cat for the past five minutes.

I lower my chin. "Mom."

"Why don't you get some coffee, Katrina? There's a full pot. And tell me about your evening! You didn't get home until nearly midnight. I'm guessing you had fun?"

"It was okay," I say, admitting defeat about the cat. I extricate myself from Toby's hold and head for the coffee machine. I'll lay down the law after I've gotten some caffeine in me, when the last remnants of the three or four drinks I had last night are cleared from my body. I should have known better than to stay out late.

“I noticed you took a cab home,” my mother says, eyes still on the newspaper as I take a seat across from her. “I’ll need the car to take Mr. Fuzzles to the vet.”

“I had a couple of drinks last night,” I explain. “Didn’t feel safe to drive. I’ll go grab the car as soon as I’m dressed.”

Mom nods just as my seven-year-old, Katie, comes barreling into the room. She sprints toward me, then skids to a stop on the hardwood floors, hands clasped at her heart. “Can we keep him? *Please*, Mom? *Please*?” She blinks at me, her eyes greener than Toby’s but no less potent. “I’ll feed Mr. Fuzzles every day and take him out for walks.”

“Cats don’t go out for walks, Katie.” Toby rolls his eyes. “You’ll have to scoop his litter box. That’s where he’ll pee and poo.”

A tiny wrinkle appears in my daughter’s nose, but she smooths it out a second later. “I’ll scoop his litter box,” Katie says solemnly, as if she’s vowing to throw herself on a sword, lashes still batting at me. “Please, Mom?”

The last thing I need right now is a new cat. My mother and I just moved to Heart’s Cove a few weeks ago, and I’m in the midst of starting my life over after finding out my perfect husband wasn’t so perfect after all. A pet just screams more bills and responsibilities.

For a woman with an impending divorce, no job, and a dire need for a bit of stability, bills and responsibilities are already plentiful. I don’t want to add any more.

“Mr. Fuzzles might have an owner already,” I say, stalling for time.

“No collar,” my mother helpfully cuts in. “But we’ll check for a microchip when we take him to the vet.”

My phone dings. Shamelessly avoiding my kids’ hopeful stares, I glance at the screen and, reading the email notification on it, surprisingly, feel...nothing. It’s from my lawyer. Looks like my divorce is no longer impending. Kevin finally signed the papers.

I should feel heartbroken, right? Or at least relieved? I should feel...*something*.

All I feel right now is annoyance about the damn cat. What the hell is *that* about?

I turn my phone over, and Toby drifts closer, glancing at my face every few seconds. He wants to keep the cat. No—he's *desperate* to keep the cat. Katie is practically vibrating next to me, and my mother just flicks through the newspaper without a care in the world, but her head is tilted toward me. She's listening.

Ever since I found out my soon-to-be—wait, no—my *now*-ex-husband had been having an affair, my life has been one long downward spiral. First, my marriage fell apart. Then, the divorce became a scary, life-changing reality. I had to move in with my mother at the tender, young age of forty-two. Finally, my sister Candice's house burned down, so I moved from one family emergency to another. Moving to Heart's Cove was supposed to be a fresh start, but I'm still waiting for it to get easier.

Now I'm here, with no marriage and no home and no job...

And a cat.

Katie jumps from foot to foot, brows arching high over her green-gold eyes. "Mom?"

Look, I don't dislike cats. I just don't need anything else on my plate. I don't like surprises. Not right now. Not after the last surprise was finding out my dear husband had a long-time mistress. What I need right now is stability. Routine. Beautiful, safe *boredom*.

"I'll think about it," I squeeze out through gritted teeth, already regretting the words when they pass my lips.

My daughter squeals and throws her arms around my neck. I barely have enough time to put my cup of coffee down without sloshing it all over myself before Toby appears on the other side of me, cheek pressed against mine as he hugs me

close. I'm smothered by my children, and I know no matter what happens, I've already lost. We're keeping the cat.

"I'm getting dressed and picking up the car," I announce when my kids fall away from me and run to the kitten's box at the sound of a tiny mewl.

Before I can say anything about diseases, worms, and stray pets, Toby's reaching into the box and nuzzling the little bundle of black fur under his chin. Katie reaches over with a delicate hand, running one finger down the kitten's body. An adorable purr starts vibrating from the cat.

I glance at my mother, who peers at me above her purple glasses, then shrugs. She folds the newspaper and chucks my cheek. "From the moment that kitten appeared at the back door, we were never going to win this battle. Better to just accept it, Trina."

Sighing, I glance once more at the kids and go back upstairs to get dressed.

---

THE TAXI DROPS me off outside the Cedar Grove, a small bar nestled on one end of a strip mall next to a pharmacy and a barber shop on the road that connects Heart's Cove to the nearest airport. It's just outside the city limits. Close enough to be convenient, but far enough that I didn't run into anyone I knew last night. Like my sister Candice and her gang of merry besties.

I pay the driver and get out, eyes drifting to the car I left here last night. It's a rusty heap of junk, if I'm honest, but I'm on a tight budget until I can find a job in Heart's Cove. I'll get a payout from the divorce—my ex-husband was a successful artist who got big while we were married—but that money will have to be budgeted carefully. My kids need me to be smart right now, and buying a new vehicle just doesn't seem like a priority. Even if the car looks like it just rolled out of a junkyard.

I glance at the Cedar Grove.

My cheeks heat.

I came here last night hoping to see the handsome, sexy stranger named Mac who promised me a ride on his motorcycle a few weeks ago. I saw a Harley in the parking lot, and—like the desperate, divorced, forty-two-year-old biddy that I am—I couldn't wait to throw myself at him last night.

But Mac wasn't there. The motorcycle in the lot belonged to someone else.

Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. I was just lonely enough last night to do something stupid.

I had a glass of terrible white wine at the bar, until one grouchy old white-haired man in a Harley Davidson tee took pity on me and asked me to a game of pool. He had the remnants of a Scottish accent that'd been smoothed by decades away from home, and he called me doll in a way that was sweet and cheeky all at once.

So, I played pool.

The whole time, Mac's name was on the tip of my tongue. All I had to do was ask about him. Hamish, my old, Harley-loving pool partner, probably could have given me Mac's phone number. Mac did tell me all I had to do was go to the Grove and ask for him. When I found out Hamish owned the Cedar Grove, Mac's name nearly came flying out of my mouth, but I clamped my lips shut until the feeling passed.

I mean, desperate much?

Maybe I was too much of a chicken to say his name out loud, or maybe I was just having too much fun playing pool with an old Scottish biker-dude with a fondness for pet names, but I decided I didn't need to meet Mac again. I didn't need to meet *any* men. All I wanted was to have an evening away from it all. Away from the mess that is my life.

By the end of the first game (which I lost quite spectacularly, by the way) I switched to gin and tonic. When I ordered my fourth drink, I knew I'd be coming back to pick up my car in the morning.

And here I am.

The Cedar Grove is dark, with the big timber doors closed tight. It's barely eight o'clock in the morning, and I doubt it's open. Not that I'd be going in for a tippie at this hour. Shaking my head, I walk to my car. Last night was fun, but I'm not going to make a habit of it. I have kids to take care of. A mother who needs me.

And a kitten, apparently.

Unlocking the car doors with my fob, I frown when I close the distance with the final few steps. A long sigh slips through my lips as I tip my head toward the sky. Wonderful. Just—just *wonderful*.

The front tire on the driver's side is flat. I bend over and—don't ask me why—I poke it, then straighten up again and reach for my phone. I can't drive on that thing.

Looks like my mother's vet visit will have to wait, and my children will be possibly infected with whatever worms and parasites Mr. Fuzzles has for another few hours.

"Everything all right?" a familiar, broad-accented voice calls out. Hamish exits the barber shop next to the Grove, his grey beard looking neat and trimmed as he strides toward me. He's wearing dark jeans, a leather vest over a ratty old black tee, and motorcycle boots. He looks cool, in a friendly-old-biker kind of way.

"Flat tire," I call out, pointing to the offending wheel. "Must have run over a nail or something." Or the wheels on this piece of trash car just decided they were ready to be retired. Or the universe decided I needed another problem on my plate.

*Hey, congrats on your divorce! Here's another bill.*

"I'll call my son. He'll be right over with a jack." Hamish already has his phone in his hand.

"That's okay, Hamish, I have insurance. I can call them and get a tow truck, or something."

Hamish just waves me away and speaks into his phone. "Son. Pretty lady here with a flat tire. Mm-hmm. At the Grove.



Good.” He hangs up and looks at me. “He’ll be here in five minutes.”

“Really, that’s not necessary, Hamish, I—”

“We’ll change your tire in no time. You got a spare?”

“Um...” I bite my lip and glance at the trunk. “Maybe?”

Hamish harrumphs. “Firstly we need to get you a spare, then maybe a more reliable car in general. Then we need to give you lessons on how to play pool.”

A surprised laugh falls from my lips. “I wasn’t that bad!”

He just levels me with a stare, which makes me laugh harder.

“I wasn’t! I was keeping up with you. I nearly won that third game.”

“Doll, I was lettin’ you win that one. Then you went ahead and blew it anyway by potting the black.” He hooks his thumbs into his jeans and jerks his chin to the trunk. “Unlock that, will you?”

I click it open as Hamish leans over it, pulling on a little tag I’d never even noticed at the bottom of the trunk. We both peer down at an empty space where a spare tire should be. I bite my lip. Hamish huffs.

“I should just call a tow truck, Hamish, really.”

This time, Hamish just completely ignores me and glances at the road, presumably the direction from which his son will be arriving.

Sighing, I pull out my phone and call my mother. “Yeah, Mom? My car has a flat.”

“Oh no! How did that happen?” A cute little meow sounds over the phone, and I wonder if she, too, is in love with Mr. Fuzzles and just used my children to convince me to keep him. I wouldn’t put it past her.

“I’m not sure how it happened, but I’ll be gone a little while before I can get it fixed. Can you ask Candice to take you to the vet?” The sound of an engine draws my attention to

the road, where a massive pickup truck is turning into the lot.  
“I have to go.”

“All right, honey. Call me if you need anything. *Who’s a cute little kitty—*” She clicks off just as the truck pulls into a nearby parking space, and my stomach falls right down to splatter at my feet.

Because Hamish’s son, the man who’s come to save me from this flat tire?

Yeah. He’s sexy, smoldering Mac, and he’s looking at me like he wants to eat me right up.

*Trina*

“**W**e meet again.” Mac flashes me a million-dollar smile as he shuts the door with his hip, his eyes on me as he heads for the truck bed.

“Hi, Mac.” I mentally high-five myself for managing to speak. That’s how low the bar is right now.

My mouth waters as I watch him move. His dark-chocolate hair is still mussed with sleep, but in a sexy, grown-man sort of way. He still has that two-day stubble lining his jaw, dark brown interspersed with silver.

His eyes are pale brown, almost gold, and they sparkle at my words. “And you remembered my name too.” The corner of his lush lips tips up. “Here I was thinking you’d forgotten all about me.”

“You’ve met Trina?” Hamish asks.

“Briefly.” Mac’s eyes crinkle at the corners, his eyes alight with a brighter smile than the tilt of his lips...and I start blushing. Hard. Oh no.

“She never told me her name, though.” He angles his head as the sun catches on the masculine planes of his face. “Trina.” His lips shape my name, tasting it, and something warm glides down my center, settling low between my thighs.

This is bad. Very, *very* bad.

I glance away, gluing my eyes to the flat tire on my car. “Thanks for coming to my rescue. You really didn’t have to.”

“He most certainly *did* have to,” Hamish cuts in, grabbing a jack from the truck bed as Mac hauls a spare tire out.

Mac grins at his father. “Dad says jump; I say how high.”

I give them a faltering smile, hoping I don't look as out of sorts as I feel.

Then begins a show that I didn't think I'd get to see at eight o'clock on a Thursday morning. The two men set up the jack and start lifting the car, and my eyes seem to want to linger on the way Mac moves. His tee clings to his broad shoulders as he cranks the jack. A little strip of skin along his lower back is exposed when he leans over. His hair, dark brown and tousled, glints red and gold in the morning sun.

And his hands—oh, his hands. I have to look away after a while because watching those hands work feels positively indecent. The long, dexterous fingers. The hard, masculine tendons. The deft movements. The muscles along his forearms clenching and releasing as he works. With one last look at his bulging biceps, I tear my gaze away and study a crack in the pavement.

It takes a few long moments for my pulse to slow.

They're just *hands*, for crying out loud. Why does my body feel hot and flushed at the sight of them?

I should buy a new vibrator. Sort myself out before this gets out of hand—*Gah! Stop thinking about hands!*

When a machine starts whirring and the men remove the lug nuts from my tire, I work up the courage to look again. My heart stutters at the sight of Mac's strong thighs spread wide, the spare tire held in front of him as he fits it into the wheel well with a grunt.

I'm not a pervert. I swear, I'm not. There's just something about the way this man moves that makes my blood turn to honey.

Pulling a rag out of the back of his truck, Mac wipes his hands and lifts those amber eyes to mine. “All done. Should get you to the mechanic in one piece.” His eyes crinkle at the corners as his lips tip up again, a deep crease bracketing one side of his mouth. I want to trace that crease with my tongue.

Blinking, I try to clear the image from my mind. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Thank you,” I manage to respond. “I’ll look up the nearest mechanic.” I reach into my purse for my phone, but Mac makes a noise to get my attention.

“It’s Remy’s place. I’ll go with you. My bike is there.” Mac chucks the rag into the cab of the truck and nods to his father. “See you tonight?”

Hamish waves a hand as he turns and walks toward the Grove.

“Thank you!” I call out after him.

Hamish pauses and turns, then points a finger at me. “I was serious about those pool lessons, girl. You were a disgrace.” Then he turns back around and marches toward the bar.

I grin, turn, then trip over my own feet, because Mac isn’t in his truck—he’s standing with one foot against the passenger side door of my own car. When I swallow, my throat is thick. “You... You’re riding with me?”

Is it just me, or did Mac’s eyes heat when I said that? He arches a brow and leans a hand against the roof of the car, stretching his long body to its full height. “That okay?”

“I— Yeah, of course. You... I don’t— Yeah. Uh-huh.”

*Ohmigod. Stop. Talking.*

Mac’s eyes glimmer. “You sure?”

This time, I just clamp my mouth shut and nod. Then I make my way to the driver’s side and get in.

Mac folds his long body and slides in next to me, and the air in the car turns stifling. He’s just so...*big*. The top of his messy hair brushes the roof of the car. His thick, tree-trunk legs are spread wide, knees touching the edge of the glove box before he pushes the seat back and gives himself a couple inches of room. I watch those hands work to pull the seatbelt across his body, and I have to close my eyes for a moment just to compose myself.

There's something wrong with me.

There has to be.

Why else would the sight of someone's hands send me off the deep end?

Mac gives me directions after I turn the key in the ignition, and I do my best to keep my eyes on the road. My attention is on him, though. On the way he leans an elbow against the door, cupping his face between his thumb and forefinger. How he slouches down just a bit and his shirt rides up at the side. How the fingers of his other hand drum over his thigh to a rhythm only he can hear.

All this I see with my peripheral vision and a few brief, stolen glances. If I look directly at him, I might spontaneously combust.

Maybe if I turn the radio on, it'll give me something else to listen to. "You can choose the station," I tell Mac after I turn the volume knob to an appropriate level. "I usually just leave it on classic rock."

"A woman after my own heart," Mac says in that deep, sensual voice of his, and my panties grow damp.

Not knowing what else to do, I start chanting a mantra in my head: *Get a grip, Trina. Get a grip, Trina. Get a grip, Trina.*

I squeeze the steering wheel tighter. This is getting out of control.

He's just a man in black jeans and a tight tee. He's got a deep, smooth voice and a body I'd like to lick, and so what? I just separated from my husband six months ago! I am officially divorced as of *this morning*. I have children. I have responsibilities which now include a cat. The last thing I need is some romance with a badass motorcycle man who looks good when he's changing a tire.

"Pull in here. I can see Remy through the garage doors." Mac points to the mechanic in front of us and directs me to a parking space off to the side.

Is it wrong that I'm enjoying him telling me what to do?

My brain seems to have remained in the box with our new kitten this morning, and everything between my ears is scrambled mush. I park the car, thankfully without crashing and embarrassing myself, then let out a long breath.

"You okay?" Mac has one hand on the door, but his eyes are on me. "It's just a flat tire, Trina. Remy is a good friend of mine. He'll give you a discount." He tilts his head, gaze intent. "I'll ask him to service the car and make sure there's nothing else the matter with it. Everything will be okay."

*Gah.* He's being sweet. I don't know if I can handle Sweet Mac. Sexy Mac is nearly too much for me, but I can put him in a box reserved for sex and lock him away, because I do not have sex with strange men.

Repeat after me: *Katrina Viceroy does not have sex with strange men.*

Period.

End of story.

For him to look at me with soft eyes and tell me he'll take care of me? Nope. Too much.

I'm supposed to be focused on my children, my mother, and myself (and the cat). I'm supposed to be calling my lawyer and making sure everything is squared away. I'm supposed to be preparing for Kevin's visit in two weeks. I'm supposed to be doing anything but sitting in a car with a man who makes me want to strip naked and get in the back seat of this old beater.

Not to mention the reason I look so frazzled isn't the damn flat tire, it's the mountain of muscle and male sex sitting to my right. But can I tell *him* that?

Ha. Exactly.

I try to give him a reassuring smile, but my lips freeze when Mac moves his hand toward me. His touch is feather-light, barely brushing my skin as he tucks a strand of hair

behind my ear. His finger runs along my temple, smoothing down the shell of my ear in a slow, deliberate movement.

I feel that touch somewhere much, much lower.

When I swallow, Mac's gaze brushes my throat, my collarbone, before sliding toward the garage, where Remy is angling toward us.

"I'm fine," I hear myself say, then I scramble out of the car.

---

MAC'S HANDS are near me again. He's currently clicking the clasp on a helmet under my chin, his eyes intent on his work. He's still dressed in his badass black outfit, except now he has an equally badass leather jacket and a helmet of his own.

I'm not into bad boys. Never have been. Kevin was soft, and sweet, and artistic. He took me on a picnic to the park for our first date. He spent his days painting and talking about textures and movement and shape. Our house wasn't a house, it was a "sculptural piece." If someone told him to ride a motorcycle, he'd probably just ask to paint it instead.

I liked that about my ex-husband. I liked that he wasn't macho, that he didn't need to prove his masculinity to feel like a man. I liked that he was talented and brilliant and unapologetically creative. I liked, most of all, that he was a caring father and a loving husband.

Then I found out he was cheating on me, and I wondered if I was blind, or just stupid.

But there's something about the confidence of Mac's movements that reaches deep into my gut and pushes my past aside. He changed my tire like he could do it in his sleep. He sat in my car like he owned it. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear like touching me meant the world.

Now I'm standing next to a big, gleaming motorcycle with a helmet on my head, wondering how the hell *this* happened.



All I know is Remy and Mac greeted each other like old friends. They talked shop, took a look at my car, and Remy promised to take care of it. He gave me a quote that was basically just the cost of a new tire, then Mac put his hand on my elbow and asked me where I needed to go.

In a daze, I said home to Heart's Cove, and he told me he'd take me there.

"All set." Mac's lips do that hot, tilty, half-smile thing, his eyes full of humor. His fingers linger at my chin before dropping down to his sides.

I knock the side of my helmet with my knuckles. "Feels solid."

His grin widens, then he jerks a stubble-lined jaw to his machine. "Let's go." He swings a leg over the bike and lifts it off its kickstand, then turns to wink at me. "Get on. You'll love it, I promise."

Why is my heart thundering? All I can hear is the whining of a machine in the mechanic's shop and the insistent thumping of my pulse in my ears. With a deep breath, I walk my heeled boots to the bike and swing a leg over. There's not much space between Mac and me. Not much space at all.

He turns his head to the side. "Hold my waist tight. We're going to go fast. Don't want you to fall off." When I hesitate, I catch that crease in his cheek appearing then disappearing. "You can grab onto my jacket. If you don't want to wrap yourself around me yet."

Um, *yet*? Excuse me? What does that mean?

But Mac revs the bike and I do as he says, shimmying closer as my hands find their way to his waist. My fingers curl into the soft, black leather of his jacket as my chest presses close enough to feel the breadth and solidness of his body. I close my eyes as the bike roars to life, and I realize that maybe I do like bad boys. Maybe I like motorcycles. Maybe I like feeling the vibrations of a powerful machine beneath me while my hands wrap around the sexiest man I've ever met.

“Hold on tight. You won’t hurt me if you squeeze hard.” He leans back a bit, as if he’s looking for more contact between us. I curl my fingers into his jacket and hear him let out a low, masculine noise at the back of his throat.

For some reason, that noise nearly undoes me. I close my eyes and keep my grip tight, breathing in the scent of leather and Mac.

Then we take off, and my breath takes off with us. My grip on Mac’s waist tightens as he accelerates, and I think I hear him groan. It’s not until we’re on the freeway on the way back to Heart’s Cove that I realize how hard my arms are squeezing him and how tight my thighs are plastered to the outside of his.

Every inch of me is pressed tight to every inch of him. From neck to navel, all I feel is Mac. His strong, muscular back encased in leather. His ass against the insides of my thighs. His ribs under my arms. It feels...good. Great. Amazing.

*Too* good. My breasts are pressed up against a strange man’s back and all I can think about is how much I want more.

I haven’t been this close to a man besides Kevin in over thirteen years. I haven’t been this close to *Kevin* in years, either.

But when I try to loosen my grip, he speeds up and I have no choice but to hold on.

And it’s magic.

The wind, the freedom, the feeling of flying. It takes my breath away. It makes my heart soar. I stop thinking about how hot the feel of his body next to mine makes me and about how wrong it is for me to enjoy it.

The heat of Mac’s body is a blaze at my front, protecting me from the chill of the wind whipping past us. For a few glorious minutes I don’t even mind that I’m plastered to his back, because it feels too good not to be. I rest my chin on his shoulder and watch the world rush past us.

Mac moves the bike like it’s an extension of his body. He’s totally in control. Totally confident. Totally freaking *hot*.

It's not until we cross the Heart's Cove town limits and slow down that I realize just how tight I'm holding him. I unclasp my hands from his jacket and Mac lets out a low chuckle.

"How was that?"

"Incredible," I breathe.

There's a smile in his voice when he responds, as if he's pleased with me. "Where to, gorgeous?"

Those three words should *not* make my insides clench the way they just did.

"Um..." Do I really want to drive up to my house on the back of Mac's motorcycle? I can just imagine the inquisition my mother would launch. "The Four Cups Café is fine. My sister owns it. She'll get me the rest of the way."

My sister, Candice, owns the café along with three of her friends. It's become crazy-popular in town, and I'm not surprised that Mac knows exactly how to get there.

But when we pull up outside, I *am* surprised to see him turn off the bike and set it on its kickstand. I attempt a graceful dismount and mostly succeed, even if I do have to lean heavily on his broad shoulders and teeter a little bit on the curb. Mac follows with a much more practiced movement, his hands immediately reaching to steady my hips.

How is he so *warm*? His hands feel so damn good against my jeans, fingers holding me tight as I try to catch my balance. Then his hands leave my hips and reach for the clasp at my chin, but my body hasn't caught up. I can still feel the imprint of his fingers on my hips, the heat of his body against mine.

I'm dizzy. Overwhelmed. Totally loving every minute of this and knowing I'm not supposed to.

When the helmet comes off, I run my fingers through my hair and bite my lip at the messy, flattened rat's nest I feel. I must look like a mess.

Another low noise escapes the back of Mac's throat. I feel it in my bones. When he speaks, his voice is deep and dark and

sinful. “You keep biting your lip like that and I’m going to have to tug it free myself. And I might use my own teeth to do it.”

I freeze, my bottom lip releasing. Then my eyes climb up to Mac’s and I see a look that is so far from sweet it’s not even funny. I didn’t know eyes could hold so much heat. My mouth goes dry and my lips part, and Mac lets out a short huff as he shakes his head.

“Next time you have a date playing pool with my dad, you call me first, all right?” He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet, then slides a hand into his jacket’s breast pocket for a pen. I watch those wicked, beautiful hands write a phone number on the back of a receipt with neat, tight handwriting. Then he hands it to me, his eyes lingering on mine while I take the paper.

“Trina?” Mac says, arching his brows.

“Yeah?”

“You’ll call me?”

“Um, yeah,” I answer, because what else am I going to say?

Mac rewards me with a curl of his lips. “Good girl.”

Heat gushes through me at those two little, not-so-innocent words.

Now, I’m not a girl. I’m very much a woman. And I’ve never had a man say *good girl* to me in a way that makes everything inside me clench...until today. When Mac says it, it feels like a reward. Like he’s been waiting for me to agree to call him his whole life, and I just made his day. Like he’d like to say *good girl* to me again...and again...and again.

He sticks the spare helmet in one of the cases attached to his bike, gives me a little salute and a wink, then gets on the motorcycle and drives away.

I just stand there, hearing the words “good girl” playing in my head on repeat, feeling the imprint of his back against my

chest and the brush of his fingers against my skin, wishing he'd made good on his promise to bite my lower lip himself.

Then the café door bangs open and my mother stands in the doorway. "Trina. Who in the world was *that*?" Her eyes are wide as she glances at Mac's disappearing shape, then swings her gaze to me.

Her eyes are full of mischief, and all I can do is groan.

Looks like I'm not escaping a Lottie Inquisition after all.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Candice*

**M**y sister looks flushed. My mother looks delighted. They walk to the display counter together and Trina gives me a pleading look.

“Coffee?” I ask.

“Please.” She glances at her kids, who are sitting at one of the tables. There’s a half-eaten muffin between them. Toby is playing a game on a tablet while Katie quietly works her way through a coloring book. Trina shifts her gaze to our mother. “Where’s the cat?”

“At the house, in the spare bedroom, with a litter box, a scratching post, food, and water. The vet said he’s healthy, and we gave him his first round of shots. No microchip, didn’t match any of the missing posters, likely a stray. But enough about the cat. Who was that *man*?”

I fight a smile just as the café door opens and my own man strides through. Blake is a movie star in the outside world, but in Heart’s Cove, he’s just Blake. He gives me a broad smile before glancing at my sister’s face, then changing course to hook an arm around my mother’s shoulders. “Lottie, you’re looking lovely this morning. Did you change your hair?”

“Oh, stop it.” She swats at Blake’s chest. “You know I haven’t.”

He winks at me, then gently directs my mother toward the kids’ table...and away from Trina.

My sister lets out a long sigh and leans against the counter. “I think I just fell in love with Blake for that.”

I laugh. “He’s surprisingly perceptive.”

She looks back at me. “How’s the house design going?”

“The architects are taking their time responding to our comments,” I answer. “They have this ultra-modern vision, but both Blake and I want something a bit more subtle. I think it’ll take a while to get the plans approved.” I glance at my sister. “But I heard back from the construction manager at my house, and it looks like they’ll have the last of the fire and smoke damage fixed up within three weeks. You’ll be able to move in before the start of the school year.”

Trina accepts the coffee that Sven, our barista, hands her over the counter and takes a deep breath as she cups it close to her face. She shakes her head. “Are you sure you’re okay with Mom and me moving into your house? You want to stay in the rental you’re in with Blake and Allie?”

I shrug. “It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

My house caught fire three months ago. The damage was localized, but I still had to move to a rental with my teenage daughter, Allie. That was right around the time I met Blake... and right around the time he decided he wanted to stay in town. Now we’re living in a small, two-bedroom rental while the design of the new house on the coast gets finalized. Blake bought the property and told me he was staying, and he’d wait however long it took for me to realize we belonged together.

Swoon.

Thankfully, I came to my senses pretty quickly. I keep thinking Blake is going to wake up and realize he’s happier in his swanky Beverly Hills mansion, but he keeps waking up and telling me that Heart’s Cove feels like the only home he’s ever had.

It’s the fastest relationship I’ve ever been in, but it feels like I’ve known him my whole life. It feels right.

So Trina, her kids, and our mother will move into my old house when the repairs are done. I’m ready to move on, and I know my sister needs some stability right now. I’m happy to give it to her.

“Have you heard from the lawyer?” I ask.

Trina sips her coffee and nods. “This morning. Kevin signed.”

I arch my brows. “It’s all done? After all his talk about never signing divorce papers?”

Trina leans a hip against the counter and plays with the edge of her cup with her thumb. “I thought he was going to take his time. Drag it out. He kept complaining about giving me any money even though we had two kids together and he was the main breadwinner ever since his paintings took off.”

“But you supported him with two jobs for the first four years of your relationship.” I frown. “His paintings didn’t even sell until a couple of years ago. *You* were the one who introduced him to the gallery manager who gave him his first big show.”

Trina grimaces. “I don’t know if that’s exactly how Kevin remembers it. He’s made a few speeches about bootstraps.”

I roll my eyes. “He would never have been successful without you. You did his bookkeeping for years. You bought all his supplies until he could support himself. That asshole *owes* you.”

“That’s what my lawyer says,” Trina replies. “That’s probably why Kevin decided to sign the papers. I haven’t asked for anything excessive. Just child support and a fair settlement. He gets to keep the house, the cars, everything. And he was all too willing to sign off on me moving here with the kids. It’s like he *wanted* us out of his hair, which I guess worked out for me.”

My brows lower and I glance over at Blake. We don’t have kids together, but I can’t imagine him doing that. Cheating on me. Kicking me out of the house...or letting me leave without even trying to fix it.

But Kevin isn’t Blake, and maybe this is for the best.

My sister lets out a heavy sigh. “It’s fine. I’m glad it’s done. I don’t want to turn bitter. Honestly, with the kids and



the move and starting at a new school and everything, I'm glad he signed the papers. I just want this to be over."

"Oh, Trina." I reach across the counter and squeeze her hand.

Her eyes drift to our mother, who's still safely on the other side of the café and unable to lay into the thousand and one questions I'm sure she has for Trina. Which reminds me—

"What's up with the motorcycle man?"

She jumps. "Huh?"

"Katrina." I cross my arms and pop a brow.

"What?" is her angelic response.

"You rode in here on a Harley so loud it made the windows shake, then looked at the hot, leather-clad rider like he just made your whole life. Then *he* looked at *you* like you were the hottest little thing he'd ever seen. *You* did that. My stylish, high-maintenance sister was riding a *motorcycle*."

"High maintenance?" Her voice squeaks. "Who are you calling high maintenance?" She uses a manicured hand to flick her perfectly styled hair over her shoulder. Even after a motorcycle ride, her hair looks like she just walked off a photo shoot.

My sister is many things...and high maintenance is definitely one of them.

I don't mean it as a bad thing. It's actually one of the things I admire most about her. She's unapologetically girly. She takes care of herself—always has. She's always loved clothing and fashion and pampering. Look at this morning! Mom told me she was going to pick up the car, and she's standing in front of me in figure-hugging jeans, a simple white tank top, and enough silver bangles that she sounds like a wind chime when she sips her coffee. She's wearing smudged eyeliner, mascara, and a bit of blush across her cheeks. She looks edgy and cool and totally not like a hungover person doing the walk of shame to their car in the pub parking lot.

No wonder Mr. Motorcycle looked like he wanted to throw her over his shoulder and take her to his lair.

I grin at her outrage. “You know you’re not *low* maintenance, Trina.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that!” a voice calls out from the doorway. Dorothy and Margaret, the elderly twin ladies who own the town hotel, are standing at the entrance, hands on their hips.

Margaret cocks a brow. “I’ve been called high maintenance all my life, and always take it as a compliment.” She pats her perfectly coiffed hair with an elegant hand, her silk blouse and pressed salmon-colored trousers adding to the overall effect.

Her sister, Dorothy, is the wild child of the two, with long silver hair braided over her shoulder and a leopard-print wrap dress. Different style, but no less stylish. She nods at Margaret’s words and tuts at me.

I just grin and jerk my chin at Sven, who starts making coffee.

Dorothy glides toward Trina and hooks her arm through my sister’s elbow. “Now, you’re next, mm?”

Trina frowns. “What?”

“Your motorcycle man.” She beams.

Trina, looking slightly freaked that Dorothy already knows about her escapades this morning, shoots me a panicked glance.

I just laugh. She’ll get used to this town quick enough.

Dorothy leans her head against Trina’s. “He’s going to sweep you off your feet and ride off into the sunset with you. First Fiona, then Simone, then Candice, now you! We just need to get Jen and Fallon to stop messing around, and everyone will live happily ever after!”

Trina wrinkles her nose, and for a brief moment looks exactly like her daughter, Katie. “I don’t believe in happily-ever-afters, Dorothy.”

“Oh, that’s just the divorce talking.” Dorothy waves a hand. “Look at Candice. She was mopey for *years!*”

Um, excuse me? Mopey? “My husband died, Dorothy,” I deadpan.

Dorothy ignores me. “Lottie!” She crosses the café to go kiss my mother on both cheeks, then takes her time hugging Blake, squeezing his shoulders, kissing both of *his* cheeks, patting his hair, stroking his arm...

I grin and shake my head while Margaret studies Trina.

“You okay?” Margaret asks quietly.

Trina nods. “Yeah. Fine. But I’ll probably need a new car in the not-too-distant future.”

“Get that good-for-nothing ex-husband of yours to pay for it.” The older woman harrumphs, and I hide my grin while she orders a coffee.

Then, like a hurricane, Simone and Fiona—the two women who co-own the café along with me and Jen—blow through the door. Simone pumps a fist in the air. “Fiona’s venue just confirmed! She’s getting married to the man of her dreams at the old cannery on the coast! It’s happening on the first of December, and we’re going to have the *best* time!” She squeals and throws an arm around Fiona’s waist, leading the laughing woman to the counter.

My mother jumps up to congratulate Fiona, who’s already being smothered by Dorothy and Margaret.

Trina glances at me, a sad smile playing over her lips.

Then Jen appears in the doorway to the kitchen. “Have you decided on a cake flavor yet, or what?”

“Oh, give her a break, Jen!” Simone calls out, laughing as Dorothy hugs her tight. “You made my wedding cake in twenty-four hours! You have like a million weeks to do this one. You’re a master baker. You can do it!”

Jen purses her lips, but I think it’s mostly to stop from smiling. As congratulations are exchanged and coffees are made, I drift closer to my best friend and the most talented

baker I've ever met. "You okay?" I ask Jen. "What's going on with your recipe book?"

"Amanda is coming back next week to go through the recipes I have so far." Her lips twist, and her eyes dart back to the kitchen. Fallon, our amazing chef, dances around the space like he was born to make food for people. When Jen looks at me, she lets out a long sigh.

Amanda works in publishing, and she happens to be Fallon's ex-girlfriend. With Jen agreeing to work with her, she's basically torpedoing whatever budding romance was occurring between her and Fallon. Now Amanda visits Heart's Cove on the regular, and everyone can see the way she looks at Fallon. I don't blame Jen for stepping back.

"You don't know that they'll end up back together, Jen."

She gives me a quick, jerky nod. "Yeah. Whatever. Better get back to work."

"Let's have a celebratory dinner! Our place," Simone calls out. "Everyone's invited. We will fire up the grill." She beams at me, then shifts her eyes to Trina. "And don't think you're getting off without telling us all about your motorcycle ride this morning, Trina. You're one of us now. That means you got beans, you spill 'em."

Trina gapes. "How in the *world* do you know about my motorcycle ride? It happened a few minutes ago!"

Simone taps the side of her nose. "Welcome to Heart's Cove, honey."

I just laugh, and Dorothy lets out a loud squeal of her own. "I almost forgot! The pottery master class is going ahead on Monday." She looks me, Fiona, Simone, and finally Trina in the eyes. "You're all coming. Monday, eleven o'clock in the morning." She points a finger at Trina. "And I know the kids will be at their day camp every day next week, so you have no excuse."

Trina's shoulders drop. She bites her lip. "Look...pottery? I'm not artistic. That was Kevin's thing."

“Oh, *puh!*” Dorothy bats the comment away. “You will be there and you will enjoy it, if only for the fact that Mr. Blair is easy on the eyes. His pieces sell like crazy, you know. He’s a big name in the pottery world. Did you hear about the big pop-up gallery opening happening in January?” She doesn’t wait for anyone to answer. “Mr. Blair agreed to show a few pieces.” Dorothy beams. “It’s going to be great. And”—she leans closer to the two of us—“he has the hands of a *god*.”

For some reason Trina’s eyes glaze over for a brief moment, and color sweeps high over her cheeks. Then she blinks it away and lets out a breath. “Fine.”

Dorothy just grins and winks at me. “I’d get him to do classes here year-round, but he works at—”

“Dor! Come taste Jen’s new recipe,” Margaret calls from the kitchen.

“Can’t resist a demand like that!” The older woman laughs and sways her hips toward the kitchen. “See you all on Monday.”

I exchange a glance with my sister, who just blows out a breath.

“Guess I’m doing pottery then, huh.” Trina shakes her head, resigned, then moves to give Fiona her congratulations.

## CHAPTER 4

# *Mac*

I ride for over an hour, but it still doesn't cool the embers burning on my skin. I feel her everywhere. Pressed up against my back, wrapped around my waist, her thighs plastered against mine. I feel the memory of her silky, soft skin against my fingertips.

Trina.

I've been wanting to learn her name for weeks. All summer, I've spent more time than usual at my father's bar in the vain hope that she'd show up again. It's pathetic, really.

But she came back. She has my number. I felt the sharp intake of her breath when I started the bike. I know she'll want more.

Or at least, I hope so.

The engine cuts as I pull in next to my father's bike in the parking lot of the Cedar Grove. Then I groan as a minivan door opens, and a tall woman with chocolate-colored hair and a sultry smile slides out.

"Well, if it isn't Mac Blair. Funny seeing you here." Belinda sways her wide hips toward me.

"Were you waiting for me to show up?" I jerk my head to her minivan.

She rolls her eyes and lets out a coquettish laugh. "Of course not. I was just stopping in. I haven't seen you in so long, and you know, the kids are in junior high now, so..." She lets the words hang, and I don't take the bait.

Belinda was a mistake. A big, *big* mistake that I do not intend to repeat. Ever.

See, I'm a teacher at the local elementary school. I teach second grade, and I'm damn good at it. But—not to sound like an arrogant jackass—there are certain mothers who tend to be interested in me beyond my role as their kid's teacher. They see the motorcycle, they see my age, my body, and they think I can give them a good ride.

It's inappropriate.

Belinda and I...

I hate admitting this, but it's true. I slept with her. Her kid was in my class, and on the last day of the school year, she showed up at the school with a bottle of whiskey in her hand and fuck-me shoes on her feet. I took her home and obliged. I won't pretend I didn't enjoy it.

If it had happened even a day earlier and people caught wind of it, I could have been in big trouble. There's no explicit rule against parents and teachers seeing each other, but it's highly, highly unprofessional. It was a mistake. Inappropriate, obviously, and the only thing that saved me was that I was no longer teaching her child.

The problem is, I ran into her all the time for the next four years. School drop-offs, pick-ups, theater nights, sporting events, science fairs...she was always there.

And now she's here.

Four years, this woman has been batting her lashes at me. And she's not unattractive—not at all—but it's just not something I want to do again. I can't handle the whispers, the looks from other mothers, the stain on my reputation.

"How's Michael doing? Looking forward to the new school?" I take a sidestep away from Belinda to keep some distance between us.

"I'm not here to talk about my kid, Mac." She tilts her head. "Aren't you going to ask me if I want to take you up on that motorcycle ride you promised me four whole years ago?"

Her eyes flick from me to my bike, and there's no mistaking the heat in her gaze.

"Listen, Belinda." I take a deep breath and comb my fingers through my hair, looking for the right words.

It was never going to be more than sex with her. It's never more than sex with anyone. I can't do that lovey-dovey bullshit. It doesn't make sense to me that people actually *want* that. To open up. To be vulnerable. Why give someone else the chance to hurt you? Why show someone else all your softest, weakest places?

Even if Belinda tried to convince me she just wanted sex, I can tell by the desperate edge to her voice that she wants more, and I simply can't give it to her. I don't have that in me to give.

Not to mention she was the first and only time I'll ever hook up with a parent. It's not worth the torture afterward, when they inevitably want more than I can give. It's not worth throwing my job away. My reputation.

Then, just as I'm wracking my brain for the right way to tell this woman to leave me the hell alone, a car comes screeching into the parking lot and slides into a spot across the pavement from me. Four white-haired ladies shuffle out of it.

One of them is about four feet tall with eyes that shoot flames as she glances at another woman over the hood of the car. "Dorothy, you wouldn't know good wine if I smashed a bottle of it over your head."

I know Dorothy. She owns the Heart's Cove Hotel with her twin sister, Margaret. She's wearing an animal-print dress, cinched at the waist with a belt studded with turquoise. She gets out of the opposite side of the car and plants her hands on her hips. "And how would *you* know good wine, Agnes? I didn't know they had sommelier classes in hell."

Agnes sticks out her tongue.

A short-haired woman puts her hands up. "Ladies—" She stops talking when she sees me, points in my direction, and screams, "He's here! It's him! It's the motorcycle man!"



Belinda lets out a huff. “Do you know these women?”

“Uh...” I frown, my eyes darting between the three women shuffling toward me, then to the driver who’s following behind. It’s Margaret, Dorothy’s twin sister and co-owner of the Heart’s Cove Hotel. “Yeah,” I finally say. “I do.”

“Mac Blair is the motorcycle man?” Dorothy screeches. She turns to Margaret, then swivels her head back to me. Then she squeals and jumps. “Yes! Mac Blair is the motorcycle man!”

“Excuse me, Belinda.” I walk away from her, angling toward the women in front of me. “Ladies. Can I help you?”

“Don’t know who you’re calling a lady, but I’m hoping it’s not this old hag,” the short woman, Agnes, says, jerking her chin at Dorothy.

I frown. “Um...”

“Oh, don’t mind her.” The pixie-cut lady with purple reading glasses around her neck grabs my elbow and yanks me closer. She peers into my eyes, then takes a step back and studies me from head to toe. Then she nods. “You’ll do.”

“I’ll...do?”

“What are we waiting for?” Dorothy cries. “Mac, we’re here for a drink. Lead the way.” She thrusts her arm toward the bar, then proceeds to lead the way herself.

The five of us enter the Cedar Grove in a whirlwind of silver hair and animal print. My father is behind the bar counting the till while Lee, my younger brother and part-time fill-in bartender, wipes bottles down with a white cloth. They both look up and freeze. My father’s brows inch down over his eyes.

“Ooh, moody,” Pixie Cut says. “I haven’t been in a dive bar in decades.”

“What are you calling a dive bar?” my father growls, but there’s no bite to his words. His lips tip up as he meets my gaze, tilting his head in question. *Who are they and why are you with them?* his eyes ask.

“She meant it as a compliment,” Margaret cuts in smoothly, looking utterly out of place in her peach pantsuit and pearls. “Didn’t you, Lottie?”

Pixie Cut—Lottie—still has her arm hooked through my elbow. She leads me toward the bar and hums her agreement. “Of course it’s a good thing.” Propping her reading glasses on the end of her nose, she glances at the bottles on the wall before removing the glasses and looking at Dorothy. “I thought you said this place had good wine.”

“This is what I was trying to tell you,” Agnes huffs. “She wouldn’t know it from vinegar.”

“No, I said I *hope* they have good wine,” Dorothy says with a roll of her eyes. “But I’m thinking maybe I’ll just have bourbon.”

Margaret groans. “Dor...are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Of course it’s not a good idea.” Dorothy plonks herself on a barstool right next to a grouchy old regular.

“New friends of yours?” my father asks me with a grin while the other ladies take their seats. His eyes linger on Margaret, watching the way her fingers run over her pearl necklace while she peruses the beer-stained menu. Having her in here is like having the First Lady visit my father’s bar. She makes everything seem grubbier. Suddenly, I see every speck of dust, every bit of dirt, every beer stain and layer of old grease.

“Something like that,” I answer, then glance over my shoulder and let out a long breath when I see Belinda hasn’t followed me in. I’ll have to buy the first round to thank these ladies for that.

“We have full attendance for your class on Monday, Mr. Blair,” Margaret tells me. “The students can’t wait to learn from a talent such as yourself.”

“Call me Mac. He’s Mr. Blair,” I tell her, gesturing to my father.

My father really plays up his fading Scottish accent when he leans a broad palm across the bar to shake with her.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs...”

“Margaret,” she replies, slipping her hand into his while she pats her hair with the other. “Call me Margaret.”

“We should do shots,” Lottie states with a decisive nod.

“Good idea!” Dorothy cries, while Margaret and Agnes bark out a “No!” in unison.

“First round is on me,” I tell my father, who nods.

“Oh, I like him,” Lottie says, lowering her reading glasses to look me up and down again. “I *definitely* like him.”

“Have a little shame, woman,” Agnes huffs, but she gives me a long, assessing look just the same.

Grinning, I meet my father’s gaze across the bar and nod toward the door. He gives me a slight dip of the chin while my brother surveys his new patrons with an arch of the eyebrow, and I slink out before the four ladies can crowd around me and tell me more about how “I’ll do.” Whatever that means.

When I get outside, I poke my head out to check for a certain minivan, then slip out when I see the coast is clear.

Then, grinning, I get back on my bike and ride.

*Trina*

**T**he weekend is spent hosting multiple kitten viewings for half the residents of Heart's Cove. Toby and Katie are over the moon. Katie does, in fact, empty the litter box. There's a deep wrinkle in her nose while she does it, but to her credit, my daughter doesn't complain once.

My car magically appears in front of the Four Cups Café sometime between Saturday night and Sunday morning, to the delight of everyone in town. Candice calls me to let me know she has the keys, and I bite my lip when I see it, knowing—just *knowing*—it was Mac who left it here. Candice, of course, only gives me a mischievous grin when I ask her who dropped it off, which all but confirms it was Mac. And seriously—how thoughtful can one man be? Now I don't need to figure out how I'll pick my car up from the mechanic.

I don't quite have the courage to call or text him, though. Not right now. Maybe on Monday, once the kids are busy at camp and I have time to take a breath. After the pottery class. Maybe Tuesday, when I have free time. Just...later. I'll do it later.

But before I know it, I'm dropping the kids off at a nearby summer day camp and getting ready for a pottery class I never signed up for.

What does one wear to a pottery class? Dorothy said old clothes that I don't mind ruining, but I'm the type of person that has a strict policy on house clothes staying at home. I stand in front of my closet and finally choose a pair of loose khaki-green, drawstring-waisted pants that are somewhere between sweats and cargos, and a tight, white, cap-sleeved tee.

My hair, which I curled yesterday and still has good volume, gets swept up in a high pony. I brush on a little makeup, then grab my purse, casual Converse shoes, and my favorite pair of oversized shades to complete the look.

Okay, fine. Maybe I am high maintenance. But is that really a bad thing? I like clothes. I like makeup. I like looking nice. So what?

I used to have to defend myself to Kevin all the time. He didn't understand why I got manicures, why I spent my time blow-drying my hair, why I wanted to look stylish when I was going to the grocery store. He thought it was frivolous.

Any time I tried to explain to him that it made me feel good to look good, he'd tell me he preferred me in sweats with no makeup on. As if *his* preferences on my appearance were more important than how *I* felt. These days, when I think back on my marriage, I wonder how much I settled for someone who didn't really care about me, my thoughts, or my feelings. Is it any surprise he was unfaithful? I sometimes wonder if he ever saw me as my own person at all, or if I was just an accessory to his perfect life.

Not to mention the person who would finally launch his career was a woman I'd met and befriended at the nail salon—did he acknowledge that maybe my manicures were a good thing?

I'll let you guess the answer to that one.

Shaking my head, I find my mother humming to herself in the kitchen. "You coming?"

She arches her brows. Her eyes glimmer with hidden delight, but I don't have the time or the energy to figure out why. With my mother, sometimes it's better not to ask. "Oh, no, honey, you go ahead. I'll stay here and do some laundry." She smiles, the mirth in her gaze softening into something warm. "You look gorgeous, Katrina."

At least my mother appreciates it. Smiling, I call out a goodbye and head to the Heart's Cove Hotel.

The art studio is at the back of the building, accessible through a lush, jungle-like courtyard. I find Candice, Simone, Jen, and Fiona in the lobby, and the five of us do the usual greetings and hugs, then head back toward the studio.

I've been in town most of the summer, but it still feels weird to be accepted so seamlessly into a group of friends. I haven't had girlfriends since college.

"You okay?" Fiona glances at me as we walk. "You're looking very serious for someone who's about to have her hands covered in clay."

I force a smile and shake my head. "It's nothing. I'm fine." When she arches her brows, I let out a laughing huff. "Fine. I'm nervous. I haven't done anything artistic in years. It's silly, I know, but it's true."

She's quiet for a few steps, then her lips curl into a smile. "You know, my first couple of hours in Heart's Cove were spent in this studio. That's how I met Grant." Her eyes glimmer. "I was so completely overwhelmed, because I'm as far from an artist as you can get, but now I love it. There's no pressure in there. You can be as bad or as good as you want. There's no rules to creativity."

"Kevin used to mock my lack of artistic skills," I blurt, then snap my mouth shut. I hadn't meant to say that. But he did, didn't he? Little snide comments whenever I'd try to join him in the studio in the early days. I stopped going after a year or so, and he never asked me back. Art was his thing, and I wasn't invited.

Fiona tuts. "Girl, one look at your face and I know you've got more creativity in your pinky finger than I've got in my whole body." When I frown in confusion, she smiles. "Your makeup, Trina. It's art."

"It's not fair!" Simone says, turning around to grin at us. "I can barely manage to put mascara on without poking myself in the eye, and here you are looking like a million bucks."

My chest warms at their comments, even though I wave them away.

Then we enter the studio, and I scream. Literally.

Because Mac is there, wearing an old blue button-down with the sleeves rolled up to show off his mouthwatering hands and corded forearms. He's got a brown apron wrapped around his muscular body, and it looks positively sinful.

The man wears leather, and I want to jump him. I never thought he'd look like pure sex in an apron.

I was wrong.

Mac's face registers surprise, but it's not the bad kind (I hope). He straightens up from the pottery wheel where he'd been positioning a stool and rakes his fingers through his hair, his eyes running down the length of my body.

I—

Wow. I want him to look at me like that every hour of every day for the rest of my life. It warms me from the inside out, makes me feel like the most beautiful, sexiest woman in the world.

That's when I realize that everyone *else's* eyes are on me, too. Simone and Fiona look like they're having the time of their lives, fighting grins behind raised hands. Jen lifts her gaze to the ceiling. Candice is just unabashedly laughing like the evil older sister she is.

"Ladies," Mac greets us in his deep baritone, eyes still on me. "Here for the pottery class?"

"You're Mr. Blair," I say stupidly.

Mac's eyes gleam. "You know my name, Trina, but if you want to call me Mr. Blair instead, I won't complain."

Now Simone is laughing too. Oh no. I turn my red face away from Mac and stare at the fiery-haired woman who's quickly becoming a good friend, then shift my gaze to Candice. My sister just grins.

There are a few students in the class I don't know, and they're all looking at me. Wonderful.

Mac saves me by introducing himself to everyone and starting the class at a long table at the back of the studio, where a few bags containing rectangular chunks of clay are positioned at regular intervals around the table. After we all get situated with paint-stained aprons on, he instructs us to open the bag and use a wire to cut off a big hunk of clay. We massage it to get the air out, which feels like a workout and a half, then cut it again and roll it into four balls. Mac demonstrates as he talks.

I was wrong about the tire changing. That wasn't a show. *This* is a show. Those hands—I need help. I can't stop watching them. My mouth waters as he handles the clay with confidence, shaping it into four equal-sized balls with a few expert movements. The slapping of his palm against the clay almost sounds like skin slapping against—

Nope. Not going there. Not in public. Not right now.

Then I realize everyone has already started, and all I've been doing is staring at Mac's hands.

With trembling movements, I make four wonky-shaped balls, then wrap them back up in the bag to stop them from drying out. We're led over to the wheels set at equal intervals in a circle in the center of the studio, and somehow, with all the other ladies moving at light speed before I can grab a seat on the opposite side of the room, I end up sitting beside Mac.

They seem totally impervious to my withering glares, avoiding my eyes as they take their seats. Jerks.

So I sit, and I wait for Mac to start teaching...but I'm not prepared for what happens next. Turns out shaping the balls of clay was only the start of the show.

“Place your ball in the center of the wheel. Smack it down hard.” Simone snorts, and Mac's eyes flick to her, then to everyone's clay. “Good. Pat it down a couple of times, then wet your hands and start your wheel. We're going to center the clay, which will allow us to shape it into what we're trying to create. If it's off-center, you won't be able to shape it properly. You'll end up with one side thicker than the other.”



I can't look away as Mac takes those huge, broad hands and dips his long fingers into a small pail of water. His forearms flex as he shakes off a few drops, then Mac starts shaping the clay. He's saying something, explaining the process of centering the clay, but all I can do is stare.

Wet clay moves between his hands, smooth and sensuous. His fingers press, release, move like magic over the clay, making it dance up and down and through the gap in his hands. He cups the clay and shapes it in a smooth, tall—listen, there's no other word for it—*phallic* shape. It looks like a massive grey dong on the center of his pottery wheel, and the sight of it makes me want to combust. I have to look away.

My face is red-hot.

Candice is biting her lip, and Simone's face is as red as mine, except she's not blushing. She's trying not to burst out laughing. Traitor.

With nothing else to do, I start centering my clay. It's smooth, wet, and it feels calming to put my hands around it. Keeping my eyes firmly on my own wheel, I listen to Mac's deep voice rumble through me as he gives instructions, encouragements, and tips.

My clay wobbles. I chance a glance over at Mac and reposition my hands, wetting them, moving them over the smooth material. After a few moments, I think I've got it.

Once the clay is centered, we start opening it. Mac demonstrates as he explains, but all I can do is watch the way those hands fondle the clay as a bowl appears on his wheel.

My panties are wet.

That's so damn embarrassing. I'm turned on by the man doing *pottery*, for crying out loud. What is wrong with me?

It's just... I can't even explain it. He's just so *capable*. He shifts his fingers ever so slightly, and the opening in the center of his clay widens. Then he shifts again, with water and clay running over his hands as the wheel goes around and around and around, and he pulls the sides up as if he's commanding the clay to move. Soft, gentle strokes. Firm touches. Stiff,

muscular upper arms, with his elbows braced against his wide-spread legs.

It's erotic. Every movement. Every touch. Every focused, beautiful line of his face.

Tearing my eyes away from the sex-on-a-pottery-wheel show, I try my hands at opening my lump of clay. It's harder than it looks.

Within a few seconds, there's a warm presence at my back. Mac pulls his stool over next to mine. "May I help?" he asks.

"Of course," I reply, my voice a croak.

Those gorgeous hands move closer, fingers pressed against my own, palms warm and broad against the backs of my mine. His touch is confident, warm, and it sends my mind reeling.

"Firm, even pressure works best," he says, his head bent next to mine, so close his breath ruffles a rogue strand of hair.

"Ain't that the truth," Simone quips, and Fiona lets out a cough that sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

I don't even have the brain capacity to look up and glare at them.

Repeat after me: *Murder is wrong. Do not murder your sister's best friends. Murder will get you put in jail for the rest of your life, even if they deserved it.*

"Here, like this." Mac moves his hands over mine again, showing me exactly how to move them to shape my lump of clay into a bowl. The clay responds to him, and so do I. I can barely breathe at the feel of his hands on mine, his sleeve brushing my arm, his thigh pressed against my leg.

And our hands, wet. Touching. Stroking. Clay, cold and soft and malleable, moving exactly where he wants it to.

I can't breathe.

He smells so damn good. I'm close enough to inhale it, bask in it.

My heart thunders against my ribs, and it's all I can do to watch...and enjoy. My insides clench around the painful

emptiness between my legs, and I try to hide the way he makes me want to squirm. I want to squeeze my thighs together, but Mac tells me to brace my elbows against them, so I have no choice but to keep them spread wide on either side of the wheel. When he picks my hand up and shows me how to place it to pull up the sides of the bowl, my breath hitches.

Mac notices. He glances at me, turning his head so his lips are only a couple of inches away from mine. Sinful, stormy eyes meet mine, then drop to my mouth. His gaze lingers, tracing the shape of my lips, and I almost expect him to kiss me.

Then I remember we're in a room with women who won't think twice about teasing me for the rest of eternity, not to mention a bunch of people I don't know. I've been divorced for all of four days. I can't kiss Mac. I can't kiss *anyone*!

I jerk away from him, gouging the side of my bowl in the process.

Mac just grins. "Luckily, wet clay can be reshaped." He nods to the gouged clay. "Show me." His command shivers through me, and I make the mistake of meeting Simone's eyes.

She wiggles her eyebrows, mouth forming the words *show me* in a much more suggestive way. And damn it, I'm blushing again.

I turn my attention to my wheel as Mac rinses his hands in my bucket of water and watches me. I wet my own hands again, then shape the bowl just like he taught me.

"Good, Trina," he says, and oh, my name on his tongue sounds sinful. "You're a natural." Mac's eyes darken, and for a few long seconds, I'm caught in the crossfire of his gaze.

Then someone—Candice, maybe?—clears their throat, and Mac jerks his gaze away. He mumbles something about helping the other students, and I busy myself shaping and reshaping my bowl.

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I END UP WITH A BOWL, a cup, and a little flat jewelry tray by the end of the class. Mac will have to fire our creations in his kiln once before we can glaze and fire it again, which means we'll be coming back next week. I pretend that doesn't make my heart leap. Most of the students except for my crew have filed out of the class by the time Mac removes his apron.

He smiles at the five of us. "Good work today, ladies."

"We had a good teacher." Simone winks at him, then winks at me.

Subtle. Real subtle.

"You should see an optometrist for that eye twitch," I tell her.

Simone just laughs.

Mac clears his throat, then his lips tip up in that cheeky grin that makes my cheeks burn hot. "How do you feel about that pool lesson this weekend, Trina? My father's been asking about you. Said you need to come by the Grove before he gets too lonely out there."

"Oh, I—" I'm about to come up with an excuse—any excuse—when Simone and Fiona exchange a glance, and Simone lets out a little *whoop*.

"Girls' night!" She grins, then arches her eyebrows at the rest of us. "Yeah? Yeah."

"I'll book the salon for some blowouts," Fiona says. "Jen, make sure you have the evening off. Wait, what evening are we doing this?"

"We?" I ask. "Girls' night?" When did my pool lesson with Hamish—which I fully intended on avoiding—turn into a full-on girls' night out that somehow includes blowouts at the salon?

"Saturday," Candice answers Fiona. "The Cedar Grove, right?" This, she directs at Mac.

Mac's grin spreads into a full smile. "The Cedar Grove." He nods.

“We can get our hair done, then head to Katrina’s to get ready. You can do our makeup, right?”

“I don’t... Toby and Katie...”

“Clancy and Allie can watch them,” Candice cuts in, waving a hand. “They’re pretty much in love with Mr. Fuzzles anyway, so any excuse to spend time at your place will be enough for them.”

“Mr. Fuzzles?” Mac asks, eyebrows arched.

I shake my head. “New kitten. Don’t ask. It’s been an eventful week.”

“He’s *the cutest*. Little white paws.” Simone lets out a squeaky noise. “You should come meet him, Mac. I can just imagine a big, strong man like you holding a little, tiny, furry kitten. That’s the stuff dreams are made of.”

“He should come meet him?” I repeat dumbly. I feel like I have whiplash from staring down everyone who talks. Mac should absolutely not, ever, not in a million years come meet my new cat. No way.

“This is going to be so fun!” Candice says, and I’m ashamed to say I’m tempted to be violent with my own beloved sister.

*Murder is wrong. Do not murder your sister. Murder will get you put in jail for the rest of your life, even if she deserves it.*

“You can say that again. Saturday night! Yay!” Simone hooks her arm through Fiona’s. “I’ll make mini quiches. You bring wine. We should get our hair done just after lunch so we can meet up at Trina’s early enough to get ready. Then we can have some kitty time too.”

“Definitely.” Fiona nods decisively. “We could do an early dinner. Charcuterie boards!”

Biting my lip, I turn to Mac. “I guess everyone will be at the Grove on Saturday.” I give him an apologetic smile. “Hope that’s okay.”

“I’ll tell Dad to batten down the hatches in preparation.”

“I heard that!” Simone calls out from the doorway. She pauses, turns, and grins. “Not a bad idea, actually. I’m feeling like letting loose.”

Jen, Candice, Simone, and Fiona leave, and all of a sudden I’m alone with Mac. Tension stretches taut between us. I should walk away. I really, really should. But somehow, my feet stay anchored to the ground. My body burns in every place he’s ever touched, from my hands to my hips to the thighs that were pressed against his only a few days ago.

He stands there, just a couple of feet away from me, and it feels like every cell in my body is drawn to him.

I clear my throat and jerk my thumb over my shoulder. “I should...”

“Yeah.” Mac rubs the back of his neck, and neither of us make a move to leave. His grey-blue eyes meet mine, and a little smile tips up his lips.

I don’t want to leave. Not even a little bit. “I didn’t know you were into pottery,” I say. “Dorothy said you were kind of famous.”

Color rises high on Mac’s cheeks, and he shrugs the comment away. “I don’t have much time to do it during the school year, but summers tend to be productive.”

“Oh! Do you have kids?”

“No, I—”

“Hey Trina, you coming?” Candice pokes her head through the door. “Sorry to interrupt, but apparently Fallon is putting lunch on at the café to celebrate our newfound love of pottery.”

“Yeah. Sure. Of course.” I glance at Mac. “See you Saturday.”

He nods, his eyes lingering on mine, then dropping to my lips. Before I can do anything stupid, I turn on my heels and walk away, but I stop when I get a few steps away. Glancing over my shoulder at him, I tilt my head. “My car—was that you?”

“Was what me?” Mac picks up a stool and stacks it on top of another, not meeting my eyes.

“Did you drop it off in town this weekend after Remy fixed the tire?”

Mac looks at me then, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He lifts a shoulder, then bends over to pick up a stack of stools. “You seemed like you might need a break. It was the least I could do.”

My heart grows so fast I can barely catch a breath. Through a thick throat, I squeeze out enough air to speak. “Thanks, Mac.”

He just nods. “See you on Saturday.”

“Yeah,” I answer, lingering, before finally getting my butt in gear and leaving before I *really* do anything stupid.

*Trina*

Candice was right. Allie and Clancy, Fiona's stepdaughter, are more than happy to spend time with my kids—and the kitten, of course.

Mr. Fuzzles, despite my grumbling about taking care of a pet, hasn't been a bad addition to the household. Last night, after the kids had gone to bed and I was zoned out watching *The Bachelor* on TV, he jumped up on the couch beside me and stretched his little body next to my thigh, curling his tiny white paws under his chin. It was the first time he'd approached me, and it made my heart thump harder than it should. When I used a gentle, timid finger to scratch behind his ears, he made the cutest purring sounds I'd ever heard while his tail flicked over and back across my thigh.

Then, out of the blue, he jumped off the couch, gave me a look over his shoulder that I can only describe as pure, unadulterated sass, and sauntered away. As if he *knew* he was winning me over. Little shit.

Now it's Saturday afternoon, and Toby and Katie are playing outside with Allie and Clancy. I just got back from the salon with the girls, and I can only hope that Hamish did, indeed, batten down the hatches. These ladies are not messing around. It's barely past six o'clock in the evening and we've already made our way through three and a half bottles of wine and an industrial amount of mini quiches. The charcuterie boards have long since been demolished.

While I sit at my vanity, Simone lounges on my bed and Candice peruses my closet. Fiona is in the bathroom doing her



makeup while Jen reads a book on my armchair, legs hanging sideways off the arm as she waits for everyone to get ready.

Candice lets out a long sigh and finally turns to me. “Trina, can you do that thing you do where you wave a magic wand and make me look amazing?”

I frown, laughing. “What?”

“You know, you tuck my shirt in and cuff my jeans and then do stuff with accessories and hair and I go from frumpy and old to a super-hot MILF in like ten seconds?”

“You want me to style you?” I tilt my head.

“Yes!” She stands in the middle of my room and spreads her arms. “Fix this.”

I smile and do as she says. She’s wearing a silky, draped top with an asymmetrical neckline, but her skirt sits too low on the hips. It doesn’t show off her tiny waist at all. I tap my chin, then dig through my closet for a high-waisted, faux-leather skirt that will hit Candice just below the knees. I tell her to put it on. That skirt is hot. On me, it hits scandalous mini-skirt territory and used to make Kevin cluck about my age.

Once she has it on, it only takes a bit of tucking, a few bobby pins in her gorgeous ombre hair, and a touch more blush.

“There.” I stand back and smile.

“Holy shit.” Simone sits up on the bed, glass of wine dangling between her fingers. “Do me next!”

Candice moves to a mirror, looks at herself, then shakes her head and beams at me. “You are so freaking talented, Katrina. You should do this professionally.”

“What, dress people?” I snort and shake my head, but Fiona walks out of the bathroom and whistles.

“I’d pay for someone to tell me how to dress if I ended up looking like *that*,” Fiona says.

“Same.” Simone stands up and spreads out her arms. “Do me! Do me!”

Jen looks up and nods. “You could make it a business.” When I frown at her, Jen shrugs. “If I can bake, and Candice can do yoga, Simone can do social media and websites, and the four of us can run a café, then *you* can do *that*. People would pay.” Then she returns to her book.

I blink. For some reason, her words hit me hard. Jen isn’t the type of person to mince her words. She’s incredibly logical, methodical, and hearing her say that I’m good at styling... I don’t know. It means a lot. It shouldn’t, but it does.

So, I take a sip of wine and get to work. I put Simone in a gorgeous orange wrap dress that sets off her hair and eyes, then add lots of gold jewelry. Then Fiona puts on a tight, short-sleeved green top and the same slim-fitting black pants she had on before. Jen refuses my services, but she does let me touch up her makeup and when she glances in the mirror, I see a hint of a smile on her lips. The three others twirl and laugh and flick their hair, then tell me I’m a genius.

All I did was dress them, but sure. I’ll take the compliment.

I feel twenty years younger than I am right now. Girls’ night? I haven’t had a girls’ night in far, far too long. And I haven’t had someone actually appreciate the fact that I’m good at hair and makeup and styling clothes in even longer. I’d started to feel like my interest in “girly” things was something to be ashamed of. Lord knows Kevin mocked it often enough for me to doubt myself.

Never mind the fact that I managed all our household affairs and even did his bookkeeping and management before he got big enough to hire a team. But I learned that when you want to be typically feminine, you have to deal with people assuming that you left your brain at the door.

I smile, then turn to my closet and suddenly remember what I’m doing. I’m going to see Mac. I’m going to play pool. In his presence. At a bar. With all these crazy women egging me on.

Oh, no.

“What the hell am I going to wear?” I turn to my friends, panic suddenly rising inside me. What am I even doing? I should be spending time with my kids and making sure they’re okay with the divorce, not going out and meeting strange, sexy, pottery-throwing, motorcycle-riding hunks.

“Okay.” Fiona puts her glass of wine down and lifts her palms up, entering what I can only describe as Fiona Gets Down to Business Mode. “We’re going for sexy but not trying too hard, but so smoking-hot Mac won’t know what hit him. I want his jaw to hit the floor as soon as you walk in. I want him to forget how to speak. Your outfit needs to totally lobotomize him.”

“Yes. Big hair, big makeup, tight clothes,” Simone announces. “Hooker-chic.”

“Whoa, um, no,” I cut in.

“Oh! Wear that white bodysuit with the low back!” Candice says, eyes brightening. “You know the one. It’s super flattering and has those long sleeves and the low scoop. No cleavage, but damn sexy.”

I tilt my head. “With jeans and heeled boots. That could work.”

“Candice, be honest,” Simone says seriously. “Is it truly sexy? Is it lobotomy-inducing sexy?”

“The man’s brain will leak out of his ears. I promise. You haven’t seen my sister when she tries hard.”

Fiona chokes on her wine. “Wait...all this time, all these outfits I’ve seen you in—that’s you *not* trying hard?” She gapes at me, then at the rest of them. “Am I just a frumpy person, or is that not shocking to you all?”

I blush and try to hide how much I appreciate what they’re saying.

*I am a girly girl, hear me roar!*

Getting dressed distracts me from the worry of seeing Mac again. I give my hair a little zhoosh, curling it out a bit bigger than the stylist did as per Simone’s instruction, and brush on

some smokey makeup as my wine glass gets filled and refilled as if by magic.

When the five of us are ready, we head downstairs. The kids are in the living room with Clancy and Allie, and my mother, Dorothy, and Margaret are in the kitchen eating dinner. I'm not quite sure when they arrived, but I have a sneaky suspicion they wanted to see the five of us off.

Dorothy whistles as my mother grabs her phone. "Photos! I want photos."

"Mom, this isn't prom." I grab my purse from the kitchen counter and check for my things while my mother ignores me and starts creative-directing a photo shoot right there in the hallway.

Katie skips to me and wraps her arms around my waist. "You look like a princess, Mommy. So pretty."

Annddd my heart melts. I place a soft kiss on my daughter's head. "You going to be okay tonight without me?"

My sweet daughter who just called me a pretty princess rolls her eyes and snorts. I guess that answers that.

Then, with one last look at my friends and one last goodbye kiss for my kids—and fine, a little scratch behind Mr. Fuzzles's ears—I bid goodbye to the ladies in my kitchen and head for the waiting taxi. As I slip inside, crammed in the back seat with three others, I can't help but smile.

It's been ages since I've had a night out like this. *Years*. In fact, I don't remember the last time I went out with girlfriends without worrying if Kevin would be okay with the kids—or as he called it, "babysitting," even though they're his own children—or without him turning his nose up at such "pedestrian" activities as going for a drink. If it wasn't a gallery opening or a poetry reading, Kevin would act like it was beneath him.

But this...this is fun. And I'm going to enjoy every minute of it.

And maybe I've had too much wine, but when we arrive at the Grove and tumble out of the cab, I can't help but laugh

when Simone struts up to one of the many motorcycles parked outside and poses beside it. Fiona starts snapping photos—much like my mother was doing a few minutes ago—and I finally let go of that little niggle telling me I shouldn't be doing this.

I'm a grown woman. I'm allowed to have fun. I may be recently divorced, but I'm not dead. I can go meet a sexy man at a bar if that's what I feel like doing. I can learn to play pool in my forties. I can have nights to myself.

And—after fantasizing about that pottery class for nearly a week—I can say with complete honesty that this is *exactly* what I feel like doing.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Mac*

**A**s I tip a bottle of beer into my mouth to take a sip, my eyes drift to the door for the millionth time tonight.

She'll show up. I know she will. Her friends wanted to come here, so she has no choice. She'll be here.

Another sip of beer; another glance at the door.

"You got it bad," my brother says from behind the bar. He's taller than me by an inch and has the same thick, dark hair, usually messy from the way he runs his hands through it. Lee sees one of the regulars jerk his chin and is a good enough bartender to know that means the man wants another drink. As he pours the pint, he arches a brow at me. "Dad told me about your woman."

"She's not my woman."

*Yet.*

Wait. No.

She's not my woman, ever.

My father claps me on the shoulder. "Help me change a keg, will you?" He jerks his head to the storeroom where we keep the spare barrels.

I nod, slipping off my stool to follow him across the bar. My father has a bounce in his step that I haven't seen in a long time, and I wonder if it has anything to do with the long phone calls he's been taking in his office with a certain refined, sophisticated older woman he recently met.

The thought makes a void tear open in my chest. My father is a man of contradictions, but he's always been predictable. Steady. He owns a bar, but doesn't drink. He rides a motorcycle, wild as anything, then goes home to spend long hours reading by the window that overlooks his backyard. He flirts with women, charms them within moments, but he doesn't get attached. Never has.

Not since my mother left him with us boys and never came back.

It was me, Lee, and Dad against the world. I learned early on how easy it is for women to walk away. I felt the pain of those wounds like bloody, ripped blisters on my feet. Constant, throbbing aches that got worse with time, not better, and I learned it by seeing my father drink himself to near-death, then crawl his way back to sobriety.

When he bought the Grove, I thought it was some awful form of torture, some penance for the years he spent drowning in his own pain, but it was just another of his contradictions. Being near alcohol didn't make him relapse. It's like he needed the constant reminder of what would happen if he did.

It always made sense to me that Dad was on his own, the same way it made sense that *I* was on my own. Like the sun rising in the east. It was the only way we could be.

But my father glances over his shoulder, a broad grin on his lips. "Don't look so worried, son. She'll show."

I pretend not to know what he's talking about. We keep the new kegs near the back of the building, in a room where the delivery truck can easily access the door. My father, wisely choosing to drop the subject of who may or may not show up at the Grove tonight, tells me which beer needs to be changed, so I grab one of the big silver kegs and start rolling it across the floor to get to the keg room behind the bar. From there, I swap an empty for a full one and haul the empty keg over my shoulder to take it back to the storage room.

It's a trip I've made hundreds of times, especially as my father has gotten older and struggled with the weight of the full kegs. I know every step of the journey from the keg room

to the storage room by heart. I could walk this path in my sleep.

And it's when I'm halfway across the bar that I see her.

Trina walks in wearing tight jeans, the hottest fucking knee-high boots I've ever seen, and a white top that's somehow not revealing while leaving nothing to the imagination. Holy *fuck*. My brain stops sending signals to the rest of my body and everything inside me malfunctions. I trip over a chair, my body pitches forward, and the keg clangs against a table. Beer goes flying everywhere.

Screams, flailing arms, empty kegs rolling away, and then I'm on the floor. There's a chair on top of me and a table descending toward me, until a hand reaches out and catches it—but not before every bottle and glass on the table comes clattering down around and on top of me. One of them smashes nearby.

Great. Wonderful. I blink, afraid to move in case I cut myself on broken glass. Also, I might be in shock.

My father's face appears in my field of vision, his eyes glimmering with humor. "That was quite the dismount."

"Be quiet and help me up, yeah?" I extend an arm, which my father grabs to help me to my feet. Thankfully, the glass that smashed was a couple feet away from me, but I still brush out my hair in case of shards.

"Are you okay?" a sweet-as-honey voice says from behind my back, and I brace myself before turning around.

It doesn't help. Trina is still as drop-dead gorgeous as she was a minute ago, when I wasn't covered in dust and spilled beer and a sheen of hot embarrassment. Her long-sleeved white top hugs every inch of her tight, curvy body. I run my eyes down to those mile-long legs, internally groaning again at the sight of her heeled black boots. I can't help but imagine asking her to wear them for me—and *only* them—somewhere more private.

When my eyes slide back up to meet her eyes, I have to fight the instinct to shift my pants against the growing



tightness near the placket of my zipper. She did something with her hair, her makeup. It makes me hard as hell, as if my body knows this is the woman I've been waiting for. This is the woman I want.

Then I realize I've been staring at her for a really, really long time. My father clears his throat as someone sweeps up glass nearby.

"Hey," I manage.

Her lush, pink lips—glittering with some kind of shiny gloss that makes me want to lick her mouth clean—curl into a smile. "Hi." Her gaze slides to my father, standing to my left. "Reporting for duty, Hamish. I brought a few willing students with me." She points her thumb over her shoulder, and that's when I see her friends.

Battening down the hatches might have been a good idea.

Simone, the redhead, has her arm around Harold, a grouchy regular that's as much of a fixture as the stool he sits on. But the weird thing? Harold is *laughing*. I've known the man eleven years, and I've never seen him laugh.

The dark-haired woman—Fiona, from memory—is passing her card over the bar to pay for a round of drinks while Trina's sister, Candice, has drifted over to the electronic jukebox by the wall. Then, "Fantasy" by Mariah Carey starts blaring over the speakers, causing every regular patron—all male, all older than me—to snap their heads up in confusion.

But the women—including the quiet one, Jen, that barely said anything at the pottery class but made the best bowl I've seen from a beginner—throw their hands in the air with a collective scream and immediately start singing and dancing. They know every word. Every little trill. And they're singing at top volume—and not necessarily in key.

"Oh, God..." Trina looks horrified.

It makes me laugh. I pick up the chair I'd crashed into while my father replaces the customer's spilled beer, and when I grab the empty keg, I clear my throat. "I need to put this away," I tell Trina. "Don't... Don't disappear, okay?"

Her smile spreads wide across her face as she tilts that pretty head of hers. “Where would I go? I have very serious business to attend to.” Her eyes slide to my father, who nods.

“Damn right you do. First thing’s first, grab a pool cue. I’m going to show you how to chalk it up.”

With a grin, Trina follows him to the back of the bar where the pool table resides. I watch her walk away and nearly stumble over that damn chair again when I see the back of her outfit. There’s her ass, which is glorious, cupped by those jeans like they’re painted on...

And then there’s her top. Somehow, by some female fashion voodoo, there’s no back. Her hair cascades down in golden-brown curls to mid-back, and when she takes a hand to lift it off her neck, I groan at the sight of her spine, the creamy expanse of flesh on display.

The woman’s *back* is making my cock throb, for fuck’s sake. I readjust my belt, but I can’t tear my eyes away from Trina as she grabs a pool cue, chalking it up under my father’s watchful eye. Then he demonstrates how to prop the cue against his left hand, and I’m the luckiest man in the world, because I get to watch Trina lean over the green felt, her heart-shaped ass and exposed back glowing gold under the lights above the pool table.

That pose...

I stifle a groan. I’m not going to make it through the night if this continues.

A face appears at my side. Fiona. She squints at me, then lets a slow smile spread across her face. Then she just starts laughing. “It’s a lobotomy, ladies!”

The rest of them cheer, then go back to singing and dancing.

I glance over my shoulder and nearly fall over again when I see Harold bopping along to the music, his feet shuffling beside his stool as Simone swings his arms from side to side while she sings Mariah’s lyrics off-pitch in his face. And

Harold loves every minute of it, judging by the broad, gap-toothed smile on his face.

Shaking my head, I grab the keg and make my way to the keg room for a moment of peace. I put the empty barrel with the rest of them and pause before exiting the small room again. It's a long, rectangular room with an exterior door at one end and an interior door to the bar at the other. Empty kegs line the wall on one side, with full ones on the other. I stand between the silver barrels, hand on the interior door, and I drop my chin to my chest.

Trina... She looked... I'm not...

I can't even form coherent thoughts. My cock is so hard I feel like I'm fifteen years old instead of forty-five. I squeeze my eyes shut and press my palm to my shaft against the zipper of my jeans, willing it to go down—but it only swells in response, throbbing against the pressure of my touch.

Fuck.

I can't go out there like this. I already tripped over my feet and nearly knocked a table over. How am I supposed to watch her bending over the pool table every few minutes while my body feels heated to the core?

And—look, I'm not proud of this. But I either have to wait for this to pass, knowing my shaft will grow painfully hard as soon as I walk out there again, or...

Ah, fuck it. I hunt through my pockets and, not finding what I need, I kick off a shoe and pull my sock off. Then, like some sex-crazed hormonal mess, I lean my back against the door and unbuckle my belt with quick, jerky movements. My cock is a heavy iron bar when I pull it free from my pants.

Fisting myself with a tight grip, I close my eyes and think of those shiny, pink lips. Of that body leaning over the pool table, hair spilling over her shoulder with her back on display. Of Trina's bright eyes, and how good they'd look if they were lazy with pleasure. I think of notching my shoulders between those thighs while discovering what kind of noises she'd make with her legs wrapped around my head. How she'd taste,

earthy and sweet and fucking perfect. I think of spreading her wet heat with my hardness, feeling her milk my cock with every hard stroke—

My orgasm rips through me, pulling heat to my groin and spurting it out in thick, long ropes. I grunt low and rough, catching my seed with my fucking sock, of all things, wishing it was her skin. Her mouth. Her soft, pink folds.

I lean against the door, panting, letting my head fall back with a soft thud. I should be fucking ashamed of myself for this, but all I feel is relief. A few gulping breaths, and my heartbeat starts to slow. When I close my eyes, I still see her, but I no longer feel like I'm about to burst out of my skin.

Then I tuck myself in, zip myself up, slip my shoe back on, walk out of the keg room, and throw my soiled sock away in the first available trash can. Finally, with a deep breath, I walk back out into the bar.

*Trina*

“It’s all about angles,” Hamish says for the millionth time when my shot hits the felt just beside the pocket, ricocheting halfway across the pool table. “Focus on the angles.”

“I get that,” I answer, trying hard to keep the frustration out of my voice, “but I’m not understanding what angles I’m supposed to be focusing on.”

A hand lands on my shoulder, and Simone appears at my side. “Can I try?”

“Please.” I give her a smile in thanks, needing a sip of my drink—badly. Between seeing Mac fall flat on his face when he saw me, to the heat in his eyes when I approached, to this surprisingly serious lesson on how to play pool, I’m not exactly feeling like myself.

Not to mention this backless bodysuit requires undergarments that are a combination of Spanx, a girdle, and a full jumpsuit with built-in cups—no way in hell am I ever going braless in public, not after breastfeeding two kids—and all these layers are starting to feel a little too warm. A bit too tight...especially down there.

Simone sights a ball as Hamish directs her, but I have a feeling she doesn’t need his help. She hits it with practiced ease. Not only does she pot the ball she was trying to hit, but the white ball rolls to nudge a second ball into a corner pocket.

“Show-off,” I mumble, but there’s no animosity in it.

Simone grins. “Try thinking less. When you do an eyeliner flick, do you calculate the angles in your head, or do you just go for it and trust your instinct?”

“Instinct,” I answer. “Also, I’ve done it a zillion times, so I know what looks good on my face.”

“So do the same thing here. Look at the ball and line up, then hit through it with a smooth stroke.”

Why did the words “smooth stroke” just make me blush? Is it perhaps because Mac just walked out of the hallway where he disappeared a few minutes ago, and he looks good enough to lick?

Simone titters, then winks at me. She thrusts the pool cue into my hands and gives me an encouraging nod. “Go for the orange.” She points to the solid orange ball lined up perfectly with a pocket.

It should be an easy hit. Even for me.

But I can almost *sense* Mac approaching. The distance between us shrinking. His eyes on my body, my skin, my hair.

Squeezing my eyes for a moment, I think of eyeliner flicks. Easy. Intuitive. The more confidence, the better the wing.

And I hit the cue ball, smiling at the satisfying thunk of the orange hitting the bottom of the pocket and rolling into the internal mechanism of the table.

“Nice shot,” a deep voice says behind me. I turn to see Mac grinning at me. “You’re a quick study.”

“Thank goodness for eyeliner,” I respond, and laugh at the tiny frown that appears on Mac’s forehead. I shake my head. “Never mind.”

“Boys versus girls?” Simone asks, sipping her drink as her eyes gleam at me. “I’ll rack ‘em up.” She gets to work, accepting the keys that Hamish hands her to unlock the table and allow us to play for free. I watch as she gets the triangle and starts expertly swapping balls around with—in my eyes—

no rhyme or reason, trying my best to ignore the heat of Mac's shoulder as it nudges mine.

"How was your week?" I ask, my voice going up uncontrollably at the end. I clear my throat.

Mac takes a sip of beer. "Long." His eyes flick to mine, then to my lips, then away.

Lordy.

Is it hot in here, or is it just my shapewear?

"Ladies first," Hamish says to Simone. "You break."

Simone shrugs and throws me a wink over her shoulder before turning back to the old Scot. "Your funeral, old man."

Then, with a flourish and more confidence than I've had in all my life, Simone lines up and hits the pack of balls hard enough to make me jump. The satisfying crack of the balls snaps across my skin, and the balls explode outward. Two of them drop into pockets, and Simone blows on her nails.

Mac chuckles, moving his hand to brush the small of my back. His broad, warm palm makes heat pool low in my body, and I do my best not to let my heart run away from me. "Are you always this nervous?" he asks, his thumb making a slow sweep across my spine, his eyes dancing as he glances down at me.

I study the strand of tousled hair that falls down over his temple, a bit of silver gleaming in the low light of the bar, and I shrug. "Only when I'm about to make a fool of myself."

"It's a week to try new things," he replies, and I know he's talking about pottery and pool, but it really, *really* sounds like he's talking about something...else.

His hand stays where it is, thumb making slow, steady movements over and back across my skin. His thumb is near my spine, but his other fingers feel dangerously close to my jeans. To places so private, they haven't been touched in a long, long time. It's making my head spin.

I watch Simone miss a shot and whisper a curse under her breath, then Hamish lines up and hits three balls in a row.

Then, he leaves me with the white on the opposite end of the table as all our balls, with all my targets hidden behind the boys' balls.

I bite my lip, not moving from my spot even though both Simone and Hamish look at me expectantly.

“Your turn,” Simone says with an encouraging smile.

Just then, Fiona, Candice, and Jen wander over. Simone gives them a quick recap, and Fiona lifts her glass. “Go Trina! Are you stripes or solids?”

“Solids,” I answer, still not moving from the wall.

Mac hasn't moved his hand either, and his thumb keeps stroking, slow and steady. It's erotic, that touch, sending every thought fleeing from my head as heat builds low in my stomach. Back and forth, soft but firm, feeling his big, warm hand pressed against my skin. I think, given enough time, I could probably come from it. From him touching the small of my back. My skin feels tight, prickly. All I can do is throw back a gulp of my drink and tear myself away from him. The space where his hand was a moment ago burns. I want more of it. More of him.

I line up for a shot that Hamish helpfully points out for me, and then promptly miss.

Mac grins. He holds out his hand for the cue, his fingers brushing mine while he takes it from my hands. Then I watch his corded, muscular body lean over the table to expose a little strip of skin on his lower back, the arms in his muscles stark against the green felt beneath them.

And he pots a ball.

“Well, we know who the dud in this round is,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Aren't you guys supposed to be teaching me?”

Simone just laughs and takes her position when it's her turn. I find myself at the bar, ordering a round for everyone, then watch Hamish do his thing.



My turn again already. When I stand next to the table, pool cue grasped in my hands, I bite my lip and look at the battlefield. I don't have high hopes.

"Here," Mac says as he sets his fresh beer down and approaches. "I'll help. You're keeping too much tension in your right arm. Line up for that shot." He points to one of the balls and waits for me to position myself.

I feel him move behind me, his fingers leaving trails of fire over my hips as he shifts me over slightly, repositioning the pool cue. His hand on my elbows is like a brand, squeezing gently to get my attention.

"Good," he says quietly. "Relax."

"Kinda hard in this position," I say, glancing over my shoulder in frustration.

*Oh.* Big mistake.

Mac is standing just inches from me, his hips near my ass, one hand on the waistband of my jeans while the other still grips the pool cue. Words fail me. I don't want to admit to myself how good it feels to have him behind me like this, or how much it turns me on to be bent over this table with him behind me.

Especially when he's looking at me like he's thinking the same thing. Hooded eyes, dark gaze. After a beat, he nods to the table. "Take the shot, Trina."

I turn back around, still so intensely aware of every inch of him so close to me. But I take the shot and to my surprise, I pot a ball.

Simone whoops, and all the girls cheer. I start laughing, standing and leaning back slightly into the warmth and strength of Mac's chest.

He puts his hands on my shoulders and leans his lips close to my ear. "Nice shot." A soft squeeze of my upper arms with those sinful hands, and he steps away from me.

I miss my next shot, but that's less because I suck at pool and more because my brain is scrambled. But still, when I

slide onto a barstool next to Fiona, my eyes across the pool table on Mac, I can't help but smile.

I'm having fun. I can't remember the last time I had fun. My kids are safe, my new home will be ready soon, and the sexiest man I've ever seen looks at me like he might think I'm sexy too.

I met Kevin thirteen years ago, when I was twenty-nine years old, and I wonder if it's been that long since I had a night out like this. A night that's just for me.

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THE BOYS WIN, and Jen and Candice take our spots to play them. Unsurprisingly, Jen is even better at pool than Simone. She tries to tell me something about angles, but I've had two drinks—not to mention the wine I had at home—and all I can do is nod along and pretend I understand what she's explaining.

Feeling overheated, happy, and a little buzzed, I end up going to the bathroom before slipping outside for a bit of fresh air. It's August and the air is warm, so I stand just outside the Grove and let out a happy sigh.

The door opens behind me, and I turn to see Mac exiting the bar. His eyes crinkle when he sees me. "You okay? I saw you slip out on your own and was worried you were running away from me again."

"Needed some fresh air," I explain, grateful that the dark is hiding my blushing face. "I'm wearing too many layers."

Mac's eyes flash as an eyebrow pops up. "I can think of a few ways to rectify that."

I laugh, swatting at him. "You're naughty."

"Only when I want to be. Now, tell me the truth. You were out here because you just wanted to ogle my bike."

Laughing again, I tilt my head up to meet his gaze as he approaches. "Maybe," I admit.

He closes the distance between us and takes a deep breath. “I’m glad you came. Earlier, I was thinking maybe you wouldn’t show.”

“Is that why you had that spectacular fall when I walked in? Pure shock?”

Mac’s lips tilt, but his eyes grow lazy. “No, Trina.” He reaches over and hooks a finger into my belt loop, tugging me closer. “I fell over because you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Heat rises up my neck and over my cheeks. He gives me another tug and I catch myself on his chest, fingers curling into his black tee. “No need for flattery, Mac.”

With one hand still hooked around my belt loop, Mac lifts another to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. He lets his fingers slide down the strand, then shifts his gaze to meet mine. “It’s not flattery if it’s true.”

Suddenly, I realize where I am. Half-drunk with a man I barely know, standing outside a bar his father owns. My two kids are at home in bed, and I’m here. Doing...whatever it is I’m doing.

“Look, Mac, I...” I take a deep breath.

Mac slides his palm over my neck, curling his fingers into the hair at my nape. He leans his forehead against mine, effectively silencing me. “If you’re about to give me some sweet rejection, do me a favor and just...don’t.”

I close my eyes for a moment and try to find the words to say what I need to say. I’ve been divorced for approximately three seconds. I spent thirteen years with Kevin and I don’t know myself anymore. I have kids and school and money and housing to worry about.

And a cat. I can’t forget the cat.

I can’t handle a man! Even if he looks like sex on legs. *Especially* if he looks like sex on legs. I’m a divorcée with two kids and boobs that are a lot less perky than they were twenty years ago. Why the hell would a sexy, badass, pottery-

throwing motorcycle man like him want someone as normal and boring as *me*?

“Trina,” Mac says softly, lifting his head from mine. I open my eyes to meet his gaze. “Whatever’s going on in your head right now, I’m going to need it to stop.”

Annoyance sparks at his words. “You can’t just tell me to stop thinking what I’m thinking, Mac.”

His lips tilt. “I can, and I did.”

“Listen. I don’t know the type of women that you usually hang around with, but I’m not—”

He shuts me up with a kiss. His mouth takes mine as the pressure on my neck increases, and I tilt my head where he wants it. Then he deepens the kiss, sliding his tongue across mine as a low, guttural grunt escapes his throat. The hand on my belt loop slides around my body to rest on my lower back. The heat of his skin, the pressure of his kiss, the way his tongue strokes and teases—it’s too much.

I melt.

Or maybe I implode.

Whatever happens, any thoughts of rejection fly away, and I forget all the reasons I can’t do this, because every part of me can only focus on how much I want it. My hands hook around his neck, fingers tangling into that tousled, dark hair as another groan slips through his lips.

I love those noises. I love that he’s making them with *me*. I love the way his hand presses against my lower back when I slide my tongue against his, how he tightens his fingers into my hair to bring me nearer.

Then his hand slides lower and he palms my ass to tug me closer. I gasp when I feel the steel in his pants. Mac breaks the kiss, moving his lips to my jaw, my neck, his teeth tugging at my earlobe.

“Mac.”

He pulls back just far enough to meet my eyes. “I fucking love the way you say my name.”

My insides turn molten at the intensity of his gaze, his voice. “How do I say it?” I ask, my voice barely more than a rasp.

He closes his eyes for a moment, his nose sliding along the side of mine. When he kisses me again, Mac’s lips are soft, tender. Then he speaks against my mouth, shaping the words as his lips brush mine. “You say my name like it means something.”

My heart thunders. My legs wobble. Mac’s hand stays splayed over my ass, the tips of his fingers just brushing the crease between my inner thighs and the swell of my curves. I’m going to spontaneously combust. His other hand moves from my neck down to my breast, and his thumb starts making slow, deliberate circles over my furling nipple.

Gasping into his kiss, I realize I’m clinging to him, sinking my fingers into his shoulders and grinding my hips against his hardness. His tongue slides over mine, exploring my mouth as that thumb—that *thumb*—continues its slow torture of my breast.

I want him to use his mouth. I want him to bend his head down and suck my breast through my top, tug my nipple between his teeth and make another one of those guttural noises. I want him to drag me to the side of the building, tear my jeans down and shove inside me. Every filthy, dirty fantasy I’ve ever had is a living thing inside me now, hot and needy and alive.

Then someone opens the bar door, and we scramble apart. The old man with the missing front tooth who had been dancing up a storm with Simone stumbles out, catching himself on the side of the building. He looks up at me, then at Mac, nods, and makes his way toward the road.

I put a hand to my forehead and chance a look at Mac.

His lush, kiss-bruised lips curl up at the corners.

“We should go back inside,” I blurt.

A pause extends between us, and I wonder if Mac might not want to go inside. If he might want to go somewhere

else...with me.

But he lets out a breath and slides his hand across my shoulders to pull me close to his side. It's the perfect place for me, and all I can do is hook my arm around his waist to hold on. Then he places a soft kiss to my temple, and my heart gives a mighty thump. "Yeah," he says softly. "Let's go back in."

*Trina*

I wake up to the mother of all hangovers and a godawful smell. What the—

Vomit. There's vomit on my carpet.

Did I...?

I blink. No. I didn't get *that* drunk. I had five drinks. I counted! I remember everything, including a certain kiss that feels like a universe away from where I am now, and I know for a fact I did not vomit on my carpet. I left not long after the kiss, swept away by Candice in Mom Mode, who insisted we'd regret it if we stayed out for one more drink.

I didn't puke.

Which means...

"Mom..." Katie is at the foot of my bed looking pale, sweaty, and ashamed. "I'm sorry. I wanted to come to bed with you, and then I didn't make it to the bathroom in time, and—" She interrupts herself, clapping a hand over her mouth.

You know when you hear those stories about mothers lifting cars off their babies with superhuman strength? Well, my hungover ass moves with superhuman speed. I throw my blankets off and don't even blink when I realize I'm wearing a pajama shirt and nothing else. I scoop Katie up under her armpits and sprint to the en-suite bathroom just in time for her to spew all over the toilet.

"Get it all out, honey," I say, pulling her hair back. "It's okay. You're okay."

Her little body shakes as another retch convulses through her. Oh, jeez. Leaving my hand on her back running small circles over her, I reach for a washcloth and run some cool water. Then I run it over her head, her neck, trying to soothe my little girl.

After washing her up and tucking her in my bed, I get to work cleaning the vomit-soaked carpet, glancing once every few minutes at my daughter, fast asleep in a pile of blankets on my bed.

It's hard not to feel guilty about going out last night when I have a pounding headache and a sick little girl. Watery light starts brightening through the curtains as dawn approaches while I spray some carpet cleaner on the stain to soak.

Giving Katie a kiss on her clammy forehead, I go out in search of my son.

He's usually up by now. Toby is a morning lark through and through, just like me. But when I push open his bedroom door, I find him burrowed in a nest of blankets and pillows of his own. Sitting down on the edge of his bed, I push hair off his clammy forehead as he groans, looking so young it makes my heart squeeze.

"I don't feel good, Mommy."

Uh-oh. He hasn't called me mommy since he was a toddler. He must be feeling really ill. My son curls himself around my hip, putting a hand across my thigh.

I stroke his hair for a few moments, then grab a bucket to set it near the bed. Then, my morning is swallowed up by sick kids and lots of vomit. My mother wakes to the sound of Toby retching into his bucket. She gives me a horrified look and gets to work helping me.

All those times I complained—either out loud or in my head—about being a grown woman living with her mother? Yeah, just...forget about those. Lottie is a superhero right now.

It's not until the sun is well and truly up, the kids have had a bit of juice for hydration, and I feel worse than I did when I awoke that I'm finally able to sit down at the kitchen table.



Mom puts a cup of coffee in front of me and feeds the cat while I sit, listening to birds titter as a beautiful day unfolds just out the window.

“You think they caught a bug at day camp?” I ask as my mother joins me with a coffee cup of her own.

“Who knows?” She leans back and lets out a long sigh. Then she blinks and glances at me. “How was your girls’ night?”

I let out a huff. Girls’ night feels like eons ago. Did I really half-drunkenly kiss Mac? Calling it a kiss doesn’t exactly feel accurate. It felt like sex. I shake my head. “It was fine. I’m not twenty anymore. I can’t drink like that. I had five drinks and I feel like garbage.”

My mother chuckles. She tilts her head. “Was Mr. Pottery there?”

*Don’t blush. Don’t blush. Don’t blush.*

“Yeah.” My cheeks heat. Damn it.

She holds my gaze. “And...?”

“And what?” I play dumb, knowing it won’t get me anywhere with her.

I’m saved by a knock on the door, and that’s when I realize I’m still not wearing any panties. My T-shirt hits high on my thighs, so I sprint—well, hobble—upstairs to grab a pair of old pajama shorts.

Candice is in the entryway when I come back downstairs, frowning at me. “You’re not dressed.”

“The kids are sick.”

Her reply is automatic. “Oh, no! Can I do anything?”

Have I mentioned I love my sister? Why the heck didn’t I move here ages ago? I haven’t had this much help with the kids, *ever*.

I shake my head.

“I was coming to get you to go glaze our pottery, but I’m guessing you want to stay here.”

“Yeah.” Does it make me a terrible mother that I’m partly glad my kids are sick? Not glad they’re sick, but glad I have a decent excuse. The thought of seeing Mac when I look and feel the way I do...

“I’ll tell Mac you say hi.”

“That’s not necessary—”

“You do that, honey,” my mother interjects. “Tell him to stop by here sometime during the week too. I’d like to see him again.”

“Mom, no,” I practically shout, then frown. “Wait. ‘Again?’ What do you mean by ‘again?’”

Lottie, in classic Lottie style, totally ignores me. Why is it that I feel like a kid any time she’s around? I’m a grown woman! I’m forty-two!

“This Mac boy might be just what she needs. Don’t you think, Candice?” She shuffles back to the kitchen for more coffee while I swing my gaze to meet Candice’s laughing one.

My sister shakes her head. “Now you know what I went through for the past three months. She was insufferable when Blake and I first started seeing each other.”

“Careful!” Mom calls from the kitchen.

Grinning at Candice, I say goodbye, then go check on my kids again.

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I DON’T SEE anyone until the next day. I’m too busy taking care of two sick kids, and when Candice and Fiona stop by with big platters of food, soup, and a box with my mediocre pottery, I give them a grateful smile. “I haven’t eaten in forever. Thank you. The kids are sleeping, but the soup will be great.”

“Fallon made it from scratch,” Candice says, opening the fridge and propping it with her hip while she puts the food away.

Fiona lifts my slightly misshapen bowl, glazed in bright pink. “It was supposed to be green but somehow turned pink when it was fired in the kiln. Don’t ask me how.”

I snort. “That’s fine. I’m not exactly going to frame it or anything.”

“You should see what Mac made. It was gorgeous. He brought a few samples of different glazed pots and mugs to show us what was possible, and I think I’m going to order all new crockery for the café,” Fiona says, running her fingers over the uneven edge of my new jewelry tray.

“Apparently he’s famous in the pottery world,” I say, putting my new bowl in the cupboard.

“It shows. I think his stuff would fit the Four Cups’ aesthetic.”

“Definitely,” Candice says. “And with the extra money we made with the catering contract at the beginning of the summer, I’m fully supportive of upgrading.” Without me having to ask, my sister starts cleaning. She glances at me over her shoulder and nods to the messy mop of hair on my head and grubby athletic clothes I’m wearing. “Go shower. We’ll clean up and check on the kids.”

What would I do without them? Sometimes, I worry that moving the kids away from Kevin was a bad decision, but I’d discussed it with him prior to the move, and he seemed almost relieved that he wouldn’t have to take care of them fifty percent of the time. When we were married, he could barely manage a few hours without calling me to rescue him. He was happy enough to get a weekend a month with them.

Still, I worried that it was a bad decision.

Now, though, when I have more of a support system than I’ve had in years—decades? Ever?—I know coming to Heart’s Cove was the right thing to do. I take a long, hot shower, and come out feeling like a new woman.

Then I dress and head downstairs to find my mother, Candice, and Fiona lounging in the living room with tea and cookies laid out.

Fiona points to the plate of treats. “Jen made these. New recipe. Double chocolate with salted caramel. Amazing.”

I haven’t eaten a vegetable in forty-eight hours, but whatever. I pour myself a mug of chamomile tea and grab a cookie, curling up on the couch next to my sister.

“How are you holding up?” Candice asks.

I glance at her and shake my head. “I was just thinking how grateful I am for you guys.”

Candice pats my leg. “We’re family, Trina. It’s what we do.”

I lean my head back on the sofa. “Yeah, but I’m still grateful for you all. I haven’t had help in a long time.” Staring at my tea, I shake my head. “I remember when Katie was born. Toby got some sort of stomach bug at the same time. He was nineteen months old and sick as a dog. Katie was three weeks old. It was totally overwhelming.”

Candice’s face scrunches up. “I remember that. I should have gone up to help you, but Paul was in the hospital, and…”

“It’s fine.” I wave a hand. After taking a sip of my tea, I let out a snort. “I remember this one specific day: I was breastfeeding Katie on the sofa. Toby was lying next to me, so sick I was considering taking him to the emergency room. Kevin walks into the house with his mother, and—”

I have to stop myself from talking, because the anger and shame well up inside me without warning. Tears build behind my eyelids, and I swallow them down with a gulp of tea. I meet Fiona’s eyes across the room.

“What happened?” she asks.

“His mother walked in,” I repeat, “and saw me on the sofa with Katie at my boob, and made this big song and dance about turning away in shock. Then Kevin—my fucking *husband*—told me I needed to cover up. In my own house! I

was feeding our daughter and taking care of our sick son, and he had the nerve to tell me I needed to cover my own boob up. I wasn't sunbathing topless for the whole neighborhood to see. I was on the couch in the freaking living room! *My own* living room! But his mother wouldn't shut up about it. She even told Kevin's sister, and the whole family made me feel like I'd done something wrong. I was postpartum and sleep-deprived and totally overwhelmed, and they made me feel ashamed for feeding my own daughter."

"That *dick*," Candice says with more vitriol than I've ever heard from her. "And his mother! How fucking *dare* she? She's a mother herself!"

Seven-year-old anger boils inside me. I snort and shake my head. "I should have known then that he wasn't the man for me. I probably did know, but what was I supposed to do with two young kids?" My finger toys with the edge of my mug. "The worst thing is, I felt so, so ashamed. It was like a burning lump of coal in my chest. He kept badgering me, and his mother made so many snide comments about me covering up, and I was actually convinced that I was in the wrong."

"I'm going to kill him," my mother says before taking a vicious bite of her cookie. She masticates violently while shaking her head. "He's coming next weekend to be with the kids, right?" When I nod, she points her half-eaten cookie at me. "Well, he's going to get a piece of my mind."

"Mom," I protest, even though I can't keep the smile off my face. "It was a long time ago."

"He deserves to get chewed out." Fiona shakes her head, gritting her teeth on my behalf. "What an ass." Getting up, she moves to sit next to me, putting her arm around my shoulders. Then Fiona—a woman I just met a few months ago—squeezes my shoulders until I soften against her. Emotion clogs my throat. Fiona holds me close as she says, "Divorce sucks, and it's painful and messy and awful, but you'll get through it. You'll be happier in a few months' time than you thought possible. I promise. Simone can attest to that too."

I don't know why I burst into tears. Maybe it's the fact that I've been so alone for so many years, and I didn't even realize it. I lived in Seattle with Kevin and drifted away from most of my friends as the years wore on. I knew *his* friends. The only person I could lean on was my mother, but Kevin didn't get along with her, so I ended up avoiding her too. I was so damn alone, and the man who was supposed to be my partner wasn't there for me. Ever.

I guess I'm crying because I never realized it. I didn't see what was right in front of my face until just now. With two sick kids, no job, the divorce finally done, and more external stress than I've had in years, I still feel better than I did when I was married to Kevin and withstanding his belittling comments day in, day out.

I'm sad for myself. I'm sad that I actually put up with that. That I thought *I* was wrong. I'm sad that I felt ashamed for feeding Katie on my own damn sofa. I'm sad that when Kevin cheated, I blamed myself. I'm sad that I wasted so much fucking time on him.

But with Fiona on one side of me and Candice on the other, with my mother calling out threats against Kevin like it's her job, I let out a little teary laugh. My kids are sick, vomiting, and my life is a mess...but I have support. I have a family.

"There," Candice says when I let out a sigh. "See? We got you."

I look at my sister and give her a smile. "Remember a few months ago when you asked if Iliana was the one who had it all figured out?"

Our younger sister is a free spirit. She's been traveling for years, and always seems to land on her feet. I think she's had about a thousand boyfriends and none of them have stuck, but she's been happy. Free.

Candice smiles. "Iliana is different from you and me, Trina."

“I know,” I reply, resting my head on her shoulder. “But I was just thinking that actually, she might be the one who’s missing out by not being here with us.”

Candice clicks her tongue, squeezing me tight, and my mother comes over to wrap all three of us in a big, motherly hug. When she backs away, she’s got tears in her eyes.

Mr. Fuzzles, who has been out of sight most of the day, appears from under the sofa. With a surprisingly powerful jump, he leaps into my lap and curls up on top of me, promptly falling asleep. My heart nearly gives out at the feel of his little warm body snuggled up against me.

Maybe I am a cat person.

After a few minutes, conversation drifts to more neutral topics. Candice’s house will be ready for me, my mother, and the kids to move into in two weeks, just in time for the start of the school year. Fiona is helping Clancy choose colleges to apply to, and she’s brimming with pride for her stepdaughter. Her wedding preparations are well underway. My mother bought a new outfit from a local shop and can’t wait to wear it when she’s out with Margaret and Dorothy next week.

When I ask where they’re planning to go, she grins. “Well, a certain Scottish bar owner seems to have taken a liking to a certain hotel owner, and she seems to be enjoying the attention.”

“Hamish?” I ask, not sure how to feel about that. “And... Margaret?”

My mother smiles wide. “Dorothy wants Eli to meet him.” Eli is Dorothy’s partner. They met a couple of years ago, when Simone and Wes started dating. They’re perfect for each other.

Then Candice glances at me. “Mac was asking about you today.” Her eyes twinkle. “He offered to deliver your pottery in person.”

I stare at her, horrified.

My sister cackles. “I figured that would be your reaction, which is why I said it probably wasn’t the right time to come visit you.”

“Thank God.”

“Do you think he’d let me ride his motorcycle?” my mother asks, reaching for another of the admittedly addictive chocolate-caramel cookies.

I freeze. “Mom...”

“Trina, I’m in my seventies, and there’s a sexy younger man with a hot bike. What kind of person would I be if I *didn’t* ask him to take me for a ride?”

“Um, the normal kind?”

Candice snorts, then throws me a sideways glance. “Pick your battles, Trina. If Mom wants to ride on Mac’s bike, I’d put money on the fact that she’ll end up on it.”

The worst part is, I know it’s true.

“I just need to get through Kevin’s visit this weekend. Can we leave the motorcycle riding until after that?”

“I’m not making any promises,” my mother announces.

Then, the four of us hear movement upstairs, and my mother—nutty, thrill-seeking, but incredibly loving and supportive—puts out a hand. “My turn. I’ll go check on them. You relax, Trina.”

Having moved to stand up, I pause, glance down at the kitten in my lap, and lean back again. After a brief hesitation, I help myself to another cookie. Mr. Fuzzles purrs against me, lifting his head to demand more scratches. I oblige, and finally let a smile curl over my lips.

“What?” Fiona sips her tea, arching a brow.

“I was just imagining the look on Kevin’s face if he saw my mother riding a motorcycle.” I laugh, shaking my head. “He’d be horrified.” When the two of them don’t answer, I give them a grin. “That’s a good thing.”

“I’m sure it can be arranged,” Candice says, kicking her feet up on the coffee table. “Or better yet, he could see *you* riding on the back of Mac’s motorcycle. I’d pay good money to see *that* expression on his face.”



“Asshole,” Fiona mumbles.

And maybe this makes me a bad person, but hearing Fiona calling my ex-husband nasty names puts a great big smile on my face.

**T**here's something wrong with the leavening agent in my chocolate layer cake recipe. Crossing my arms, I stare down the offending baked goods with narrowed eyes. Dense on the bottom and crumbly on top, this recipe just doesn't want to play ball.

And, of course, it's the recipe Fiona and Grant chose for their wedding—and one Amanda thinks we should include in the book.

But the recipe isn't working. It's too finicky, it's not consistent, and definitely not friendly for home bakers. And it's driving me crazy.

It's nearly eleven o'clock at night, and I've been baking chocolate cake for six days. It's now Thursday night, and I'm running out of time. Developing recipes is a rabbit hole I never expected to be so all-consuming. My mind is brimming with baking chemistry, procedures, ingredient quality. Last night, I had a stress dream about a talking meringue. It called me a fraud then burst into flame, and I woke up sweaty and breathless.

It's bad.

But by the end of it, there will be a book with my name on the front and my recipes inside. That's worth a few sleepless nights, no?

At least I'm not thinking of him. Fallon Richter. The man who kissed me like I was the only woman he ever wanted.

Too bad his ex-girlfriend, Amanda, wants him too—and that she’s the one person who can make my recipe book a reality. So with Fallon on one side, and Amanda (and my recipe book) on the other, I was forced to choose. Unsurprisingly, I chose not to get in the middle of an old relationship.

I may not be the smartest person in the world, but I know that poking that hornets’ nest will only hurt one person: me.

The back door to the café opens, and I let out a little yelp. “Fallon. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” is his answer, which makes my heart seize and thump at the same time, which then makes me wonder if his presence is dangerous for my health.

“Why?” I’m holding a spatula for some reason. When did I pick that up? It’s brandished between us like it can protect me from the power of his gaze.

“Two months ago, you kissed me like there was nothing else in the world you’d rather do, Jen.” Fallon takes a step inside and lets the door close behind him.

Despite myself, I take a step back. “Look, Fallon—”

“Why are you avoiding me? We work together, yet you’ve said not two sentences to me in the past month.”

“I’ve been busy. The book...” I shrug. “Developing recipes is a lot of work.”

It’s a weak excuse, and we both know it. I’m avoiding him because his ex-girlfriend looks at him like he hung the moon, and she’s also supposed to be the one to deliver my dream on a silver platter. Even if he *does* want to be with me, how can I pursue that? I’ve seen jealous women lash out before. I’d be putting my own career at risk.

Plus, there’s a part of me that just refuses to believe that a man as sexy and charming and handsome as Fallon would want to be with a nerdy, nearly celibate forty-five-year-old baker like myself. It just doesn’t fit logically in my mind. I can’t make it make sense.

But seeing him here...it makes my heart skip. I won't say how many times I've thought of our kiss, or how many times I've dreamed of doing it again.

Those dreams are much, much better than judgmental, sentient meringue.

Fallon seems to be thinking the same. His eyes drop to my lips. "You know, I contacted Amanda because I knew she'd jump on the opportunity to do a book with you. I didn't think it would make you run away from me."

"Fallon"—I roll my eyes and turn back to the sub-par cake—"you emailed her and invited her to town, and didn't even mention me until she was here. You don't need to coddle me. It's fine."

"What's fine?" He sounds exasperated, so I glance up at him. Uh-oh.

Those dark, nearly black eyes are trained on me. His big, broad body looks impossibly bigger, and he moved closer to me without me even noticing. His palm lands on the stainless steel counter beside me, and he leans his muscular chest into my space. "What's fine, Jen?"

"For us to leave things where they are," I finally say, still holding the rubber spatula between us. Fallon doesn't even look at it. "We kissed. So what? I'm not going to ask about your past with Amanda, and all I ask is that you leave me alone and let me finish this book."

His eyes flash as he lets out a dry snort. "You know, some days I regret calling Amanda at all, then I come in here and see how hard you're working on these new recipes, and I feel like an asshole for ever letting those thoughts cross my mind. You *deserve* this, Jen. But Amanda being the one to publish your book doesn't mean you can't explore what exists between you and me."

Another spasm grips my chest. My mouth grows dry as I blink up at Fallon, still holding that stupid spatula between us like it can save me from whatever he's about to say next.

“I don’t know how else to say this, Jen, so I’m just going to say it as slowly as I can.” He leans forward. “I’m not interested in Amanda. I’m interested in you. Can you get that to sink in? Am I being clear enough?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. The man sure does have an overbearing, condescending way of professing his affection for me.

“And what about her, *hmm?*” I ask, tilting my head. “What does she think about that? She’s still staying at your house, no? She’s still flicking her hair over her shoulder and giggling at every stupid comment you make, yeah?”

His eyes slide away from me.

I’m on a roll. I cross my arms—spatula still gripped in hand—and cock a hip. “And what about the book, Fallon? Have you thought about that? How do you think Amanda would react if she came to Heart’s Cove to check on my progress with the recipes, only to find out I’d shackled up with the man she was pining after?”

“She’s a grown woman, Jen. She’d deal with it.”

“Yeah? Or maybe she’d pull out. Maybe I’d end up with no book deal, then you’d wake up next to me one day and realize you’re bored because I’m *literally* the least exciting person in this town, so I’d end up with no book and no relationship.”

Fallon’s body goes rock hard. His eyes flash, anger written on every line of his face. “Is that what you think? You think you need to choose between me and your career? You think I’d just move on from you without looking back?”

“I don’t *think*, Fallon. I know.” I turn back to the cake and with a sigh, pick up the cake board and tip the whole thing into the garbage.

“You’re a coward.” He says the words quietly, but they still hurt like hell. “You’re afraid of what we could have together.”

Swiveling my head to meet his gaze, I can’t help the hurt and anger zinging across my chest, carving that nasty word

into my bones.

*Coward. Coward. Coward.*

His teeth grind as he watches me, and I will myself not to cry. I won't cry. I can't.

Lifting my chin, I grit my teeth to stop my bottom lip from trembling. It takes all my energy to keep my eyes from filling with tears.

How dare he march in here and say those things to me? After one kiss, I'm supposed to just drop everything and be with him? I'm supposed to put my dream at risk so he can have his fill of me and then probably toss me aside in a few months' time?

Yeah, right.

I've worked for this. *Me*. Sure, he introduced me to Amanda, but she was impressed with *my* recipes. *My* baked goods. *My* skills.

What happens when he gets bored of me? What happens when he changes his mind?

Not worth it.

"You should leave." My voice is icy when I say the words, and Fallon clenches his jaw at the sound of it. But you know what he doesn't do? He doesn't *move*. I tilt my head. "Leave, Fallon. I have work to do, and I don't feel like having insults hurled at me while I do it."

His arms drop to his sides and he releases a long sigh. "Jen, I didn't... I'm not... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you shouldn't have. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to troubleshoot this recipe and bake another batch before your ex-girlfriend shows up here tomorrow morning asking for a progress update. Maybe when you go home tonight, you can give her that progress update yourself."

Then I, very maturely, bang a mixing bowl down on the counter and start pulling ingredients closer. My jaw is tight, eyes are burning, but I *will not cry*.

“Jen, listen.”

“No, *you* listen,” I grind out, letting anger sweep over me. “You can’t just pick me up and put me down at will, Fallon. I’m not your toy. And I’m not going to sacrifice the one thing I really want—this recipe book—for some unknown relationship with you that might last no more than a day.” Eyes blazing, I take a step forward and poke his very broad, very solid chest. “I get that you like wanting things you can’t have. I get that you’re probably used to women fawning over you because you know how to cook and you’re hot and you have a body like...like *this*. But listen to me good, Fallon, because this is important. *I am not those women*. I choose my book. I choose my career. I’ve worked my ass off and restarted my life over when I was thirty-five to pursue baking, and I’m not going to let some infatuation ruin that. I’m *good* at this. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’ve found what I’m meant to do. So, yeah, maybe I’m a coward, but I’m not going to make Amanda hate me just for the chance to kiss you again. Not today, not tomorrow, not *ever*.”

I’m panting hard now, and I think that may be the longest speech I’ve ever made in my life.

Fallon, somehow, looks angrier than when I started. “An infatuation?” he asks slowly, enunciating the word with careful precision.

“Well, what would you call it?”

He holds my gaze for a few long moments, then lets out a bitter snort. “Fine,” he says, and turns on a heel to walk away. When his hand is on the door handle, he pauses and glances over his shoulder. “For the record, Amanda’s staying at the hotel this time, just like every other time she comes to town from now on. I made sure of that.”

He waits for me to reply, and when I say nothing, he strides out into the night.

I jump when the door bangs, then stick my tongue out at it. Yes, I’m a grown woman. But I’m not thinking straight.

How else am I supposed to react when I have to choose between a man and my career?

I take my aggression out on baking more cakes than I'll ever need.



*Fiona*

The first thing I notice when I walk into the Four Cups Café on Friday morning is that Jen has been busy. Like, really, *really* busy. The display cabinet is so full of baked goods there's barely any space left. There are baskets of muffins, jars of cookies, and new, handwritten little cards proclaiming half a dozen new recipes scattered over the counter.

There's a three-tiered chocolate cake displayed on top of the glass cabinet under a cake bell. It looks incredible.

Jen shuffles out of the kitchen with a tray of croissants, her mouth set in a grim line. Angry, purple bags have bloomed under her eyes, and she doesn't even lift her head to greet me.

That isn't unusual in itself—Jen isn't much of a talker—but there's something about the hunch of her shoulders that doesn't sit right with me.

“You okay, hun?” I round the counter and grab an apron off a hook on the wall, tying it around my waist as Jen places the croissants in the overflowing display cabinet. “Did you stay up all night baking all this?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “Figured out my chocolate cake recipe and needed to take some anger out on baking for a little bit longer.”

My eyes run over the hundreds of new baked goods littered all over the place. I bite my lip. “Looks like you succeeded.”

Jen snorts.

I tilt my head. “Want to share what made you so angry?”

The door opens, and Fallon strides through with a face full of thunder.

I glance at Jen, whose eyes have narrowed to slits. The air in the café is so thick, it feels like soup. Welp. There’s my answer.

“I gotta go,” Jen mumbles, then drops her empty tray in the kitchen and leaves out the back door.

Fallon watches her go, jaw set in a grim line, then starts wordlessly helping me take chairs down from tables and open the café up for business.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Peachy.” A chair bangs onto the floor, then Fallon stomps to the kitchen with long, angry strides.

Okay, then.

Thankfully, Sven, our barista, arrives wearing his usual pink T-shirt with a glittery *Heart’s Cove Hottie* written across the chest, sleeves ripped off to reveal his tattoos and a carefree grin tugging at his lips. At least someone is in a good mood.

I open the café and get swept up in the usual hubbub of early risers needing their daily dose of the black stuff. It’s not until ten o’clock in the morning or so that Grant, my soon-to-be husband, walks in looking good enough to eat.

Pushing a strand of hair off my forehead, I let my lips slide into a smile. I love that man. I love the way his broad body moves so gracefully. I love how he has eyes only for me, and even though I’m sweaty and frazzled from the morning rush, he still looks at me like I’m the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen.

His thick, corded arms wrap around me as his lips dip down to kiss the soft skin below my ear. “I enjoyed this morning,” he growls softly.

My cheeks warm, and a curl of heat knots in my stomach. I woke up before Grant this morning and decided to use an—

ahem—*creative* tactic to wake him up which involved my mouth...and not for talking, if you know what I mean.

“Me too,” I tell him.

“Do you have time for me to return the favor?” Grant asks, pulling away slightly before dropping a kiss on my lips. “I can’t focus on work when I’m like this.”

“Get a room, you guys!” Simone, my fiery-hearted and fiery-haired best friend, calls out as she enters. “We get it. You’re in love.” She rolls her eyes but gives me a sly wink. “Morning!”

“Morning,” I say, giving Grant a quick squeeze before pulling away. A squeeze that says, *Later*.

Simone grins, then takes in the explosion of baked goods behind me with a raised eyebrow. “Jen’s been busy.”

A man enters the café, and I don’t have time to answer Simone because I’m slipping behind the counter to take his order. With a receding hairline and long, lanky limbs, he looks like any other middle-aged man in need of caffeine. But there’s something in the way he glances around the café, like he’s looking for someone but he’s not supposed to be here.

“Can I help you?”

“Uh...” He glances at the chalkboard menu behind me, then at the multitude of grinders and coffee carafes on the counter at my back. “Black coffee?”

“Comin’ right up.” I smile brightly, glancing briefly at Grant, who still looks ready to throw me over his shoulder and take me away. Blushing, I pour a black drip coffee for this customer and try to wrap my head around the fact that I’m getting married again.

It scares me, obviously. My first marriage was such a disaster, such a slow stripping of my confidence and sense of self that committing to a man again makes the primal part of my brain blare in fear. But Grant leans a big boulder shoulder against the wall, his full lips teasing into a smile as he scrubs his scruffy jaw with a wide palm, and the fear subsides.

He loves me. I love him. His daughter loves us. Our little family is more than I could have ever hoped for.

The man takes his coffee and drops it at a table before putting his jacket on the back of a chair, then wanders past Grant—giving him a quick glance and a wide berth, probably because Grant has about fifty pounds more muscle than he does—and ducks to the bathrooms.

That's when the café doors open again, and Lottie, Trina, her kids, Candice, and Blake come barreling through. The kids are seven and nine, and they recovered from their illness this week and are now begging for a muffin from the overflowing basket by the till.

Lottie corrals them to a table while Candice tilts her head up to Blake for a kiss, and Trina lets out a long sigh and leans against the counter. “We ran out of coffee. Do you do intravenous drips here, or no? I need it in my bloodstream like, now.”

Grinning, I take her order as Sven gets to work.

Then, I watch in slow-motion as the man in the bathroom returns to the main space. He spots Lottie first, and freezes. Lottie takes a step as if to shield Toby and Katie from him, a look so fierce on her face that I already know something is wrong.

It's him. It's Kevin. It's the asshole who shamed her for breastfeeding her own damn kid in her own damn house.

Then Trina sees him, and she goes rock solid too.

Then it's Candice's turn to freeze.

Blake frowns, following her gaze to the balding man at the mouth of the bathroom hallway.

“You're not due until tomorrow,” Lottie growls.

The man puts his hands up as if to placate her. “I had a day off. I thought I'd come down early.”

His voice makes the two kids turn around, and Katie launches herself at him. “Daddy!” She wraps her little arms around his stomach and looks up at him with stars in her eyes.

“You’re here! Are you staying? Toby and I got a cat! His name is Mr. Fuzzles and he likes catnip. Don’t worry, I change his litter box and everything.”

The man frowns. “Why doesn’t an adult do that?” He finally lifts his gaze to Trina, who somehow goes even more immobile. “You let her handle a cat’s excrement? No wonder they got sick.”

“They didn’t get sick from doing chores, Kevin.” Trina’s voice is flatter than I’ve ever heard it.

“It’s okay, Daddy, I ate lots of soup and now I’m all better. Toby too.”

My eyes flick to the little nine-year-old boy, who’s still sitting at the table, staring suspiciously at his father. He stands up, glances at Trina, then at Katie, as if he wants to go to his mother but doesn’t want to leave his sister behind. My heart spasms. What a beautiful, protective boy.

I clear my throat, but Simone throws me a glance from the opposite side of the café, shaking her head.

Trina takes a step forward. “You can’t have them until tomorrow.”

“Not even for ice cream?” Kevin says, looking at his daughter.

“Ice cream! Ice cream!” Katie screams, jumping up and down and turning to Trina. “Please, Mom?”

“You haven’t even had breakfast, Katie.”

“Are you not feeding them?” Kevin’s question is sharp enough to cut.

Trina flinches.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Lottie puts a finger up in Kevin’s face. “Not one more word. Toby, Katie—with me.” She snaps her fingers, and the two kids jump beside her. Lottie takes one of their hands in each of hers. “We’re going to walk back home and wait for Mommy and Daddy to have a conversation. Okay?”

“Fine.” Katie drops her chin. “But can we have ice cream later?”

“Maybe,” Lottie concedes. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Good,” Toby grits out, mean-mugging his own father. My heart squeezes at the sight of the anger in that little boy’s face. My divorce was painful, but seeing these two kids in the middle of Trina’s separation makes me grateful I never had little ones to go through it with me.

Lottie starts walking with the kids, and when they’re outside, Kevin turns to his ex-wife. “Are you trying to keep me from seeing my own goddamn children, Katrina?”

Katrina stiffens and opens her mouth, but before she can answer, a loud, rumbling noise starts growing outside. And growing. And growing...until half a dozen motorcycles appear outside the café windows, parking in a neat line against the curb. The first rider to dismount and remove his helmet is a very familiar, very sexy man who I last saw when I was slightly inebriated about a week ago.

Mac Blair is sex on a bike. The man handles clay like he was born to do it—and apparently motorcycles too.

He walks into the coffee shop like he owns the place, all leather and attitude, closing the distance between him and Trina in a few long strides. He wraps his arms around her shoulders and tugs her close, brushing his lips against her cheek in greeting.

Trina looks shocked. Horrified. A little flustered—and I’d bet anything she’s more than a little turned on.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Mac says loud enough for everyone to hear—probably because no one is moving a muscle as this little spectacle unfolds. “You want to go for a ride this morning?” His voice drops, but I don’t miss a word. “Been thinking about having those legs hooked over the seat of my bike all week.”

Holy *moly*. I’m about to get married, and even I feel a little turned on. Eyes wide, I glance at Simone, who looks about ready to faint. Then I look at Kevin, who looks ready to

explode. Then I glance at Grant, who has a little grin teasing over his lips when he watches the flush creep over my cheeks, as if he knows he'll reap the rewards of anything that turns me on when we're alone.

Trina just opens and closes her mouth like a goldfish until her ex-husband, Kevin, now red-faced and flustered, takes a step toward them.

“Who the *fuck* are you?”

*Mac*

**T**rina snaps out of her trance. “Kevin, watch your mouth.”  
“How about you don’t whore yourself out to a fucking biker gang, huh? How about that?”

Trina flinches against me, and I feel about ready to rip this motherfucker’s head off. Tucking her behind my back, I turn to face the sniveling, sorry excuse for a man in front of me. “That’s not an appropriate way to speak to a lady.”

The man scoffs. “Lady? That’s rich.”

A hand on my shoulder makes me pause the slurry of insults about to spew out of my mouth. Trina appears by my side, taking a step sideways to put a bit of distance between us. I try not to let it sting.

She crosses her arms. “I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow, Kevin.”

I frown. She was expecting this shitstain?

Trina glances at me. “Thank you for the offer, Mac, but I won’t be able to ride your motorcycle today. Unfortunately, something came up. Maybe another time.” Her spine is steel-straight, her chin held high. Admiration warms my chest at the sight of her, strong and proud in the presence of the man across the room who no doubt wants to cause her pain.

“I’m going to tell my lawyer about this, Trina,” the shitstain says, his lips curling in disgust.

“Last time I checked, motorcycles weren’t illegal, Kevin,” Trina snaps. “And last time I checked, you signed the divorce papers. Oh, and *last time I checked*, you *definitely* have no



right to speak about my relationships. Or have you forgotten that you cheated on me for *years*?”

Is it wrong that I’m kind of turned on by this? I glance at the door, where my father, brother, and Harold are standing near the entrance.

Then the door opens with a loud bang, and the White-Haired Lady Crew comes rushing in.

Dorothy greets my father with a loud kiss on the cheek. “Welcome! Oh my, what an entrance! We heard you all the way from the hotel and had to come say hello.” She waves another man in, a tall, grey-haired gentleman with a kind face and a shiny bald spot on his crown. He shakes my father’s hand.

Then Margaret enters. My father clears his throat, tugging the ends of his motorcycle jacket before smoothing his hair down. When Margaret extends a hand, he takes it and presses his lips to her knuckles.

A screw in my chest tightens, which makes guilt worm through my veins. I should be happy for my father. Any normal person would be delighted to see two people falling for each other.

Margaret turns the same shade of blush pink as her tweed suit jacket. Meanwhile, Dorothy is calling out for coffees all around, Trina looks like she’s about to faint, and Shitstain Kevin has turned red with anger. His fists open and close, eyes darting to me every few seconds.

Finally, the short, sharp-tongued woman with the helmet-like grey hair waddles in—Agnes, I think—sneering at Dorothy, who ignores her, and letting out a huff. “What’s this racket about? It should be illegal for you bikers to come roaring through a quiet town like this. I was having a quiet coffee in the bookstore, and you lot—”

“Oh hush, you boring old hag,” Dorothy says with a smile on her face. “You wouldn’t know fun if it slapped you on the ass and called you Bonnie.”

Agnes rolls her eyes. She's the first one to spot Kevin across the room, and she walks toward him, stopping a few feet away before crossing her arms. "Who the hell are you?"

He starts. "What?"

Agnes drops her arms to the side, looks over her shoulder to meet Dorothy's gaze, and rolls her eyes. I don't understand the relationship between these women. They insult each other, but they also go drinking and are able to communicate with nothing more than a look. Agnes turns those admittedly slightly scary eyes back to Kevin and speaks slowly. "Who... the hell...are you?"

"Agnes, this is my ex-husband, Kevin," Trina cuts in. "It's his weekend and he's here a day early, and we were just figuring out our schedules for the next couple of days."

His weekend? Does Trina have kids? She hasn't mentioned them. She mentioned her cat, but not her kids... But now that I think of it, I vaguely remember her mentioning some names when they were planning their night at my father's bar. I frown, glancing at Trina.

I only met the woman a couple of weeks ago. She has every right to keep her kids away from anyone she chooses. Still...I'd like her to trust me.

I clear my throat, drawing everyone's gaze.

Dorothy squeezes the older man's elbow and points at me. "Eli, that's Mac. Isn't he handsome? I told you he was handsome, didn't I?"

"He's a looker," Eli responds, and Dorothy's lips curl into a smile.

She claps. "Well, what are we waiting for? Hamish, you're supposed to be offering to take us out on those mean machines out there."

"Is that so?" my father answers with a grin and a wink at Margaret.

"Yes, that's so. You can't come roaring into town and not offer us a lap around the block on those things. Look! Marge is

wearing pants. We're all set." Dorothy points at me. "You take Eli. I'll go with Harold. Marge, you're with Hamish. Agnes, you take that young stud over there—"

"My son, Lee," my father cuts in with a small smile tipping his lips.

"Well, Hamish, you sure do know how to make 'em pretty," Dorothy says. "Lee, unfortunately you're stuck with Agnes. I'd say she doesn't bite, but I don't like to lie." Then she looks at Trina. "And you take care of yourself. Yeah?" Then Dorothy looks past my shoulder to the counter. "Get our coffees ready. We'll be back in ten minutes. Coffee's on me, boys!" She ushers everyone out, holding the door open as she glances back at me. "Yoohoo, Mr. Handsome! Come on, Eli isn't going to ride himself around the block!"

I can't help the grin from tugging at my lips. Glancing at Trina, I lift my brows. "You okay?"

The harsh lines of Trina's face soften, and I wonder how often she's had to stand on her own without anyone checking on her. She nods. "I'm good. You okay? You don't need to drive them around if you don't want to."

"He's fucking fine," Shitstain Kevin cuts in. "What I want to know is why he thinks he has the right to fucking talk to you like that?" Aggression is written in every line of his face, carved into every muscle of his soft frame. "You're fucking him, aren't you?"

Before I can do anything, the old ladies *move*. Dorothy comes flying in the door, followed by Agnes and Margaret, already wearing their motorcycle helmets. They form a line between him and Trina, and Dorothy lifts a finger. "You watch your mouth, buddy. One more word, and you'll be barred from every business in town."

Kevin splutters. "You can't—"

"Oh, would you look at that," Margaret cuts in. "Unfortunately, we double-booked your room. You'll have to find somewhere else to stay for the weekend." She looks up from her phone, which I can see is just a blank screen. Out of

the three of them, she's the last one I'd expect to threaten someone.

Fighting to hide my grin, I glance at my father.

He's standing in the doorway, looking as smitten as I've ever seen him, hand clutched to his heart.

"Ladies, it's fine," Trina says, putting a hand on Margaret's shoulder. "Go. Enjoy your motorcycle ride. I'll be okay."

The ladies give Kevin one more nasty look, then shuffle out toward the waiting bikes. My father whispers something in Margaret's ear, and I can't help but notice the extra swish in her hips as she makes her way toward his bike.

Trina glances at me and gives me a nod.

Every part of me wants to stay, tuck her into my side, and protect her from whatever garbage will spew from Kevin's mouth. I don't want her to stand alone against him.

But she didn't even tell me she had kids. This isn't my fight. We barely know each other, and she doesn't want me here.

Isn't that for the best? Doesn't that suit me just fine?

I don't do complications. I'm not the type of guy who can stand by a woman's side through thick and thin. Not when I know I should be on my own.

Still...instinct blares at me to stay. To protect.

But Trina just gives me a nod, and with a sigh, I make my way outside to the line of bikes and passengers waiting for their scoot around the block.

When we get back, Trina and her asshole ex are gone.

---

LATER, I end up driving to the Cedar Grove with the boys, but as soon as I walk in, all I can think about is my evening with Trina in here. The place seems duller, darker without her, and I can't bear to be here. I turn right around, then freeze.

“Hey, handsome,” Belinda says from the doorway. She’s wearing a tight top that shows off far too much cleavage, and I can’t help comparing it to the classy, effortlessly sexy clothing Trina usually wears. The two of them are like night and day.

“Belinda.” I clear my throat, wondering if I can get outside without speaking to her.

“You never called me after last time I came to see you.” She pouts, and it’s not cute.

I glance over my shoulder at my father and brother, who are most definitely listening to every word. Turning back to Belinda, I sigh. “Can I speak to you outside?”

She gives me a seductive smile, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. “Of course, big boy,” she purrs.

We walk out into the late afternoon, and I know there’s no excuse now. I need to find the words to get Belinda to leave me alone, once and for all.

If I took even a second to examine that thought, I’d realize that it’s because of Katrina. I’d realize that it’s important to me to cut ties to all other women, as stale and tenuous as they might be.

If I took a moment to admit to myself that what I feel for Trina might not be your run-of-the-mill need for a hard fuck, I might hesitate and lose my nerve. I might retreat and push Trina away.

But I don’t think of any of that.

I look at the woman in front of me. “Belinda, I’ve told you time and time again that it’s not appropriate for us to see each other.”

“My son isn’t even at this school anymore, Mac.” She scoffs, rolling her eyes.

“I’m not interested.” My voice is hard, and Belinda’s face changes in an instant. She goes from sultry and flirty to furiously angry.

Her lips curl down and her eyes grow dark. “Excuse me?”

“I’m just being honest. This has gone on long enough.”

Belinda arches an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? I’ll go to the principal and tell her all about our affair together. You’ll lose your job.”

“Our ‘affair’ was one night after the end of the school year, and it was a mistake.”

She flinches. With a hand on her hip, Belinda purses her lips and shakes her head. “I waited around for you for four years, Mac, and this is how you repay me?”

“I didn’t ask you to do that. I told you I didn’t want to see you anymore.”

“No, Mac. You told me it wasn’t *appropriate* for us to see each other. You kept me on the hook for *years*, only to turn around and tell me you don’t want me now that my son is out of your school. You couldn’t have done that four years ago? You couldn’t have been honest with me?” She scoffs, shaking her head as she stares at the sky. “You’re an asshole and a tease, Mac.” Then she turns on her heels and stomps toward her minivan.

I stand rooted to the spot until she’s out of the parking lot and out of sight.

Closing my eyes for a brief moment, I push away the uncomfortable truth in her words. I *did* dodge her advances for years, if only to avoid awkward confrontation at my work. Maybe it would have been better to be honest—but would I have risked repercussions at work? Would it have blown up in my face?

I did the best I could do at the time. I tried to let her down as gently as I could.

When I get on my bike, though, all thoughts of Belinda get left behind as the wind whips over me. The only thing on my mind is when I’ll get to see Trina again.

*Trina*

I collapse into a sofa in the library above the Four Cups Café. Everyone's here. Simone is regaling us with a hilarious story about her college boyfriend breaking up with her because he thought she ate too much cheese. Jen is making tea for everyone. Fiona is bustling around throwing a blanket over my legs, tidying a few books that have been left out, overall just acting like a mother hen. Candice is sitting next to me, a quiet, supportive presence.

It's nice being taken care of. It's not something I experience very often.

When Jen puts a chamomile tea in my hands, I inhale the scent of the steam and let out a sigh.

"You good?" Simone asks.

I shrug. "As good as can be."

"I still think you should have refused to let him have the kids tonight," Candice says as her lips curl downward. "The absolute *gall* of that man! To barge in here a day early to his planned visitation and turn the kids against you by promising ice cream and fun. He's going to play 'Fun Dad,' and I wouldn't put it past him to shit-talk you behind your back."

"I gave in because I want us to have a good co-parenting relationship. If I put up a big fight about one night, then what? We get adversarial and nothing works."

"The minute he called you a whore, you should have punched him in the throat. Screw good co-parenting when

someone verbally abuses you like that.” That harsh comment comes from Fiona, and everyone hums in agreement.

My brows arch. “That’s a particularly violent statement. Have you been hanging out with Agnes lately?”

Fiona laughs. “No, but cheating spouses who then get mad about you moving on to something better hits close to home. He has no right to make you feel bad about what’s going on with Mac.”

“Nothing’s going on with Mac,” I respond, even though after almost a week, I can still feel the taste of his lips on mine.

“What happened after you left the café?” Simone asks.

Stalling for time, I lift my mug to my lips. It’s too hot to drink, and I grimace when I burn the roof of my mouth. Since everyone is still waiting for me to respond, I release a sigh and shrug. “We went back to my place. Kevin booked an AirBnB since his room at the hotel was ‘double-booked.’” Everyone snickers at the comment, and I just shake my head. “When Katie heard his new place had a pool, I’d pretty much already lost the battle.”

“Yep.” Candice nods, lips pinched. “He’s playing ‘Fun Dad.’”

Fiona lets out a disgusted snort. “What an ass.”

“He’s not a bad father. I can’t keep him from seeing the kids. I want them to have a good relationship with him.” I don’t know why I’m defending him. Kevin cheated on me. I found out when I saw tickets to an art gallery opening and thought they were for the two of us, only to discover he was taking his mistress instead. I spent years supporting him while he pursued his passion for painting, and then was left behind when he finally made it.

He never appreciated the work I put in at the start of our marriage to support us, and he definitely didn’t appreciate the work it took to raise two children. He’d stay in his studio until late at night, then reappear and be the World’s Best Dad for a few days.



I don't know why I put up with it before, and I'm not sure why I'm not as outraged as my friends. Maybe I'm just tired.

"Anyway, it's fine," I tell them. "I'll be able to get some job applications done this weekend."

"Have you put any thought into starting a stylist business?" Fiona asks, tucking one leg under her butt as she sits down.

I frown. "Well...no. You guys weren't serious about that, were you?"

Fiona shrugs. "I'd pay you for advice on how to dress. You're really good at it, Trina."

I shake my head, dismissing the thought immediately. "No. No, I'll look for a real job."

Simone and Candice exchange a glance. Simone gives me a soft smile. "Girl, none of us here have real jobs. They're overrated, anyway."

My heart thumps, but striking out on my own and doing something related to fashion is just too much for me. It's too far out of my comfort zone. What happened this morning with Kevin has me reeling, and the thought of starting a business when my life is in such upheaval? I shake my head. "I'm not... I don't... I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Start small," Simone says. "With me or Fiona—"

"Or me," Candice cuts in.

"—and figure out how you'd structure your services. Then just start a social media page and *boom*. You're in business."

I shake my head. "It's not that simple."

Fiona tilts her head. "Why not?"

"Because..." I drift off, then frown. I *know* it's not that simple, but I can't quite think of all the reasons. Because...the kids! The divorce! Because I couldn't possibly do something like that all on my own...could I? Close to panic, I look at all their expectant faces. "Can we talk about something else, please?"

“What’s going on with you and Mac?” Jen arches her brows, kicking her legs up onto the coffee table.

I groan.

Candice laughs. “Atta girl, Jen. On to more important things.” My sister turns to me with an expectant look on her face. “So? Has Mac called you since this morning? That *entrance*, my God. I wish we could have recorded it.”

I bite my lip. “No, he hasn’t called.”

“We should go to the Grove,” Simone says, brightening. She puts her mug down on the coffee table and looks at each of us in turn. “Allie is with Clancy and Grant at your place,” she says to Fiona and Candice. “And Jen, you’re done baking for the day.”

Jen frowns. “I still need to—”

“You’re *done* baking for the day, Jen,” Simone cuts in. “Have you seen how many baked goods are overflowing from their containers down there? Amanda can’t possibly expect you to do more.”

“The lemon meringue pie recipe isn’t quite right, though, and—”

“Jen.” Simone lowers her brows.

I clear my throat. “Look, it’s fine. I’m not sure going to the Grove is a good idea. I shouldn’t be seeing Mac anyway—”

“Why not?” Fiona screeches, sitting up on her armchair. “Why the hell not, Trina?”

“He’s...” I trail off, not really knowing what to say. I flap my hands around a bit as if that’ll explain things. “I’m... It’s too soon.”

“Bullshit.” Simone stands up and gathers everyone’s mugs. “Let’s go.”

My protests fall on deaf ears. We stumble down the stairs together and spill onto the sidewalk, only to pause when we hear the sound of a couple of loud engines.

Two motorcycles come rumbling down Cove Boulevard, the main street through the center of Heart's Cove. My heart leaps, then I let out a surprised laugh when I see the passengers on the back of the two roaring bikes.

Dorothy's silver hair streams behind her from under her helmet, her oversized leather jacket making her look massive on the back of Mac's bike. She's holding onto him tight, her face split open with a smile. But it's Margaret that surprises me. She's on the back of Hamish's bike, holding onto him just as close, a high, bright flush on her cheeks.

The men stop their bikes in front of us as the ladies dismount. Dorothy lets out a squeal. "Again! Again!"

Mac just laughs, then lets his gaze slide to me. His lips tip up at the corners. "Hey."

Why did my clothes just suddenly get rougher? I can feel every fiber of fabric scratching me, every scrap of material abrading my too-sensitive skin. "Hi."

My gaze darts to Margaret, who's still blushing as Hamish helps her with the clasp of her helmet. "That was lovely, Hamish."

"The pleasure was all mine." His eyes are soft as he responds.

I exchange a glance with Candice, who hides a smile behind her hand. Margaret's husband passed away years ago, and I've never seen her flirt with anyone. It's nice to see.

Mac takes a step toward me, and my whole body reacts. How does he manage to move like that? Grace and strength in every inch of his body. With his helmet under his arm, he combs his fingers through his hair and nods toward his motorcycle. "Want a ride?"

*More than anything.*

The thought pops into my head before I can stop myself, and my lips drop open. I suck in a breath and release it slowly, trying to figure out how to put my feelings into words.

Yes, I want to press my thighs against Mac's and wrap my arms around his torso. I want to feel the warmth of his body at my chest and let him guide me around every bend in the road as the sun sets over the ocean. I want him to take me somewhere private and kiss me silly, if only to forget about my horrible, awful, terrible day and the fact that I don't have my kids tonight.

But I shouldn't.

Kevin was a jerk, but he was also right. What if I'm getting involved with Mac too soon? I should be focused on my kids, preparing for the school year, finding a job.

But Mac's eyes slide down my body, taking in the tight jeans and the draped, loose-fitting tee that exposes one of my shoulders. There's heat in his honey-colored eyes that I can't ignore, and I find myself speaking.

"Yeah," I hear myself say. "I'd like that."

I'm rewarded with the sexiest grin I've ever seen. Mac's full lips curl up at the corners as his eyes glimmer, the crinkles at their corners deepening. It should be illegal to be that sexy. With dark jeans, his leather jacket, his motorcycle boots, and hair that looks like it would feel good to run my fingers through, is there any wonder I agreed?

And before I can change my mind, Candice's hands appear on my shoulders. She not-so-gently nudges me closer to the sexy motorcycle man in front of me as Mac extends a helmet.

I glance over my shoulder to see Simone giving me a big thumbs-up. So, with a sigh and one last look at Margaret and Hamish, whose heads are still angled close together, I turn to Mac and nod. "Let's do it."

His grin widens to a smile, and a thunderbolt hits me right in the middle of the chest. Way, way too sexy for his own good. It should be illegal.

Helmet fitted over my head, and Dorothy's oversized leather jacket—which I discover is actually Mac's—over my shoulders, I swing my leg over Mac's bike and shimmy forward, sliding my hands around his waist. This time, I don't

hesitate. It feels all too natural to have my arms around his waist and my cheek pressed up against his shoulder.

“Hold on tight,” he reminds me, and I can’t quite hide my smile as I turn to rest my chin on his shoulder and let him take me away.

---

WHEN MAC finally stops the bike, I feel like I just ran a marathon. My blood is heated, my arms sore from squeezing him so hard, and my thighs permanently branded with the feel of his legs against them. There’s something intensely erotic about being on a bike with him, feeling the roar of the engine between my legs, knowing I’m completely at Mac’s mercy.

He took us around bends, on the highway, and wove through the forest until we got to a familiar lookout point above the Pacific Ocean. I stumble off the motorcycle and giggle, giddy with adrenaline as I remove my helmet and take a deep breath.

“Better?” Mac asks, studying my smile as if he wants to remember it. As if he’d never get sick of looking at me.

I nod. “Much better.”

“Your ex is an asshole.”

A surprised laugh falls from my lips. I clap my hand over my mouth and shake my head. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“Why not?” He takes a step toward me, grabbing the helmet from my hands to rest it on the motorcycle seat. “It’s true, isn’t it?”

I shrug, turning to the ocean crashing at the foot of cliffs below, if only to avoid his piercing gaze. “I... I don’t know. I don’t like bad-mouthing people.”

“Even if they deserve it? Even if they insult you in a room full of people? Even if they say things that no man should ever say to a woman?”

I bite my lip and ignore how much his words affect me. When was the last time a man actually defended me like that? Actually *cared*?

Mac meets my gaze for a moment, then angles his head toward the edge of the parking lot, where a small shed-like building stands.

My eyes light up. “Ice cream!” Then I laugh, because I had the exact same response to the treat as my seven-year-old daughter.

Mac, smooth as anything, intertwines his fingers with mine (swoon!) and leads me across the lot. There’s an old couple in front of us who order with expert precision, and I wonder how many times they’ve gotten ice cream together. Then Mac steps up and leans a muscled forearm against the chest-height counter.

The young girl behind the counter arches her brows, color rising high on her cheeks at the sight of the man in front of her. “Wh-what can I get for you, Mr. Blair?”

Somehow, it doesn’t surprise me that she knows him. Mac flashes a smile. “Hi Kaylee. How has your summer been?”

“Really good, but my arm is pretty sore from scooping.” The girl lets out a little giggle, her cheeks turning a brighter shade of red. I bite my lip. It’s cute seeing her reaction, but I’m glad I’m no longer a young teenager. She points to the buckets of ice cream in front of her. “What would you like?”

“Double-scoop waffle cone. One scoop cookies ’n’ cream, one scoop double-chocolate brownie blast. Trina?” He looks at me.

I step up and hesitate, even though I know exactly what I want. I grin at Mac, feeling like a little girl again. “Butter pecan, please.”

“One scoop or two?” The girl is already putting Mac’s cone together with a few expert movements, dunking her scoop into a jug of milky-looking water between each new mound of ice cream.

“Oh, what the hell. Two. In a waffle cone as well, please.”

At my words, Mac's lips tug. He slides his hand around my waist and gives me a squeeze.

My smile widens, and I duck my head to hide it. I haven't been out for ice cream in a long, long time, and for the past few years it's always been with kids in tow. Kevin would always click his tongue if I got more than one scoop, and he'd grumble at the extra dollar for a waffle cone.

This feels so indulgent, I can't wipe the smile off my face.

Mac pays before I can reach for my purse, ignoring my protests and handing me my cone. Then we walk to the edge of the parking lot, where a few benches are set out to admire the view. I take a seat next to Mac, keenly aware of the way his thigh is pressed against mine, the movement of his tongue over his ice cream cone, the way his hand is slung casually along the back of the bench behind me.

This feels like a date. When was the last time I went on a date?

Wait—no. I don't want to think about that. It'll make me feel too old.

“So,” Mac says after a while, “when are you going to let me see that pussy of yours?”

That's when my ice cream decides to go down the wrong hole. Choking and spluttering, I cough out a shocked, “Excuse me?”

Mac keeps his eyes on the horizon, the setting sun turning his skin golden-brown while the corner of his lip twitches. “Mr. Fuzzles, was it?” When he meets my gaze, his eyes are dancing. “Why? What did you think I was talking about?”

Laughing, I nudge him with my shoulder and shake my head. “You're unbelievable.”

Mac's smile widens, turning my stomach into delicious knots. He drops his arm from the back of the bench to my shoulders, tugging me closer. “At least I put a smile on your face this evening. Mission accomplished.”

Oh. Everything from neck to navel warms inside me at his words—at the sincerity of them. He’s just...so damn *sweet*!

And as Mac lifts his treat to take a bite out of the waffle cone, then glances at me and gives me a cheeky wink, I know I don’t stand a chance to resist him.

Would it be so bad if I just...didn’t?



*Trina*

**W**e stay at the lookout until the sun sets and a chill creeps into the air. Our ice cream is long gone and there's a lingering taste of sweetness in my mouth. When Mac takes me by the hand and leads me to his bike, my heart gives a mighty squeeze.

I like this.

I like being treated like a princess. I like having my hand held. I like simple pleasures like ice cream and sunsets.

And, apparently, I also like motorcycles.

We stand beside the bike and Mac puts my helmet on, his lips tugging once the latch is clicked beneath my chin.

"What?" I ask, seeing the glimmer in his eyes.

"You look cute in a motorcycle helmet."

"I am not *cute*."

His lips curl a bit more. "Okay, you look hot as fuck in a motorcycle helmet." A chuckle falls from his lips when he sees the startled expression on my face. "Better?"

"You have strange preferences, Mr. Blair."

That makes him laugh outright, and my heart clenches again. And when Mac leans down and presses his lips to mine in a soft, sweet kiss that quickly devolves to something deeper and wetter? Well, my heart nearly gives out completely.

When he pulls away, Mac brushes his thumb over my swollen lips and shakes his head. "I don't think my preferences are strange at all."

With practiced, easy movements, he mounts his bike and nods for me to follow. Then, we're off onto winding, forested streets all the way back to Heart's Cove, to the temporary rental my mother and I are occupying for the next week until we can move into Candice's old place.

Mac pulls out in front of the house and we dismount. A deep well of disappointment opens up inside me as I remove my helmet, once again doing my best to smooth down the rat's nest on top of my head.

The house keys are cold in my hand as I fiddle with them, watching the way they spin around the key ring just to avoid glancing up at Mac's bottomless eyes. "Thanks for this evening," I finally say. "I didn't realize how much I needed it."

Mac lets out a breath, and I look up to see him combing his fingers through his hair. His eyes are on me, and just as I predicted, the sight of them makes my blood heat.

If I didn't live with my mother, I'd invite him in. If I had any sense of adventure, I'd ask to see his place.

But I have kids, responsibilities, and my life is such a jumbled mess that I need to think things through. What if I'm just latching onto the first decent man I meet? Shouldn't I be focused on being single for a while? Getting to know myself again? Finding a job, moving forward, being independent?

There's nothing but conflict inside me. On the one hand, Mac is a brawny, sweet, sexy man the likes of which I've never even *seen*, let alone dated. He makes pottery and rides a motorcycle. He doesn't complain when kooky old ladies like Dorothy and Margaret demand rides around the block. His kisses are like dynamite.

I'd be a damn fool to turn my back on that.

But on the other hand...I'm a mess. I'm barely out of a bad marriage. The ink isn't even dry on my divorce papers and I'm ready to throw myself into another man's bed. That's wrong, isn't it? Shameful, in some way?

Mac cuts through my turbulent thoughts by placing a hand on my neck, his strong, warm fingers curling around my nape.

“I want to see you again,” he says, and I can’t help but bite my lip.

At the sight of it, Mac lets out a low groan. “Remember what I said about the lip biting, Trina? It’ll get you in trouble if you aren’t careful.”

Lungs catching, I gaze up at him. I’m sure he can feel the pulse thundering in my neck. I’m sure he can see the heat in my eyes. He knows the effect he has on me.

So, telling him the truth is just voicing something he already knows, even if it comes out a bit breathy. “What if I want to get in trouble?”

Another groan, and his fingers tighten. Then I’m wrapped up in his arms and I’m kissing him again, just like we did outside the Cedar Grove. Melting into his chest, I let out a moan at the warmth and strength of him, the feel of his strong, broad body curved around mine.

And his lips—oh, his lips are magic. He parts mine with his tongue and deepens the kiss, the hand on my neck shifting to tangle into my hair.

I curl my fingers into his shirt, then claw them up to wrap around his shoulders, wanting more closeness. Needing it. I’m making out like a horny teen on my mother’s doorstep, and I don’t even care. He tastes too good. He feels too good. *I* feel too good.

When his hand slides down my back to grip my ass, I swear it nearly sends me over the edge. The sheer possessiveness of the movement, the way he grips my body like he needs to feel it under his palm—it’s too much for me to handle.

I break the kiss, panting, resting my forehead against the side of his jaw as he releases a low groan. “Kissing you is dangerous, Trina.”

“Why?” My eyes are closed as I inhale the scent of his skin, loving the way he holds me close. My nose nudges against his throat, rasping against the stubble there.

“Because it makes me forget myself. Makes me never want to stop.” He shifts, brushing his lips against mine. Then he pulls away and gives me a soft smile. “I’d better go.”

“Oh.” I don’t mean to sound as disappointed as I do, so I force a brave smile onto my lips. “Okay. I’ll, um, see you around.”

“Count on it,” he tells me, and it sounds like a vow.

Then—perfect timing as always—the front door opens and my mother yelps, “Oh, Trina! You’re home!” She puts a hand to her heart. “Mac! Lovely to see you.”

I don’t believe for a second that my mother wasn’t watching through the curtains, but I still pull away from Mac and give her a nod. “Hi, Mom.”

“Well, did you have fun? That’s some machine you got there, Mac.” She smiles, toddling over to us in fuzzy slippers complete with bunny ears on them. The rest of her outfit consists of bright red jeans and a polka-dot top.

Movement catches my eye behind her. Little, black, furry movement.

Like a bullet, Mr. Fuzzles darts out the open door, through my mother’s legs, and makes a break for freedom. Mom screams, trying to catch the cat while promptly tripping over the floppy bunny ears on her slippers. Momentarily distracted, the cat pounces on the floppy slippers, then changes his mind again and darts toward the road.

“Mom!” I cry, rushing toward her as she stumbles and falls into a flowerbed.

She lands with a low *oof*, then points to the road. “I’m okay. Get the cat!”

That’s when Mac *moves*.

I thought watching him change a tire was hot? I thought pottery was sexy? How about lightning-quick speed and Olympic-level agility? Mac lunges for Mr. Fuzzles and scoops him up in one hand before the cat can make a break for the road.

“Oh, thank God,” my mother says from the flowerbed.

I help her to her feet and wipe the dirt and flower petals from her clothing before finally turning to see Mac walking up the path toward us.

And my ovaries just lay down and surrender.

One of his big, broad hands cups the quickly-growing kitten to his chest, a little ball of black fur purring loudly against him. I watch tiny little paws kneading his thumb as Mr. Fuzzles nuzzles his face against Mac’s other fingers, the rest of his body lying on Mac’s wrist and forearm. Mac stops in front of my mother and me, a soft expression on his face as he uses a finger to scratch behind the kitten’s ears. It sounds like he’s holding a little engine.

“Oh, he likes *you*,” my mother says. “He’s never let me pick him up and hold him like that.”

Mac’s lips tilt up, his eyes still on the little ball of fur. Then he glances at me and nods. “Here.” He extends his hands and deposits the cat into my arms, to Mr. Fuzzles’s great displeasure. The cat yowls and reaches for Mac, flailing and scratching so hard I nearly drop him.

Mac to the rescue once again. He grabs Mr. Fuzzles with a deep chuckle and nods to the door. “Maybe I should bring him inside.”

“Great idea!” My mother claps, retrieves one of her slippers from the plants, and leads the way to the house. “Have you two eaten? I can whip something up for you.”

*Oh...no.* I don’t want a family dinner with Mac and my mother. No way.

Panicked, I whip my head toward Mac, who just gives me a wink and a smile. “I have plans, unfortunately, but thank you for the offer, Lottie. I’ll have to take a rain check.”

“Another time.” Mom waves a hand for us to follow her to the living room. “Keep your shoes on. Mr. Fuzzles’s scratching post is in the guest room. We can drop him in there”—she turns to the cat and lifts a finger as if she’s

scolding him like a child—“so he can think about what he’s done.”

I notice the way Mac’s eyes linger on the kids’ shoes by the door, the jackets, the colorful backpack with Disney princesses all over it, and I bite my lip.

I haven’t actually told him about the kids. It’s not that I’ve withheld the information, it just...never came up. The time that I’ve spent with Mac has felt like an escape from my life. Not that I’m ashamed of my kids, but just that... I don’t know. It’s just so much easier to be a divorced woman meeting up with a hot badass without thinking about all the implications of actually being with him.

But Mac says nothing about the kids’ clothes. He just deposits Mr. Fuzzles next to his food and water bowls, grinning when the cat does a figure-eight through his legs, then softly closes the door.

“I’ll walk you out,” I tell him.

When we get to the motorcycle again, the curtains twitch, and I know for sure my mother is watching. I clear my throat. “Look, Mac. I, um... I haven’t actually mentioned this before, but I’ve got two kids.”

Surprisingly, Mac just smiles. “I know.”

“You know?”

“Your ex mentioned something about it being his weekend. I figured it out.”

I let out a little snort. “Ah,” I say, and give him an awkward smile.

“It’s fine, Trina. I like kids. Obviously.” He smiles back, as if what he just said makes sense. Why would it be obvious that he likes kids?

Frowning, I just nod. “Right. Well, look, Mac—” I take a deep breath. Time to be a big girl. “I haven’t actually dated anyone since Kevin, and I’m not really ready to introduce the kids to anyone. It’s not anything about you. It’s just, I don’t

want men in and out of their lives while the divorce is so fresh, and..."

"I get it." Mac reaches over to take my hand, then places a soft kiss against my knuckles. "You're doing the right thing. I wasn't going to ask to meet them."

"Oh. Well...good." I bite my lip and nudge the pavement with my toe. That was a much easier conversation than I imagined.

That makes him chuckle. "I'll call you, Trina."

My lips curl, and I nod. "Okay."

With one more soft kiss on the lips, Mac dons his helmet and slings a strong leg over his bike, gives me a wink and a smile, then rides off down the street and out of sight.

I turn to see my mother at the door, a cheeky grin teasing her lips. "Trina, honey, that man is something else. If you don't want him, I'll have him any day of the week. Hell, I'll have him *every* day of the week!"

"Mom, gross." I frown, and Lottie just laughs.

But the scariest part is, I feel the same way.

*Trina*

**T**he weekend that follows is busy. I spend two days packing with my mother while the kids are away so we're ready to move into Candice's old place on Monday.

Kevin drops them off at the rental on Sunday evening, peering over my shoulder to the house beyond. His lips curl in disgust. "Is your new boyfriend there? I hope you're not letting some creep around my kids."

I stare at the man on the doorstep, wondering who the hell I was married to for so long. Is this really the same man I thought I'd grow old with? Someone so vindictive and bitter? Someone who cheated on me *while we were married*, and now gets mad that I might be moving on *after* the divorce?

Maybe it's the fact that I have a girl gang behind me, a bit of space, and the attention of a sexy, sweet, motorcycle-riding badass, but I'm finding it hard to be small and civil and meek with Kevin now. I square my shoulders and stare him down. "He hasn't met the kids, and he won't meet them until I'm ready for that to happen."

Kevin snorts. "Yeah, right. He's probably in there now. Tell me, Trina. Do you think of me when you suck his cock?"

Startled, I blink. Did he just say that to me? *Did he just say that to me?*

Oh, *hell* no.

Cocking my hip to the side, I arch a brow. "Honey, I don't think of you ever, and definitely not when Mac's big, beautiful



cock is involved.”

Then I slam the door in his face.

Then I start shaking, and tears leak down my cheeks, so I hide in the powder room in the hallway until my mother knocks on the door.

“Trina? Everything okay?”

I open the door so fast my mother stumbles back, wide-eyed. “Kevin just asked if I think of him while I suck Mac’s cock.”

Mom’s jaw drops. “He said *what?*”

“So I told him I don’t think of him ever, and definitely not when Mac’s big, beautiful cock is involved.” The words are coming out of my mouth for the second time, and it’s just as horrifying as the first.

But Mom doesn’t look horrified. Her eyes widen for a beat, then she throws her head back and laughs. When she wraps me in a hug and pats my back, I pull away and shake my head.

“Mom, I haven’t done anything with Mac. I don’t know anything about his penis. It could be tiny. He could have a micropenis!”

My mother arches a brow as her lips twitch to keep a smile down. “Sweetheart, I don’t think Mac has a micropenis.”

“I don’t know if I even want to find out!”

“Of course you want to find out. Don’t be silly.”

I’m living in an alternate universe. That’s the only explanation I can come up with for the fact that I’m talking to my mother about Mac’s...*equipment*. My mother and I don’t talk about sex, ever. I definitely don’t discuss specifics, like, *ever* ever. But for some reason she seems to think this is all a big joke.

That is, until she pats my cheek with a soft look in her eyes. “I’m proud of you, Katrina.”

“You’re *proud* of me? For saying *that*?” Definitely an alternate universe. I’ve fallen through a wrinkle in the space-time continuum.

Mom huffs. “You let that man dim your shine for years. He walked all over you and it broke my heart to see it. Let him imagine you in bed with a handsome man like Mac. Just let him! He deserves to squirm.”

“I don’t want to be vindictive. Why can’t we just co-parent like adults? He was more than happy to sign off on me moving here. Said it would be better for his work, but maybe I should have stayed closer to him. Maybe the distance is hard on him, and he’s regretting it.”

“Good.” My mom gives me a decisive nod. “He should regret it. He ruined a good thing and he treated you like crap.”

“Nana said crap!” Katie screams from down the hall. “Toby, Nana said crap! She said a bad word!”

I close my eyes for a beat, and when I open them my mother is chuckling. She turns toward Katie’s voice. “I did say crap. Crappity, crap, crap!”

“Mom,” I cut in, exasperated.

Katie just squeals. “*Crap!*” my daughter yells, then bursts out laughing.

My lips twitch despite themselves. “Now look what you’ve done.” I try to keep my voice stern, but my mother sees right through me.

She just winks and heads down the hallway. I give my eyes one last wipe and exit the powder room, suddenly not caring about my daughter saying a bad word. She’s laughing, even though her life has seen more upheaval than I ever wanted her to. She said goodbye to her father today, and it broke my heart to see her teary. But she’s laughing now, so maybe one little inappropriate word is a compromise I can live with.

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WHEN WE MOVE into Candice's old house, the kids are over the moon. They choose their rooms, and my mother insists that I take the master bedroom even though I think she should have it. We spend the week cleaning, unpacking, and preparing for school to start on the following Monday.

I also end up looking for—and finding—a child therapist for the kids. Seeing Toby's hostility toward his father and Katie's tears when she said goodbye to Kevin put my butt in gear. Enough thinking about myself. Enough worrying about a hottie like Mac. Time to do right by my kids.

Candice, at first, tries to refuse to charge us rent. When I insist on having a lease and paying her rent, she relents, but charges us such a small amount for a four-bedroom house that I almost break down and cry.

Once the kids are in school, I'll get a job and I'll pay her back somehow—but she's all loved-up with Blake, building her dream home while Allie prepares for college next year, and I have a feeling she truly doesn't care. She's happy, and she's paying it forward.

Mac and I don't get to see each other, but we do text frequently over the course of the week. I send him updates on the cat, telling him how Mr. Fuzzles is adjusting to the new home.

Not surprisingly, I don't mention the last conversation I had with Kevin, and I don't ask him about the status and size of his junk.

Mac sends me pictures of his pottery projects, of sunsets he sees on his motorcycle rides, and everything in between. Every day I wake up to a good morning text, and every evening he sends me a sweet goodnight. It makes my heart flip every time I see it.

It doesn't feel wrong to be talking to him. Even though I'm recently divorced and Kevin keeps making snide comments every time he calls the kids or sends me a message, they wash over me without burrowing under my skin. It's like a switch flipped, and I can see the kind of man he truly is...and rise above it.

By the time Friday rolls around, I haven't seen Mac in a week, and I feel like I'm about to burst out of my skin. Thank goodness for moving and busy kids. At least I haven't had time to pine after him too much.

But on Saturday night, when the kids are bathed, have their teeth brushed, and are having story time with Nana, I pick up my phone and stare at the screen. The moving and cleaning is done, the kids have everything they need for school on Monday, and my weekend is free.

I need to woman up and do this.

So, I find Mac's number and with a trembling hand, hit the call button.

His deep voice makes butterflies explode in my stomach. "Hello, gorgeous."

"Hi, Mac."

"I've been wondering when you'd call."

"Doesn't seem like *your* phone is broken." I smile as I talk, my eyes on the gorgeous backyard of Candice's—no, *my*—home. I could live here. I could be happy here.

"Wanted you to be sure you wanted to see me."

"Well, I'm sure." When did I get so bold? I glance over my shoulder, listening for any little footsteps; hearing nothing, I turn back to the window. Movement near my feet makes me look down to see Mr. Fuzzles circling through my legs before jumping up onto my foot. "I think Mr. Fuzzles can hear your voice. He just came by to say hello, and he usually gives me a wide berth."

Mac chuckles, and the sound of it makes everything inside me clench. Why did I wait a week to call him, again? I want to feel like this all the time.

Gathering my courage, I take a deep breath. "Look, I was wondering if you wanted to meet up tomorrow?"

Mac groans. "I'm working tomorrow. Have a lot of prep to do before Monday"—what happens Monday, I wonder?—"and

the Four Cups pottery order is way bigger than I expected. I told them I'd have samples for them tomorrow, and—”

“Oh, that’s fine.” Heat rushes to my cheeks. I clear my throat. “It’s cool. Whenever you’re free. Or not. Whatever.”

I should have known he’d blow me off. Yes, we’ve been texting, but would a man like him really want to get involved with a single mom? He probably saw the kids’ stuff, saw my mom, and decided it was just too much work to hang out with me. I shouldn’t have called. How embarrassing. How utterly, completely embarrassing.

I’m never dating again.

“Trina.” Mac says my name in a low, rumbling voice, and I have to grip the wall to stop myself collapsing.

“Mm-hmm?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

I close my eyes at the word, heart still thundering.

Mac hums, then keeps talking. “I’ll get my work done and I’ll pick you up after dinner. That work for you?”

“Um...”

“It doesn’t work for you?”

“It’s just that the kids start school on Monday, so the evening will probably be busy.” I bite my lip and squeeze my eyes shut. Why didn’t I just call him yesterday? Or earlier today?

“How about right now?”

My eyes snap open. “What?”

“Are you busy right now?”

“Uh...no?”

I can hear the smile in his voice when he speaks. “I’ll be at your place in half an hour. Okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper, and when we hang up, I look down at my yoga pants and the shirt I reserve for cleaning, then hop into panic-fueled action. Turns out when you only have a few minutes to get ready for a date, it only takes a few minutes to get ready for a date.

When my mother sees me emerge from my room in jeans, a black sheer blouse over a black lacy cami, and the quickest makeup I could muster, she arches a brow. “I’m guessing you’re not having a glass of wine with me tonight?”

“No. You don’t mind watching the kids for a few hours?”

“Honey, they’re in bed, and I live here. Of course I don’t mind. I’m guessing this”—she motions to my outfit—“is related to a certain motorcycle man?”

The sound of a Harley approaching answers the question for me.

Mom grins. “Have fun, Trina.”

“I will,” I tell her as I plant a kiss on her cheek, and I already know it’s the truth.

*Mac*

**T**here's nothing better than feeling a beautiful woman's arms around my waist while I ride through hilly, wooded landscapes on a warm summer evening. Trina's thighs press against mine as we bank around a corner, her chest plastered to my back.

We ride for forty minutes, taking the long way back to my place, a wooded property I bought over a decade ago. I park outside my pottery studio and Trina dismounts, giving me a broad smile as she removes her helmet.

"I don't think I'll ever get over how much fun that is." She combs her fingers through her hair and shakes it out as I get off and put our helmets away.

"You've got the bug." I grin as I intertwine my fingers with hers to lead her to the studio. I don't know what it is about this woman, but I have to be touching her whenever I'm nearby. It's like there's a magnetic pull between us, and I can't resist holding her hand, touching her back, curling my arm around her shoulders. I just want to be close.

This growing need to be near her should scare me. Under normal circumstances, it would. But with Trina, it feels too easy to be around her to question it.

Rolling open the big, corrugated iron door, I smile at Trina's sharp intake of breath.

"Mac," she breathes as she steps into the space.

I flick on the warm yellow lights and steal a glance at her. It's the first time I've had anyone in here, apart from my

brother and my father. Definitely the first time a woman has stepped inside the space. My studio is usually my sanctuary. It's where I come to be alone, to create. But when Trina called me earlier and asked to see me, I knew I wanted to show it to her.

She walks up to the wall of shelving, where pottery projects are displayed from floor to ceiling. She touches a glazed plate that has a seam of gold paint running through the center before standing in front of a tall, fluted vase, shaking her head. "You're really talented, Mac."

Heat rises over my cheeks. I rub the back of my neck and turn away, reaching for one of the bags of clay I bought earlier today. "You want to make something with me?"

My voice comes out gruff, and in the few silent moments that follow, I realize I really, *really* want Trina to say yes. I want her to sit with me and throw a bowl or a pot or whatever we decide to make. I want her to sit here and soak in the magic of this space, the meditative qualities of the pottery wheel. I want her close to me.

When I lift my gaze to her, a bag of clay hanging from my hand, I see her face split into a wide smile.

She nods. "Yeah. But only if you're ready for my mediocrity."

My brows twitch into a frown at her words. Mediocre? Trina is the furthest thing from mediocre. Sure, she kind of sucks at pool, and she's a beginner at throwing pottery, but one look at the woman and you'd know *mediocre* is not a word that describes her in any way.

Jerking my chin to the wheel, I cut a piece of clay, prep it, and tell her to pull up a stool. Then I realize she's dressed for a nice dinner out, with her designer-looking jeans and lacy black top. "Hold on." I put the ball of clay down and grab a pair of coveralls.

Trina grins. "And he cares about my clothes too. I'm liking you more every minute I spend with you, Mac." She says it in



a joking way, but I can't help the warmth snaking through my chest at her words.

“The feeling is mutual.”

And it's the truth. All my worries about getting involved, about committing to someone...they just disappear whenever Trina's around.

She blushes, then gets to work putting the coveralls on over her clothes. When her arms are in, I can't resist stepping closer to her and zipping her up. Her eyes meet mine as my hands linger at the top of the zipper, that lush lower lip caught between her teeth.

Clearing my throat, I nod to the stool. “Sit down.”

“You sure like ordering me around, don't you?” An arch of her eyebrow makes me want to kiss the sass right out of her. But she still does what I say.

“Woman, you have no idea.” My voice is full of gravel, and Trina's cheeks blush pink.

“I should smack you for calling me woman.” She sticks her tongue out at me and laughs, sitting in front of the pottery wheel with her hands on her lap. “Okay. Now what do we do?”

I grab another seat and place it behind hers, pressing my thighs against her hips and reaching my arms to rest on her legs. It's a reversal of how we ride the bike, and I love the way Trina leans back into me and fits her head into the crook of my neck. She, too, can't stop leaning into me. Wanting more contact.

It's almost enough to make me forget about the clay and rip those coveralls right off her body. But Trina looks at me expectantly and dips her hand into the bucket of water beside us.

With a grin, I follow her lead, sliding my hands over hers as I turn on the wheel and start centering the clay. This is something I've always done by myself. I don't teach many classes, and I've never invited anyone to work in my studio. Pottery-making is something I do alone in the woods with

nothing but my thoughts and maybe a stereo blaring my favorite songs. I can sit here for hours, and on a warm night like tonight I love keeping the studio doors open while yellow light spills out into the night.

This is new for me. Having a beautiful, magnetic woman wrapped up in my arms, feeling every little moment of delight as she feels clay moving under her touch. Knowing she's experiencing this for only the second time, and I get to experience it with her.

It's turning me on.

The way she leans into me, then gets caught up in what we're doing and moves forward, eyes on the spinning wheel, on our hands, on the water and clay running over our fingers. For a few long minutes, we don't speak. We center the clay together, the stubble on my jaw rasping against her cheek as I lean over her shoulder, my body wrapped up around hers.

I wonder if she can feel how hard I am. I wonder if she knows every time I catch my breath. I wonder if this moment feels as intimate and spellbinding to her as it does to me.

When I curve my fingers over hers and start opening the clay, Trina's body relaxes into mine. Her hands turn pliable in mine and we work together, our bodies so close we move as one. We don't speak. There's only the noise of cicadas outside and the pottery wheel whirring inside, our quiet breaths, the rustle of the bucket of water any time one of us dips our fingers into it.

"What are we making?" Trina finally asks as I guide her to pull up the sides. "It's smaller than what we made in class."

"A cup," is my reply. My breath ruffles a strand of hair near her temple, and I feel her smile against me.

"Do I get to keep it?"

"Only if you come back to glaze and fire it."

She laughs. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"Is it working?"

Trina's smile widens as she turns to look at me, her lips just a few inches from mine. Eyes twinkling, she gives me the barest of nods. "Yeah," she says. "It is."

And in that moment, with her body relaxed against me, our hands messy with water and clay and her lips so close to mine, I can't resist any longer. My hand finds the crook of her waist, the thick material of the coveralls crinkling under my touch. I pull her close and crush my lips to hers.

Trina lets out the sexiest, sweetest little whimper as her lips part and her tongue searches for mine. Gripping her waist, I pull her close and cup my other hand to her jaw, my thumb sweeping over her cheek to keep her close.

I'll never get sick of this. Every time we kiss, it sets my body alight. I'm hard as steel right now, with her ass pressed against my crotch and her upper body twisted in mine. Her clay-covered hands find my shoulders. They curl around my neck, cool and slick from the pottery that now sits forgotten on the wheel.

She tastes sweet, perfect. When her fingers curl into the hair at the nape of my neck, I let out a low groan.

"You're going to be the death of me, Trina," I say against her lips before nipping at them and moving to her jaw, her neck. There's a grey smudge of clay over her cheek where my thumb swept across it, and her normally perfect hair is already streaked with it.

It makes my blood heat to see her like this. Messy. Undone. Eyes glazed and hungry, lips swollen with my kiss.

I pull back an inch to meet her gaze, studying her expression. "You want me to stop?" I ask as my control frays. I brush my lips over her jaw, nuzzling her ear as I inhale her scent.

Her brows tug together, confusion flitting over her face. "What?"

My fingers dig into her waist as she clings to my neck, turning in my arms in a way that her perfect, pert ass rubs up against my hardness. I groan, closing my eyes. "You're driving

me crazy, Trina. I want you so bad I can barely think. If you want me to stop, you have to tell me.”

That sinful lip gets sucked in between her teeth. Her fingers burrow into my hair, and then she says the words that undo me completely. “The last thing I want you to do is stop, Mac. Especially not now.”

*Trina*

**T**his isn't like me. I don't go on motorcycle rides with men I've known only a couple of weeks. I don't let them take me to their house in the woods, then make out with them with clay-covered hands. I'm a mother. I'm responsible.

But right now, I feel the furthest thing from responsible. Recklessness heats my blood, drives me to the brink of madness.

When I say those words to Mac, the tension finally snaps like a dry twig. He shifts his hold on me to pick me up, spinning me around as he stands and lifting me so I wrap my legs around his hips. One of his hands slides down to cup my ass while the other grips my hair, pulling me in for a hard kiss.

He walks me to a workbench and sets me down, never once breaking our kiss.

I love the way his body curls over mine. How he tugs me closer to the edge of the workbench and notches himself between my spread legs. I love the way his hands tangle into my hair, how his stubble abrades my skin, how his muscular arms wrap around me so tight it feels like every part of him is touching every part of me.

I've never been manhandled like this. I've never had someone take control of a kiss like this, showing me just how much he wants me.

When we finally break the kiss, both of us panting hard, I laugh at the streaks of clay across his shoulders, his face, his hair. "Messy," I say between breaths.

“Perfect,” is his response as his lips brush over mine once again.

I need more of this. I need to feel the muscles of his back clenching under my palms. I need to breathe in the scent of his skin and commit it to memory.

Clawing at his shirt, I tug it up and over his head before leaning back and letting my hands drift down his body.

He. Is. Magnificent.

Hard slabs of muscle cover every inch of his body. My fingers run through the rough hair sprinkled over his chest as Mac watches me, his hands gripped on my thighs. When I run my fingers over the flat discs of his nipples, I catch the small inhale of breath he makes. I smile when he does it again when I run my nail over the same spot, glancing up at him through my lashes.

Letting my hands drift lower, I run my fingers through the grooves of every abdominal muscle, sucking in a hard breath when I reach that deep V that disappears down into his low-hanging jeans. His body is thick, solid. So utterly manly. There’s an unmistakable bulge in his pants and I bite my lip, hesitating for a brief moment before running my hand lower, over the zipper of his jeans to feel the steel-hard shaft beneath it.

Side note: my mother was right. It’s definitely not a micropenis.

“Trina,” Mac rasps, his fingers tightening on my thighs.

“You have a very nice body,” I tell him, one hand still cupped over his crotch. He throbs against me, sending a wave of heat crashing through my blood. I feel almost giddy. One touch and a few words have the power to make him throb like that. He’s hard as rock—for me.

So, when Mac reaches for the zipper of my coveralls and tugs them down, it feels almost like an inevitability. Yes, I want to undress with him. I want him to touch and explore my body like I crave to explore his. I want to feel the silk-covered steel of his shaft wrapped in my fingers. I want to taste him on

my tongue. I want him inside me. Every dirty fantasy I've ever had comes roaring to life inside me as the zipper of my coveralls parts and I pull my arms out of the thick blue material.

Once the overalls are hanging on my hips, Mac stops. "Don't move," he says, his hands squeezing my hips as I sit on the counter. He moves to the sink, washes his hands, then comes back with a damp rag, which he uses to clean my hands in slow, methodical sweeps. "All that effort to keep your clothes clean," he explains. "Wouldn't want to ruin them now."

"You're perfect," I blurt, and I'm not even sure I'm joking anymore.

Mac chuckles, fitting himself between my legs again, and with a quick kiss, moves those clean hands to my top. His deft fingers make quick work of the buttons on my sheer black blouse. When it's fully open, he surprises me by tugging at my camisole with a rough, hard movement, exposing my chest. I gasp. My breasts are pushed up by the bunched fabric, peaked nipples sensitive in the cool air. When his rough thumb brushes over my breast, an echo of the movement I made over his chest, a shiver courses through me. I arch my back into his touch, leaning my palms on the workbench as my thighs tighten around his hips.

I'm sure Mac can feel the heat between my legs, even through the multitude of layers that separate us. And when he lowers his lips to my breast, I close my eyes and tangle my fingers in his hair, wild with need for him. I'm rocking my hips against him, arching my back to crush my breast into his mouth, clawing at him. I'd be embarrassed if I wasn't so damn turned on.

And when he growls low at the back of his throat, palming my neglected breast as his teeth run over my other nipple, I let out an answering moan.

That's when Mac moves.

He pulls me off the workbench with a hard tug, catching me against his body. His chest hair is deliciously abrasive

against my sensitized skin, but I don't have time to enjoy it before he's spinning me around so my back is to his front.

"Hands on the counter." His voice is harsh, commanding, and it sends fire rushing through my core.

I do as he says, pushing my ass into him as my fingers dig into the raw wood of the workbench.

And that's when I learn what Mac's hands can really do.

He unhooks the button of my jeans with a flick of his fingers, sliding his hand inside a moment later. With his fingers over my panties, he finds my bud and starts circling it with steady, confident movements.

A moan slips through my lips as the pleasure ratchets higher inside me. The lacy material of my panties—yes, I changed into my good undies for this—feels beautifully rough against that little bundle of nerves.

"Don't move, Trina," Mac says in my ear, banding his other arm across my chest so he can tease my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "Keep your hands where they are."

"I will," I pant, my eyes glued to the space where his hand disappears beneath my clothing. As if he can sense my frenzy, his movements become firmer, faster. He slides his fingers down the gusset of my panties and grunts when he feels the dampness that has already soaked through. The heel of his palm grinds against me, and I can't resist the movement of my hips as I ache for more.

So, he gives it to me.

Tugging my panties aside, Mac slides those sinful fingers through the wetness between my legs. "You're so sweet and wet for me," he growls in my ear, nipping at my earlobe as his fingers slide along the slickness of my seam.

I don't even have the capacity to answer beyond a breathy moan. My hips are grinding into him, his hardness an ache against my ass. It somehow feels dirtier to be half-clothed, leaning against his workbench like this. I'm so turned on I can hardly think, let alone move. All I can do is keep my hands



where he wants them and my legs spread as he works magic between my legs.

“Mac,” I pant. Or maybe I’m begging.

In response, he takes one finger and slides it inside. I watch the back of his hand moving and his forearm flexing as he works another finger inside me until I finally have to close my eyes.

Here’s a thing about me: I’ve never come from vaginal penetration alone. I sometimes didn’t even enjoy it, really, unless I was incredibly turned on. In the past, I always needed direct clitoral stimulation, or I just resigned myself to not orgasming.

But I’m enjoying this. Maybe it’s Mac’s palm against my clit, sometimes grinding it hard while his fingers plunge inside me, sometimes barely brushing it, or his whole body curved around mine as his fingers thrust inside me. Maybe it’s the soft grunts he makes near my ear, or the feel of his teeth brushing against my shoulder.

Whatever it is, an orgasm starts budding inside me. I drop my chin to my chest, eyes squeezed shut, as pleasure knots deep in my core, slowly building with every movement of Mac’s hand between my legs. I’m trembling, bucking, jerking against him as his name slips from my lips in keening, breathy pants.

“More.” I close my eyes. “Please, Mac. I want more.”

His arm tightens across my chest as his fingers slip out of me, then right back in with an added third. I gasp, widening my stance as my hips grind against his hand. I’m going to come. I’m going to come. I’m going to come I’m going to come I’m going to come—

Then he stops.

I whimper as Mac pulls his hand from my pants, opening my eyes and turning to see him slip his fingers into his mouth. He sucks them clean, letting out a low groan as they slide free.

“Fuck,” he says, one hand still wrapped around my chest. “You taste good, Trina.”

I don't know what to say. There's something so intensely erotic about the orgasm he just denied combined with the look of pure lust on his face as he tastes my arousal. I can't think of anything except the emptiness between my legs.

"I want you." The words slip through my lips without thought as I spin in his arms, and I watch Mac's gaze darken. A sinful smile tugs at his lips right before he crushes them to mine in a hard kiss.

"Good," he says when we break apart for a breath. His hands feel rough when they grip my waist, and he spins me around to face the workbench again. "Hands on the counter."

This time, when his fingers slip down my pants, he doesn't hesitate to slide them under my panties. He reaches down to where I'm wettest, then brings his fingers back up to my bud. My fingers dig into the bench as I moan, the pleasure of his touch almost too much to bear.

When his other hand finds my breast again, pinching and tugging and teasing my nipple, I pray he doesn't stop this time. Pleasure builds and builds inside me, a knot of hot pressure in the pit of my stomach. His hand works magic over my clit until I don't even know what he's doing, I just know it feels incredible. Then his other hand yanks my pants down lower, halfway off my hips before moving between my legs. With one hand on my clit, he uses the other to thrust inside me, his whole body curved over mine.

And I explode.

I come with a moan, body arching into his as he groans in contentment, his hands delivering pleasure to my body like I've never felt before. It's like he knows exactly where to touch me. He knows how hard I like it. He knows not to stop as I writhe in his arms, his rough voice telling me to keep my hands where they are even as they drift closer to the edge of the counter.

He whispers dirty words in my ear, calls me a good girl, tells me to keep grinding on his hands. He tells me to use his fingers as much as I need to, tells me how good and perfect and sweet I feel. His words send another wave of heat through

my thighs and stomach, and I do just as he says. I grind against his palm, ride his fingers, use his hands to take what I need until I'm mad with the feel of it.

And when I feel my orgasm fading, Mac growls in satisfaction. It feels so good I can hardly breathe.

"That's my girl," he rasps, his chin over my shoulder as he, too, watches his hand moving inside my pants.

It's only when I soften and squeeze my thighs that he pulls his fingers out of me, and the resulting emptiness makes me ache for something bigger.

Yes, I want him. I don't know if I'll ever get enough of him.

And maybe it's that feeling of being drunk on pleasure that makes me spin in his arms, that makes me kiss him once, then reach for his belt. Maybe it's my newfound freedom, this recklessness pulsing through my veins.

Mac wraps me in his arms and kisses me deep, sweeping his tongue into my mouth as a shudder wracks his body. "You're so fucking beautiful, Trina. I could watch you come a hundred times and never get sick of it."

I've never had a man be so selfless with pleasure. Mac hasn't even touched himself. He hasn't asked me to touch him. He's been hard since we sat down at the pottery wheel, but all he's wanted to do is touch *me*.

It makes me want to return the favor. I want him to feel as good as I do. I want to see *his* face when he comes. I want *him* to be wild with pleasure, to feel reckless and out of control with lust.

And when I lower myself to my knees, Mac's breaths grow shorter. "Trina, you don't have to—"

"I want to." And it's the truth. I open his belt and unbutton his fly, tugging the zipper down with trembling hands.

He helps me push his pants and underwear down to mid-thigh, then grips his shaft in a hand as it bounces free.

Turns out yes, it's beautiful. And yes, it's big.

It's a funny twist of fate that my ex-husband does, in fact, pop into my head for a brief moment as I reach to finally wrap my fingers around Mac's hardness. I realize that I never once wanted to take Kevin in my mouth. I did it, but I didn't particularly enjoy it. He made me feel like I owed it to him. Like it was his right.

This is different. Mac brushes his hand over my cheek as he releases a breath. I glance up at him, and the look in his eyes makes me feel like the sexiest woman in the world. His eyes are at half-mast, dark with pleasure as he watches me bring my mouth to his cock.

"Hands on the counter," I tell him with a grin, my lips brushing against his tip.

"Trina." He lets out a little huff, but does as I say. Both hands rest on the workbench on either side of my head, then I wrap my lips around his cock and suck.

By the time I've run my hands over his shaft a few times and taken him as deep into my mouth as I can manage, I realize I'm wet again. I glance up at him and see him watching me, the look on his face telling me he's nearly undone. The muscles of his arms are hard and bulging as he grips the edge of the counter, his hips moving with slow, steady thrusts as I take him in my mouth.

I've never felt so in control. So sexy. I've never been so turned on by doing something like this, but I can't help the way my hips rock in time to his.

"Touch yourself," Mac growls, as if he can tell how wild this is making me. As if he doesn't want me to spend one minute without feeling good.

I only hesitate for a second. With one hand wrapped around his shaft as my tongue laps up the salty taste beading at his tip, I slide my other hand between my legs. And that's when the control Mac had been keeping on himself snaps. He thrusts his hips as he moves a hand to the back of my head, hard enough to make my eyes water but not hard enough to hurt. His hand tightens in my hair as I touch myself, drunk on

the taste of him, the knowledge that he's watching me pleasure myself while I pleasure him.

When he tells me he's about to come, he tries to pull away but I just suck him deeper. He pants my name in a way that makes me moan around the shaft in my mouth. His hands tighten at the back of my head, then his hips still as he throbs against my tongue.

I come as he does, my hand moving almost frantically between my legs as he spurts onto my tongue, down my throat, the salty, musky taste of him driving me wild.

Never in my life have I enjoyed doing this. Never have I ever been turned on by swallowing a man's pleasure. Never in my life have I brought myself to orgasm while I was on my knees like this.

But it feels right with Mac. Right and so, so dirty. I cry out, the sound muffled by him, my body bucking until finally I pull away, releasing him from my mouth with a soft pop.

Mac picks me up with one swift movement, wrapping me up in his arms and burying his face in the crook of my neck. I cling onto his hard biceps, breathing hard, the remnants of my orgasm still sending spears of heat through my thighs and stomach.

He says my name again, his arms trembling as he wraps them around my limp body. Mac kisses me then, and it feels nothing like our other kisses. It's not feral and needy. It's tender, but still hard and hot and wet. It's like he's trying to tell me how much he loved what we just did. Like he can't get enough of the taste of me.

When we finally fall apart, I lean against that famous workbench and stuff my breasts back into my bra. The coveralls are still hanging off my hips and my pants are undone. My sheer blouse is half-off, revealing one shoulder. Mac has clay all over his shoulders and hair. I'm sure I do too.

I watch him lift his boxer-briefs back up, followed by his pants. He leaves them undone as he lets out a long breath and

lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Well,” Mac says with a twitch of his lips.

“Well,” I reply.

“That was fun.”

I laugh. “Yeah. That’s one word for it.” I button my jeans and straighten my blouse as my eyes drift to the pottery wheel. The sad, half-finished cup sits as a misshapen lump of clay in the center of the wheel. It’s already started drying out. I bite my lip. “We might have ruined that cup.”

Mac follows my gaze. His smile lights up his eyes as he shrugs his bare shoulder, reaching toward me to grab my hand and tug me close. His arms circle around my waist, hands cupping my ass as he nuzzles my nose with his. “I have to be honest with you, Trina, I don’t give a shit about the cup right now.”

“You should.”

He pulls away, arching a brow as his lips twitch. “That so?”

“Mm-hm,” I answer, my fingers running over his jaw. “How else are you going to bribe me to come back here?”

Mac laughs and tugs me even closer, his lips brushing mine so softly they barely touch. “I can think of a few ideas.”

Heat knots deep in my stomach, and I smile against his lips before wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him once more.

The truth is, it won’t take much to convince me to come back here. Won’t take much at all.

*Trina*

**A**fter Mac and I wandered over to his house—very neat, if sparsely decorated—and had a late-evening snack of crackers, cheese, and cold cuts, Mac drove me back home. Our goodbye kiss was lingering and sweet, and I’m still thinking about it now as I lean against my front door.

I can’t believe I just did that.

After a week of moving, keeping the kids busy, getting therapy organized, and overall just running around cleaning and unpacking, I wasn’t expecting to have a Saturday night like tonight. My lips curl almost unfamiliarly as I stand in my darkened house, and I realize I’m content. Happy, even.

That happy feeling continues into Sunday, when the kids, my mother, and I make our way to the Four Cups Café for a midmorning coffee and treat. As soon as we enter, the kids make a beeline for the counter, and my eyes dart to a huddle around a box at one of the tables.

“Ooh, what have we got here?” Mom sweeps past me to investigate.

Dorothy looks over her shoulder and waves her forward. “Look at this!” She brandishes a beautiful, handmade espresso cup, holding it by its teeny-tiny, delicate handle. My mother peers over her shoulder and grabs a saucer. It’s a soft peach color, with seams of foiled gold running across it like the veins of a marble slab.

I know that saucer.

My heart thumps. Damn it! My heart goes wild over the sight of Mac's *pottery*. What the hell is wrong with me?

Simone and Candice are leaning over the box, chattering excitedly. "Gorgeous," I hear Simone say as she unwraps one of the new mugs.

I follow the kids and get them set up at a table in the corner with a muffin and small hot chocolates. Katie brought her coloring book, and Toby is reading a book. They'll keep themselves busy for a few minutes, at least. I walk back to the table to admire Mac's artful pottery.

"What's all this?" Agnes's voice says from behind my shoulder. She's got her hands on her hips in the doorway, looking down her nose at everyone from her four-foot-nine height.

Dorothy rolls her eyes. "Go back to your cesspit, Agnes."

"That cesspit keeps you well stocked with romance novels," Agnes returns. "I take order after order from you week after week, but do I judge the smut you read?"

It's supposed to be a rhetorical question, but Dorothy snorts. "Sure sounds like it."

Agnes runs the bookstore, and judging by the thousands of books housed in the library upstairs, I can imagine she's built her business on the women of this town. Agnes toddles past me and takes one of the larger cups in her hands. She inspects it with a raised brow, turning it over a few times before glancing my way. "Your man sure does make a nice cup."

I almost choke. "My man?"

Agnes rolls her eyes. "Will someone put Trina out of her misery? It's fine. You can sleep with Mac. No one will judge you. In fact, we'll all be happy that you're not both moping around town like lovesick teens."

"You know, Agnes, that's the first reasonable thing I've heard you say in thirty-five years." Dorothy plucks another cup out of the box to admire it, totally ignoring the death glare Agnes cuts her way.



Candice looks like she's trying not to laugh. Simone isn't even trying—she just cackles into the box. I'm mostly trying not to have my whole head burst into flames from blushing so hard.

“Have you been moping?” a deep voice says near my shoulder.

I scream.

Mac chuckles, his eyes sparkling when I turn to see him standing there. Stillness settles over the ladies at the table, the sound of crinkling paper and clinking pottery going suddenly quiet. My skin feels too tight. I have visions of Mac's hands doing delicious things to me, and now is not the right time to be having those kinds of visions.

I need to say something. Mac is *right here*, and he just asked me a question. Stop looking at his lips. Oh, God, he just licked them. Did I just have a mini orgasm? *Stop looking at his mouth.* “No! I haven't been moping. I've been busy.” I've been real busy in the twelve hours since he had his hands down my pants. Since I had my mouth—

“Oh, please.” Agnes snorts.

Dorothy, in an act that defies the blood feud the two women have maintained for many decades, lets out a loud belly laugh. “She's got you there, honey,” she tells me.

My cheeks are burning. I close my eyes for a beat, try to regain control over my rioting body, and finally meet Mac's gaze again. “You...made...pottery?” I thrust my thumb toward the box.

*Smooth.*

Fiona walks over from behind the counter. “Remember, I mentioned it after our pottery masterclass? I ordered all new crockery for the café from Mac.” She shakes Mac's hand, and even though I know she's about to be married a couple of months from now, a spear of jealousy still pierces my gut.

There's something wrong with me. This is out of control.

Mac isn't in his pottery-making garb. He's all motorcycle badass now, in black jeans and boots with a worn tee hugging every strong plane of his chest.

When did my mouth get so dry?

I clear my throat. "Oh, you ordered all new mugs for the café. Of course." I nod at Fiona. "I remember now. It's great that you guys promote local artisans so much." Is this how small talk works? Am I doing it right? Does my smile look weird? What do I do with my hands? When did it get so hot in here?

"I was actually hoping I could grab someone to help me with the rest of the first order. If you're happy with the samples, that is." Mac glances at Fiona, who nods.

"Couldn't be happier. It's got the stamp of approval from the ladies who matter most, doesn't it?" Fiona looks at the table behind her.

Dorothy beams. "Fantastic work, Mr. Blair. And oh, I wish I could help you with bringing the pottery over to the café, but look at the time!" She glances at her bare wrist. "I need to go see Margaret. We're meeting Hamish at the Grove. Agnes?"

"Well, what do you know? I'm parched. I need a drink. I'll come with you."

"I've got work to do," Simone says with an exaggerated sigh. "I'm late for a deadline."

"Allie's waiting for me at home," Candice throws in.

"I've got to watch the chicklets," my mother calls out, nodding to Katie and Toby.

Glancing at Fiona, I realize what's happening. They're setting me up.

"I have to stay here, I'm afraid," Fiona says with a mournful look. "Someone needs to work the till." She starts walking away and says over her shoulder, "Trina, would you mind helping Mac out?"

*Yes, I would mind.* I stare at the ladies, feeling utterly betrayed.

Do they not realize how much this man ties my stomach in knots by his mere presence?

Evidently not, because with barely a word of goodbye, Dorothy and Agnes are out the door and heading toward the hotel. Fiona is walking back to the counter, and Simone and Candice are avoiding my death stares by carrying the box of pottery back toward the kitchen. My mother winks at me, then walks over to the kids' table and gives Katie a kiss on the top of her head. She says something to the kids, who call out goodbyes without looking up.

Looks like they'll survive without me.

Heart thumping, I turn to Mac. "I guess that leaves you and me."

"Lucky me."

I blush, but secretly, I'm delighted. I gesture to the door. "Lead the way."

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I COULD HAVE SAID NO. I *should* have said no.

Right?

That fact becomes apparent to me the minute Mac rolls the big, corrugated iron door leading to his studio. My eyes land on the workbench, that spot where I leaned my body and let Mac give me one of the best orgasms of my life.

Mac must see where I'm looking, because he clears his throat. "Are you okay being here?"

*Okay?* Am I okay? I'm basically having an orgasm by proxy just by being here, but yeah, I'm okay.

I try for a casual smile and hope it doesn't look like a grimace. "I'm good, Mac."

A bit of tension seeps out of his body at my words, and he rewards me with the sexiest grin I've ever laid eyes on. "All

right, then.” His eyes linger on my lips, then he clears his throat. “Better get to it.”

We walk over to a shelf full of mugs, espresso cups, saucers, plates, and all types of pottery in the same peach-and-gold style. There’s a handwritten list pinned to the wall, with half the items ticked off. Mac moves to stand beside me, the heat of his body an inferno at my side. “I’ve been rushing to get the first half of their order done before the start of the school year,” he tells me, and I frown at his words. Why does he care about the start of the school year? It’s the second or third time he’s mentioned it. “It’s one of the biggest orders I’ve ever gotten, and I know I won’t have much time to work in the next few months. Glad the ladies liked the samples.”

“They’re beautiful,” I answer. Before I can ask about the school year comment, Mac grabs a box from the corner of the room and brings it over, showing me how to wrap up the pottery in paper to keep it safe for the trip over.

“If we do the flat stuff first, we’ll be able to pack the box a bit more tightly,” he says, grabbing a stack of paper and placing it on one of the shelves. I watch him wrap a plate up with sharp, efficient movements, and start doing the same.

We work in silence for a few minutes, stacking plates in the box and packing everything tight. When the box is nearly full, Mac hauls it up and moves it closer to the door before grabbing another box from the corner. In the meantime, I pick up a large vase from another shelf, turning it over in my hands. It has a huge, round belly and a delicate opening. It’s glazed in rich, royal blue with flecks of white across it, like a starry night sky.

It’s gorgeous.

I’m not sure how it happens, but I’m so busy admiring Mac’s work that I don’t hear him come up behind me with a new box. I don’t see him set the box down next to me. All I know is I’m holding a piece of art, and it’s so completely incredible that Mac made this with his bare hands.

I can see a groove where Mac’s fingers—or maybe some sort of tool—was held against the clay as it spun. I can *feel* the

imprint of his hands on the piece, and there's some kind of magic in that.

Kevin was talented. I appreciated his paintings, and I know he deserved the praise he got. But there's something about holding this vase in my hands, touching the clay that Mac coaxed into this impossible, exaggerated shape, that makes my heart squeeze so tight. Maybe it's just how easy Mac's smiles are, and how much he seems to enjoy the fact that I've tried to do pottery with him. He wants me to enjoy it too. He's not gatekeeping his art from me.

The difference between the two of them is stark. Being in Kevin's studio always made me feel like I didn't belong. Like I wasn't welcome. Being here feels like there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

Then I feel a warm hand on the small of my back, and I'm jolted back to reality. I jump, and that beautiful, fat-bellied vase with the night sky painted on it slips from my grasp. I don't even have time to yell as it falls to the ground and smashes on the concrete floor. Shards and splinters and broken pieces of vase scatter halfway across the studio.

Gasping, I drop to my knees and scramble to pick it up, as if I'll be able to put it back together. As if I didn't just destroy something of Mac's that was beautiful and perfect. As if my clumsiness didn't just shatter something bigger than the vase, some intangible feeling I wasn't able to figure out.

Tears fill my eyes when I grab a large shard of pottery, my breath staying stuck in my throat at the mess I just made. "I'm sorry," I hear myself saying. "I'm so sorry, Mac. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to. It slipped, I—"

A shaky breath slips through my lips as I try my best to hold back the tears. Maybe this is why Kevin didn't want me anywhere near his precious canvases.

"Hey." A soft, deep word. "Come on." Mac takes the shard from my hand and drops it to the floor with a careless flick of his wrist before taking my hand in his. He pulls me up and wraps me in his arms.

I melt into the strength and warmth and safety of him, trembling as I apologize to his shirt. “It was so beautiful, and I destroyed it,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry.”

Mac lets out a slow, deep chuckle. “It’s fine, Trina. Really. If you had any idea how many things I’ve broken, you wouldn’t be apologizing. It’s one of the realities of being a potter. Lots of things break. Lots of things come off the wheel or out of the kiln less than perfect. It’s just the way it is.”

I lean my head back to look at his face, because I want to know if he’s telling the truth. All I see in his eyes is warmth. No anger. No sadness. Nothing that would indicate he’s upset with me in any way.

When I let out a breath, Mac’s arms tighten around me. Then, he takes one of those beautiful, talented hands and wipes the tears from my face with his thumb. “Don’t cry.”

My fingers are curled into his shirt as if I’m clinging to him for dear life. His hand is warm, comforting, and I let out a shallow sigh. “I’m sorry, Mac. That was so clumsy of me.”

“Stop apologizing. I don’t care about the vase. It was lopsided and the neck was too thin for the vase to be useful for anything but collecting dust.” His eyes shift back to me and he gives me a casual shrug. “It was a practice piece for an exhibit Dorothy and Margaret coerced me into doing in January, so no one was going to see that vase anyway.” He smiles. “And even if it had been a paid piece, I still wouldn’t give a shit.”

He’s not looking at me like I’m silly, or frivolous, or some air-headed woman. He’s not judging my every move like my ex-husband used to do.

Mac is looking at me like no one else exists. His gaze darkens as it drops to my lips.

God, I love that look. I’m back here after less than twenty-four hours, leaving my kids with my mother so I can have some time alone with this insanely sexy man. That’s...wrong, right? I should be more responsible.

But trying to keep hold of those thoughts is like grasping at tendrils of fog. I can’t quite remember why I shouldn’t fall

head over heels for this man. I can't quite remember what it is about dating him that's a bad idea. Who cares if I just got divorced? Who cares if Kevin had a fit when he saw us together? Who cares if he's nothing like the soft, responsible, and supposedly loving man I married? Why can't I enjoy my life too?

I hold his gaze for a beat, two, and neither of us makes a move. That's when I realize I'm still wrapped up in his arms—and I never want to leave.

As if he realized it at the same moment, the arm that's banded across my back grows tighter. Mac's eyes lower, and the hand on my cheek moves to my jaw, sliding back to tangle into my hair.

I let out a little whimper, knowing I shouldn't want this as badly as I do but desperate for it anyway. I'm starved for his particular brand of affection. Hungry for it. For him.

Mac lowers his head and slants his mouth against mine. His lips brush my own in a tender movement. It's barely a kiss. More like a question.

And when my lips part and my hands move to his shoulders, he knows the answer.

The kiss that follows is like an unleashing. A dam breaking. It's feral, the way he grips me, holds me tight, parts my lips and explores my mouth with his tongue. It's like he's been dreaming of doing this, just as I have.

We've been apart just over twelve hours, and it feels like I haven't tasted his lips in an age.

Why should I hold back? Why should I take things slow? I can't remember why I haven't jumped into his arms daily from the moment I saw him change my tire. How can I ignore the way he sets my body alight? How can I resist when being in his arms feels like an ending and a beginning all wrapped up in one?

"Trina," he says, nipping at my bottom lip. "I want you."

"I know." My hands curl into his hair, tugging lightly. "I do too."

He groans. “I’ve thought about you every day since you came to the Grove all those weeks ago. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“God, me too,” I sigh, finding his lips again.

He tears himself away, eyes wild as he holds me. “Come to bed with me.”

It’s an invitation, a question, and a command. I know that if I said no, if I pulled away and told him to stop now, he’d listen. I could be the responsible mother. The chaste divorcée. I could focus on me—or whatever it is I’m supposed to be doing with the broken shards of my life.

*But I don’t want that.*

Haven’t I spent long enough denying myself? Haven’t I spent thirteen years with a man who never cared about my pleasure? Haven’t I tried my best to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother, and all I’ve gotten in return is crushing loneliness and a quick divorce?

Don’t I deserve this? Something impulsive, and hot, and just for me?

*Yes, I decide. I deserve it.*

And so, I nod. “I want you, Mac. Right now.”

He lets out a breath, closing his eyes for a moment as he holds me, then he takes my hand and leads me out of the studio, leaving the shattered vase crunching under our footsteps.



*Trina*

There's a distant undercurrent of doing something we shouldn't when Mac wraps his large hand around mine and leads me to his house. I mean, we just left Four Cups to come pick up a few boxes of pottery. Everyone will notice if we don't get back. My kids are waiting with my mother. It's not even noon—not that it matters, but the sunlight makes this all feel more scandalous.

We cross the foyer and the living room, walking with purposeful steps toward a hallway to the left of the kitchen. Mac's bedroom is dominated by a huge king-sized bed. The pillows are stacked high, the bed neatly made. Closing the door with his foot, Mac tugs me close and kisses me once more.

Outside this room, the world falls away. My entire attention is caught by the way Mac's hand sweeps down to grip my bottom, the way he groans when he feels me melt into him. There's no one in the world but the two of us.

Heart's Cove doesn't exist. My ex-husband and the mess of our separation definitely don't exist.

"I can't stop thinking about you," Mac says, voice full of gravel. "Every fucking day."

The way the words are torn from his throat makes my body go pliant. He slides my cardigan off my shoulders and tosses it aside—and it's a testament to how far gone I am that I don't protest his mistreatment of my favorite cashmere sweater.

From there, our clothes are ripped off and discarded. I sweep my hands over his chest, over the rasp of the hair

sprinkled over his pecs, and I can't resist running my lips over his skin. His palm moves up my spine to cup the back of my neck, and I curl my fingers over his shoulders at the feel of it.

*Pop* goes the button of my jeans, and Mac's hand is down my pants again.

Oh, I definitely missed *that*. My lids close as my legs go wobbly; the only thing holding me up is the man in front of me.

Why have we held back from each other? I've never met a man who can make me melt like this. I've never felt as completely cherished in someone's arms as I do now. I should have begged him to take me here after ice cream. I should have known from the moment I dragged a finger across the handlebars of his motorcycle that I wanted him to fuck me.

But maybe it's the anticipation over all these weeks that gives his touch an edge. It makes his greedy fingers find every place that makes me shiver. I claw at his pants, pushing them down to his feet while he does the same.

When we're naked together, still standing next to the bed, Mac pulls me close and ducks his head to the crook of my neck, placing soft, hungry kisses down along the line of my pulse. Then with a swift movement, he picks me up and lays me down sideways across the bed, propping his body down on top of mine.

I love the weight of him. The feel of his skin against mine, his leg notched between my own. I love the way his hand slides from my neck, down my chest and over my breast, all the way down to the curve of my hip.

"You're beautiful," he says, and I feel it. I feel beautiful, perfect, worshipped for the first time in far too long.

And when Mac slides down the length of my body and hooks my legs over his shoulders, there's no hesitation or shyness in me left. His lips touch my center, his tongue starts a slow, languorous exploration, and I know there's no turning back.

It's only when my back is arched and my hand is tugging at his hair that consciousness returns to my mind, a brief, fleeting thought that reminds me I've never come this way, with a man's tongue between my legs. I've enjoyed it, sure, but it's never gotten me all the way—

An orgasm washes over me, bright and intense. I gasp Mac's name and he groans in response, but he doesn't lift his head until my grip on his hair weakens. Then, lids heavy, he looks at my boneless body and moves to his bedside cabinet.

Teeth rip the condom wrapper. Strong hands slide it over his hard cock. Then he's back on top of me, kissing his way over my chest and up to my lips.

“You taste good,” he growls near my ear while his thighs spread mine wider. “Better than I imagined, and I imagined you'd taste like heaven.”

He wondered what I'd taste like. Need splinters through me. I sweep my hands over his shoulders and roll my hips, wanting more. “So do you.”

A groan rumbles through his chest, as if he's remembering what we did in his studio in the dark of night. As if that, too—me on my knees in front of him, him thrusting into my mouth—is another thing he spent a long time dreaming about. Then he's nudging at my entrance, lifting his head to look in my eyes, and giving me a slow, steady thrust home.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to have a man inside me. Or maybe—and this is probably more likely—I'd forgotten that it could feel this good. That it could fill me up and stretch me so beautifully.

And with Mac's eyes searching my face with every inch he pushes in, watching, recording every expression I make, I let go. I roll my hips, using my hands to push him, guide him, show him that I want more.

His elbows move above my shoulders to prop against the bed, big body arched over mine, and he gives it to me. Long, hard thrusts that make me see stars. Skin plastered against mine, lips dipping down to taste my kiss. My second orgasm

rolls through me without mercy, and I only realize I'm crying out when Mac joins me, calling out my name as his hardness throbs inside me.

My orgasm is so intense, it rips the breath from my lungs. I feel him fill the condom and I wish it was filling me, and another shiver of pleasure ripples through me. This could never be wrong. It could never be anything but utterly perfect.

When we stop moving, still connected and intertwined, I let my hand slide down his sweat-dappled back. He lifts himself up to his elbows and looks down at me, eyes unreadable, then lifts himself off me and moves to the bathroom to wash up and dispose of the condom.

For the few minutes he's gone, I lie in bed and try to make sense of the past few weeks—how quickly I've become addicted to his touch—and I wonder if I should pull back. Protect myself from the hurt he could cause me without even realizing it.

I should be taking things slow.

Then Mac reappears, still buck naked with everything on glorious display, and he climbs into bed, turns me ninety degrees so I'm lying the right way on the bed, and tugs the blankets over both of us. One leg is thrown over both of mine and his arm snakes under my head while the other wraps around my waist, totally ensconcing me in Mac.

It's the middle of the day and the sun is bright as it streams through the half-closed blinds, and being in bed with Mac feels so completely luxurious that I can't help but sink into the warmth and strength of him.

"I was just wondering if you'd want me to leave, but I'm guessing that's a no."

His arm and leg tighten. "It's a no."

A smile tugs at my lips.

"How long can you stay?"

"Don't we have a few boxes of pottery to deliver?"

Mac groans, give me another squeeze, then grunts out a  
“Fine,” before letting me go.

The truth, though?

I’d rather stay in his arms.

*Mac*

**W**hy have I been denying myself this? Not just sex, but the feeling of Trina in my arms, in my bed. As I pull on my discarded clothes, I'm finding it hard to remember why, exactly, I haven't given Trina everything I have to give. All the years I spent convinced that I was meant to be alone—what was I thinking? What could be better than this?

Trina shakes out her cardigan and pulls it on, moving in front of my mirror to adjust her clothes and hair. I walk up behind her and slide my hands over her hips, placing a kiss where her neck meets her shoulder. "You look perfect."

"I look like I just had sex," she says, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

I grin. "Isn't that what I just said?" I'd like to see her like this—undone, freshly fucked—every day of my life.

After a few last adjustments and some makeup touch-ups from whatever supplies she keeps in her purse, Trina turns to me and nods. "Ready."

"You sure you don't want round two?" I arch my brows and glance at the rumpled bed.

"You're bad," she chides, a smile tugging the corners of her lips.

I kiss the tip of Trina's nose and lead her back out to the studio. After sweeping up the shards of broken pottery from the ground, Trina and I make short work of packing up the rest

of the order for Four Cups and loading it into the back of my truck. We ride back to town in silence.

When we pull up to the café, Fiona, Simone, Jen, and Candice are all there. I guess their busy schedules cleared up once Trina and I left. I grin at the thought as Fiona walks out to help us with the boxes, throwing a few curious glances at Trina. Once inside, I help the ladies unpack.

“These pieces are gorgeous, Mac,” Candice says, turning one of the new mugs around in her hands. “Good idea, Fiona.” She smiles at the other woman. “They fit Four Cups perfectly.”

“I appreciate your business,” I tell them with a smile. “I should have the second lot to you by the end of October, and the third by the end of the year.”

The truth is, the extra money is welcome. The amount of custom pottery they’ve ordered has been worth well past the five-figure mark, which means I’ll be able to do some work on my bike and maybe buy the new pottery wheel I’ve had my eye on. Not to mention a few things for my classroom over the course of the school year.

So much of my pottery sits on shelves in my studio. It’s nice to know that these pieces will be put to good use. As I help the ladies bring the boxes of pottery to the kitchen to wash, I catch Trina’s gaze lingering on me. A flush sweeps over her cheeks as she gives me a sweet smile.

In that moment, with midday sun gilding Trina’s hair, I think I might forget about my convictions about being alone. *This* is where I’m meant to be. With her.

I understand how my father could move on, how he could be happy. I understand that even after the hell he went through when my mother left, he could look for love again. He could open himself to that kind of hurt. Because isn’t it worth the risk, if someone like Trina is the reward?

When I walk back out to my truck and Trina follows, we stand next to the vehicle, unaware of what’s going on around. That always seems to happen when I’m around her; nothing

else seems to matter as much as memorizing the way she moves, the way the light catches every angle of her face, the way her clothes hug her figure and her eyes search mine.

“So,” she says, flicking her eyes up to mine.

“So,” I repeat.

“If I keep standing out here with you, I’ll never hear the end of it.” She throws a glance at the café, and I follow her gaze.

All four of the owners shamelessly grin at us. Simone waves.

Laughing, I turn back to Trina. “I think that ship has sailed.”

She bites her lip. “What’s the plan?”

I comb my fingers through my hair. “Well...”

The words are on the tip of my tongue. I want to tell her that for the first time in my life, the thought of inviting her into my life doesn’t terrify me. Well, that’s not exactly true. It does terrify me, but not enough to make me turn my back on her.

Trina is the first woman I’ve ever met that makes me see a future that isn’t lonely. Professing my feelings to this woman feels like an inevitability. The words push against my lips, and all I want to do is tell her that meeting her was an epiphany. How fucking crazy will I sound if I tell her that right now? We barely know each other.

I’m Ted from *How I Met Your Mother*. I need to slow the hell down.

But before I can even attempt to untangle my thoughts, someone walks up to us. “Mac,” Belinda says, crossing her arms as she comes to a stop. Ice water sluices through my veins as I look at the woman with thunder on her brow.

“Belinda.” I nod, keeping my face carefully blank while my mind whirls with panic.

I don’t want to talk to Belinda. The person I was when I slept with her was different from the person I am now. I’m not



the guy who will flirt with a mother all through the school year, knowing she'll end up in my bed when it's all over. I'll never do that again. I knew the moment it happened that it was the first and only time, and I should have been clearer with her over the years that followed. I should have told her I wasn't interested, found a way to say it so she wouldn't spread nasty rumors about me.

Trina glances between the two of us, and I know it's rude, but I don't introduce her. I'm hoping Belinda will just move on.

But I'm not so lucky. My ex-fling looks at Trina and arches an eyebrow. "Are you the new one, then?"

"The new one?" Trina says, frowning. She glances at me, then back at Belinda. "Excuse me? I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"The new mom he'll flirt with and fuck, then toss aside when he's done."

Trina's eyes go wide.

"Belinda," I growl. "Do not fucking speak to Trina that way. Do me a favor and walk away, yeah? You know what happened between us was casual, and you have no right to stand here and fling insults at me."

Belinda snorts. "Flirting with me for nearly a year, sleeping with me, then never speaking to me again? Ignoring me at school events for years? That's what you call casual?"

"Belinda—" I try to cut in, but she doesn't let me speak.

"I only have one thing to say to you, lady," Belinda says to Trina. She leans in, her words sharp as blades. "Don't waste your time."

With one last look at me, the woman snorts and walks away.

I meet Candice's wide eyes through the café window and watch Fiona frown as she leans to ask Simone something. Shit.

Trina's frozen beside me. She watches Belinda turn a corner, then slowly lifts her eyes to mine. "Who was that?"

I gulp, then let out a long breath. “That was... I wouldn’t even call her an ex. We slept together once. *Once*, Trina, and it was four years ago.”

Her brows lower. “Do you have a thing for single moms, or something? What did she mean, ‘the new one?’”

“What? No, I—”

“Everything okay out here?” Lottie stands in the doorway, arms crossed. The expression on her face can only be described as *Mama Bear*.

“Everything’s fine, Mom,” Trina says, redness rising on her cheeks. “Go back inside.”

“It doesn’t look fine.” Lottie’s brows arch as she looks me up and down, this time not as appreciatively as she did in the Grove’s parking lot. She looks ready to attack.

“Mom, please. I’ll be inside in a minute.”

“Fine.” Lottie lets the door close, but stands in the doorway staring.

Trina looks at her, then glances at the four other faces in the window, who quickly move away, pretending to look anywhere but at us. She turns back to me, takes a deep breath, and releases it slowly. “I think we need to talk, but I don’t want to do it in front of an audience.”

I take her hand and squeeze it. “That woman means nothing to me, Trina. We slept together once, and I’ll admit I avoided her instead of being straight with her. I was too afraid of pushback and conflict at work.” Trina frowns, but before she can speak, I bring her knuckles to my lips. “You mean a hell of a lot more to me than she did. She’s a blip from my past, I promise.”

She looks in my eyes for a few long moments, and whatever she sees must satisfy her, because she lets out a long breath and nods. “We all have pasts.” A weak smile. “My ex-husband is an asshole and I have two kids, so I’m not without baggage.”

Tugging her close, I bring her to the other side of my truck for a hint of privacy from our audience and lean my forehead against hers. “What we did today was worth any amount of baggage, I can promise you that.”

She rolls her eyes, but a blush sweeps over her cheeks. “You’re not really making me feel like much more than a one-night stand with that kind of line, Mac.”

“How about this,” I say in a low voice, cupping her cheek with my hand as I bring my lips to hers. I kiss her slow and deep, trying to show her all the things I can’t say with words yet. All the feelings she’s waking up inside me. All the old wounds that are starting to knit back together.

When we pull apart again, Katrina looks a bit dazed. She steps back, shakes her head, and gives me a sexy little grin. “You’re too good at kissing. It’s dangerous.” Lifting a finger, she pokes me in the chest. “But we’re not done talking. Don’t think you can distract me with sex any time I try to talk about something serious.”

“I won’t distract you with sex if you promise not to be so sexy and distracting.”

Trina huffs, rolling her eyes, but there’s a hint of a smile on her lips.

“I’ll tell you everything that happened with Belinda. Dinner tomorrow?” I ask. “You can ask me anything you want. I’m an open book.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize they’re the honest truth. I want Trina to know how I grew up with a single father. I want her to know that I suffered when my mother left, that I never trusted anyone besides my father and my brother to stay by my side. I want to tell her that for the first time in my life, it feels like that might change.

Trina bites her lip, hesitates, but finally nods. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

I can’t resist the temptation of one last kiss. It’s quick, but deep, and I’m hoping it’ll hold me over until tomorrow evening. “Pick you up at seven.”

“Can you make it seven-thirty so I can get the baths and bedtime routine done?”

“Seven-thirty.” Smiling, relieved, I watch her walk back inside to be swarmed by her friends and family, then I get back in my truck and let out a long breath.

If I’m going to tell Trina about Belinda, I’m going to have to tell her about my mother. I’m going to have to face a lot of truths from my past that I’ve never shared with another woman—but as I drive back home to get ready for the first day of school tomorrow, I know it’ll be worth it. Because I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that Katrina Viceroy is worth being vulnerable for.

*Trina*

**T**he girls and my mom accept a brief, vague explanation of what happened outside only because Katie and Toby are still in the café. I manage to dodge the hardest questions, grab my kids, and head home. Then there's lunch to make, backpacks to prep for tomorrow, school supplies to label with the kids' names, and all the thousand and one last-minute tasks that need to be done on the Sunday before the start of the school year.

Finally, when the kids are in bed and my mother's reading in her bedroom, I make my way to the kitchen, open the refrigerator, and grab a bottle of white wine that has at least a glass and a half left in it. I pour myself a glass that feels completely indulgent after a day like the one I just had, and I lean against the kitchen counter as I take a sip.

I had sex with Mac Blair.

Holy smokes. My wine tastes dry and a little sour—I probably should have opened a fresh bottle—but it relaxes my shoulders as I replay all the events from last night and this morning in my mind. Mac is dynamite in bed. Explosive. Amazing.

The most incredible thing is I don't feel guilty. In all the years I was married to Kevin, I always felt vaguely bad about doing things for myself, things I enjoyed. It's like my whole existence was structured around making *his* life easier. I took care of the kids all the time and made sure he had time to paint. I dressed up and stood by his side at events, ever the polite wife. I took care of the house and I worked part-time, and it always felt like I was doing those things for *him*.

Last night and this morning, I did things for me, and it feels like a revelation.

Then I think about the woman outside the café. Her words—*she's the next one*. How Mac stiffened beside me when she made that comment about flirting with moms, then the sincerity written across his face when he promised to tell me everything I needed to know tomorrow night, when we had time and space to talk about it.

Maybe I'll tell him about my past. I can tell him about growing up with my mother, about my father dying when I was in my twenties, about my marriage to Kevin and all the layers of suffering that came along with being married to a selfish man like him.

I'll tell him that there's this kernel inside me, this tiny seed that is starting to bud into something bigger. It's like I'm finally scratching the surface of who I am, finding out that yes, I can do this on my own. And hell, maybe I can start a stylist business! Who says I need to be an accessory on an unappreciative man's arm? Why can't I do something for myself, for my kids?

Tomorrow, things between Mac and me will change, and I'm ready for it.

Quiet footsteps bring my attention to the stairway, where I see Katie's pajama-clad body descending. She pokes her head around the bannister and when she sees me, she freezes. Then, sliding into full view, my daughter bites her lip.

"You okay, Katie?" I put my glass of wine down on the counter and head for the hallway. Katie meets me halfway, wrapping her arms around my body. She buries her head against my stomach, hiding her face from me. "What's wrong, honey?"

"I'm scared," is her quiet reply.

Gently guiding her to the sofa, I sit down and nestle her into my side. "What are you scared of? Did your nightlight go out?"

She shakes her head, her body so small against mine. Katie has a fierce, independent personality, and I sometimes forget just how young she is. She's been running around since she was a toddler, always with mischief written all over her face.

And then there are times like now, when she snuggles up against me and it makes my heart squeeze into a tight ball.

"Tell me," I say, my hand making slow strokes through her hair.

"School," she finally says.

"You're nervous about going to school?"

Katie nods without saying anything.

"But you loved school last year, Katie. This year won't be any different."

"I don't know anyone at *this* school!" She sits up, hazel eyes wide as she stares at me. "What if they're all mean to me? What if my teacher doesn't like me?"

Frowning, I try to keep the hurricane of emotion inside me from showing on my face. Where in the world did this come from? Katie is confident, self-assured, *happy*. Katie makes friends so easily I get headaches trying to keep all their names straight.

"Your teacher will love you, honey," I tell her, but my daughter doesn't look convinced. So, I pat her knee and stand up, heading for my phone and the multitude of emails from the school I haven't quite got around to going through. That was going to be tomorrow's job.

Look, I know I'm supposed to be Super Mom. I know I should be all over this stuff and I should know everything about Katie and Toby's new school off the top of my head, but I don't. I'm doing my best not to let the mom guilt eat at me right now, especially when I grab my phone to look for the emails I got from the school when we registered.

"Now," I say, settling in beside Katie, "let's see what we can find about your teacher, *mm?*" I flick through my emails, searching for Heart's Cove Elementary. Half a dozen emails

pop up—the most recent one with a welcome pack for both children.

I open the email, click the attachment, and wait for it to load. “It’s normal to be nervous, you know,” I tell Katie. “I was nervous every year when school started.”

“You were?”

“Mm-hmm,” I say. “But everything will be okay. You’ll make tons of new friends.”

Katie bunches her lips to the side, not convinced.

I turn my attention back to the phone, zooming in to the tiny writing on the screen. “Now, here we go. You’re going into the second grade—”

“I know *that*,” Katie says with a roll of her eyes.

I hide my grin and keep reading. “And your teacher is Mr. Bl—”

I freeze.

That name.

I read it again, and it hasn’t changed.

My heart starts thumping so hard I have to gulp down a breath, but that name still stares at me in big, black writing on my screen.

*Blair.*

Brows lowering over my eyes, I stare at the name on the screen so hard it starts going fuzzy. *Mr. Blair.* It’s still there.

It can’t be. It’s not him. It’s not Mac.

Katie pokes my side. “What’s my teacher’s name?”

“Mr. Blair,” I say quietly.

Katie’s feet kick out as she leans back in the sofa, her little hands intertwined over her stomach. She looks just like her father when she slouches like that, and it makes pain rattle through my chest. Snapshots of the marriage I could have had pierce me like a thousand tiny needles scattered over my skin.



But I turn my attention back to the horror on my screen.

It's Hamish, right? Or Lee? It's some relative. It's not Mac.

Even though at the back of my mind, I remember all the things he's told me. He loves kids, "obviously." He gets really busy when the school year starts, but he doesn't have children of his own. He has a lot of prep work to do for tomorrow... *because it's the day before the school year starts.*

Oh. My. God.

I slept with my daughter's second grade teacher this morning. I had oral sex with him yesterday. No, it was so much dirtier than oral sex. *I got on my knees and I sucked his cock.*

Oh no.

The name on the screen stares back at me, taunting. I fucked my daughter's second grade teacher. Holy shit. Oh no, no, no.

But worst of all? I loved it. I wanted to come back every night and do it again and again.

And tomorrow, he'll be teaching my daughter addition and subtraction.

This isn't happening. My chest feels so hot it burns, and not in a good way. It claws up my throat, fuzzing my vision as I try to push the reality aside. I'm jumping to conclusions. Mac isn't a teacher.

"What does he look like?" Katie says, feet still kicking up in a steady rhythm, the fear gone from her face.

"Umm..." I tap on my screen to pull up the school's website with trembling hands, clicking through the pages to find the staff page.

Katie sits up, folding her hands on my shoulder as she peers down at the screen with me.

I scroll through faces, young and old, male and female, praying it's someone else. There must be another Mr. Blair. It's not Mac.

But then I see him, looking nothing like the motorcycle badass, dressed in a smart blue button-down with his hair combed back, a broad smile on his handsome face.

Katie moves closer to the screen and bites her lip. She tilts her head to the side and studies his face for a moment, then sits back. “He looks friendly.”

“Uh-huh,” I say numbly. “He is.”

He was real friendly when he was telling me how good I tasted. When he was telling me how much he loved his cock in my mouth. When he was buried so deep inside me I couldn’t breathe.

Super friendly.

I don’t really know what happens next. Katie settles down and I put her back to bed. I head downstairs and stare at my forgotten glass of wine, feeling more and more horrified as the seconds tick by.

Then I try to talk myself down.

It’s fine. Right?

We screwed around... So what? We’re adults. I throw back my glass of wine and dump the rest of the soured wine into it, staring at the golden liquid as I lean against the counter, palms on either side of the glass.

Then I straighten up, because a day ago I was standing in the exact same position, but Mac’s hand was down my pants.

I turn away, sliding my hands through my hair and pulling it tight. Okay. Okay, this is fine. It happened before the school year, and it’s casual. We can maintain an appropriate relationship while Katie is in his class. Everything is fine. We’re adults, we hooked up, and now we need to stop because it’s inappropriate.

Then I whirl back around and stare at nothing, because a fresh, horrible thought enters my head:

*Did Mac know?*

Then it dawns on me. That woman—she said I was “the new one.” The new mom he was screwing around with, and he even admitted he slept with her.

Is this what he does? Does he sleep with his students’ moms?

*Has he been playing me this whole time?*

*Mac*

**T**rina never answered my text messages last night, and as I get ready for my new kids to arrive in class, I try not to dwell on it.

She told me she was busy last night. She's a mother. Sure, we hooked up yesterday morning, and I haven't been able to stop thinking of the way she moaned my name, but we're both busy people. It's normal not to answer every single text. We're going to dinner tonight, I'll tell her about Belinda, and everything will be fine.

That's how I find myself in my classroom on Monday morning, making sure all the kids' name tags are stuck to the appropriate desks, and everything is prepped for the whirlwind of seven-year-olds that's about to walk through my door.

When I first got into teaching, I thought I wanted to be a high school teacher. I thought I'd prefer having older kids and knowing that I'd had a hand in preparing them for their futures. I even considered teaching art full-time when I discovered I loved pottery.

It didn't take me long to realize I was good with younger kids. I think it was my second year of college, I was a student teacher doing a placement at a school in a first-grade classroom, and I saw a little girl break down and cry when she was asked to write her name. All the other kids knew how to do it already, and she panicked. I sat with her and coached her through the letters of her name—Laura—then watched her face transform from teary to ecstatic. She then proceeded to write her name on every piece of paper she could find. And the desks. And the walls.

I never quite got over the wonder that young kids have in their eyes. Teaching them makes me feel like I'm actually contributing something to the world.

Movement draws my eye to the door. A little girl points to the list of names I taped to the door and looks over her shoulder, crying excitedly. "It says Katie Paulson! This is my class!" Her eyes move to the classroom, then to me. "Hi, Mr. Blair."

"Hello, Katie," I say with a smile, repeating the name she just called out. I'm pleasantly surprised she already knows my name, and I start looking at the groups of desks for her name tag. I think I put Katie near the front of the class, since she's new at school and I wasn't sure what kind of student she'd be. But before I can confirm, my eyes are drawn to her mother in the doorway, and a ringing starts in my ears.

Katrina is standing there, looking as glamorous and beautiful as ever in her high-waisted blue linen pants and silky white top. Her softly curled hair gets tucked behind her ear as she watches me, her eyes betraying nothing.

She looks gorgeous. My heart seizes. All the words I could have said yesterday come rushing back to me, but they hit the brick wall of my lips.

"Trina," I finally squeeze through my cotton-filled throat. "You..."

"Hi, Mac." She blinks, then puts her hand on Katie's shoulder, who stands frozen between us.

I clear my throat. "You can hang your backpack on a hook, Katie, then find your name tag on the desks. Your classmates should be arriving soon."

Katie frowns, her eyes darting between me and her mother.

Another thing about young kids—they pick up on *everything*.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Go on, honey.” Trina gives Katie a gentle nudge. “I need to speak to Mr. Blair.”

Katie, who had been so excited a moment ago, bites her lip as her brows draw together. “Okay,” she drags out, sounding unsure, but she hangs her backpack up on one of the pegs along the wall and starts wandering through the tables looking for her name.

After hesitating for just a moment, I close the distance to Trina. She stands in the doorway, looking ready to bolt. “Now I understand why you never answered my messages yesterday,” I say, trying to keep it lighthearted and completely failing.

My chest feels raw, empty. Trina is the first woman I’ve met who’s made me want more. A few minutes ago, I was imagining a future with her. What future can we have now that her kid is in my class?

I can’t date Trina. It would be completely inappropriate. Not only that, but if the kids ever found out, they could bully Katie. Parents could think of me differently. It would affect my career.

And when—not if—things between Katrina and me go sour, it’ll be awkward for *years*. Just like it was with Belinda.

Which means whatever had been budding between Trina and me...it’s over before it ever really began.

Trina clears her throat. “I saw your name on the school papers when I got home after...” She glances away, takes a breath, and looks at me again. “That woman yesterday. She was a mom of one of your students?”

I hate how small her voice sounds. I hate the regret etched into every line of her face. I hate that she feels that way about me.

But most of all, I hate that she’s right.

The boulder in my throat makes it impossible to speak, so all I can do is nod. I want to slip my hand in hers and pull her close, but I can’t. So I just stand there, across the threshold from her, looking for the right words.

She releases a long breath and closes her eyes. When she speaks, her voice is so quiet I barely make out the words. “Did you know?”

“No,” I answer emphatically, my voice finally returning. “I didn’t realize until right now. I swear. I thought your last name was Viceroy. I would have recognized the name in the class list...”

“I never took Kevin’s name,” she finally says, lifting her eyes back up to mine. “Look, Mac—”

A child comes barreling down the hallway, nearly crashing into Trina’s legs. “Mr. Blair! Mr. Blair! I’m in your class!” Ricky is a super-smart little boy with white-blond hair. His father, Rick Sr., hangs out at the Grove sometimes. I extend my hand to the father as Rick runs inside and greets Katie, then starts looking for his name on the desks.

“Long time no see,” the father says, grinning. His eyes flick to Trina, bald interest written in his gaze. He looks her up and down, and all I want to do is throttle him. I’ve known this guy for years. I’ve had countless beers with him. He’s a friend—and I want to punch him in the face for daring to look at Trina.

This is bad.

This is so bad, it’s not even funny.

I want her, and I can’t have her. But I don’t want anyone else to have her, either.

Rick, ever the charmer, smiles at Trina. “You look nervous. Sometimes I think the first day of school is harder on us parents than it is on the kids.”

Trina lifts her hand to tuck a strand of that elegant hair behind her ear, and I notice the way Rick’s eyes flick to her ring finger, noticing the strip of paler skin where her wedding band used to be. His stance shifts instantly, shoulder leaning against the doorway as he flashes a smile at her.

And I want to kill him. In that moment, I know we’re not so different from animals, because the primal urge to stake my claim on Trina rises up inside me, almost too strong to resist.

I'd pummel him in the face just for the way he's looking at her.

I mean—what the fuck?

A slow, long breath moves into my lungs, then back out. I need to get a fucking grip.

But how am I supposed to make sense of this? The first woman I've ever wanted is officially, completely off-limits.

Bringing my attention back to the two parents, I hear Trina let out a weak laugh that sounds nothing like her. "I know. You're happy they're out of your hair for the school year, but it's still hard to see them walk away." She glances inside the classroom, past me as if I'm not even there, to where Ricky and Katie have their heads bent over the desk, playing with building blocks I'd left out to keep the kids busy until everyone arrives. Trina shakes her head and smiles at Rick. "Especially when it seems so very easy for the kids."

Rick laughs, ever the charmer, then glances at me. When he sees the thunder in my face, his brows twitch together, but he doesn't comment. He glances at Trina. "I was about to get a coffee at the Four Cups Café. Would you like to join?"

That's it. Fuck my career. Fuck my job. I'll fight this man right here in the hallway and throw my future away. I'll piss on all the years I spent building my reputation, because there's no way I'm watching another man ask Trina out right in front of my face. No fucking way.

Not after what happened this weekend. Not after I felt her wrap her arms around me on the back of my bike. Not after I met her ex-husband and saw the hurt in her face. Not after I realized that I want to fix that for her, show her that we could be better together. I want to be the man to make her laugh. I want to be the man by her side.

"Mr. Blair! Ricky said you have a motorcycle." Katie jumps up, eyes wide. "Is that true?"

"It is true, Katie," I say, lingering near the door even though I should go to the students. But my mind is a mess. My palms itch to curl around Trina's body and keep her close. My



throat feels raw from holding in all the aggression I want to hurl at Rick.

“I’d better let you go,” Trina says to me. “We can continue our discussion at another time.” Her voice is...*cold*. Not waiting for me to answer, she squares her shoulders and paints a false smile on her face before glancing at Rick. “My sister is a co-owner of the Four Cups Café. She’s expecting me, actually.”

Rick grins hungrily, then sweeps his arm down the hallway in an *after you* motion. I watch the two of them walk away together, tasting nothing but ash on my tongue—but there’s nothing I can do about it, because Trina is officially off-limits to me until the end of the school year at the earliest.

And judging by my past experience? This is only going to get worse.

Then another child comes to the door, and it’s my turn to paint a false smile on my face.

Today is going to be a long day.

*Jen*

**H**ere's the thing. Amanda—Fallon's ex—is really nice. This is the second time she's been in Heart's Cove, and she's super excited about my recipe book. Apart from my friends, she's basically my number one cheerleader.

Take this morning, for example. She came to the café and found me in the kitchen to show me preliminary layouts for the final book. She's lined up food stylists and started talking about media appearances.

She believes in me.

And I feel like a total jerk for resenting her.

I stock up the quickly emptying display cabinet with a fresh batch of croissants, then head back to the kitchen where Amanda is sampling my banana bread.

She looks up when I arrive. “The addition of cardamon is genius, Jen. This is some of the best banana bread I've ever had.”

I can't help smiling. People tell me my baking is good, but it's different having an actual professional tell me I'm good *enough*. Good enough to make it in this industry. Good enough to be a real, published pastry chef. Recipes like banana bread are so easy to me that I can whip one up in minutes—but she's made me realize that not everyone has that skill.

“It's a pretty basic recipe.” I shrug.

Amanda puts her slice of banana bread down and brushes her fingers off. “You need to stop doing that.”

I frown. “Doing what?”

“Knocking yourself down when you speak. You have to get comfortable promoting yourself.”

I scrunch my face up, and Amanda laughs.

“Actually, that reminds me. There’s a good promotional opportunity happening right here in Heart’s Cove next year.”

My stomach sinks. I don’t have a good feeling about this. “Oh, yeah?”

She stares at me for a beat, as if she’s trying to gauge what my reaction will be. She pushes her blond hair over her shoulder and gives me a beaming smile. “There’s a TV show filming here next year. A baking competition! And it’s for semi-professional and professional bakers.”

Anxiety ratchets up inside me. “What?”

“Filming lasts four weeks. You’ll be partnered up with a teammate of your choosing, so we just need to find someone to join the competition with you. If your book is out and your social media is set up, it could provide a lot of free publicity. People will absolutely love you. It’s perfect, Jen.”

“No. Not perfect. I don’t want to go on some reality show.”

“It’s not a reality show. It’s very professional. It would give you a huge head start to promote your book.”

“I’m not sure, Amanda…” I frown. “I’m not good in front of cameras.”

“Look at it as a test run.” She smiles. “I just sent the application through to your email to review. I filled it in already.”

“Wait—”

“Jen, do you want this book to be a success?”

I huff. “Obviously.”

“You have the talent. You have the recipes. We just need to give you the profile.” She picks up her tablet and starts ticking things off her list. This book is progressing at lightning-speed. I can hardly keep up with recipe development as she puts everything together.

I watch her sort through a few recipes, double-checking them against my notes and nodding in satisfaction. Even with the thought of being on TV making me want to wet myself, I can already feel my resolve weakening. Amanda's damn good at her job, and even with the whole Fallon thing, I trust her. Maybe she's right. Maybe any publicity is good publicity.

Maybe a baking competition would be...*fun*. I've never won anything in my life! What if I won?

I clear my throat. "So, this competition...is there a prize?"

Amanda lifts her head from her tablet and gives me a beaming smile. "There sure is. A hundred thousand dollars to put toward your own business."

I grip the edge of the table. "And the prize...I'd get to keep it?" Visions of a beautiful little bakery attached to the Four Cups Café flash through my mind. I could make custom cakes. I could expand. I could hire an apprentice baker.

Amanda grins at me. "See, this is the thing I love about you, Jen." When I frown, she puts her tablet down and reaches over to squeeze my arm. "You are so brilliantly confident in your abilities. I mention a competition, and there's not even a question in your mind that you can win it. Now, I just need you to take that confidence and put it into promoting your book."

I frown. "That's different."

"It isn't, but we'll work on that." Amanda winks, and I let out a little snort.

Yeah, I like her. I said it, okay? I like Fallon's ex-girlfriend, even if I can tell she's pining after him. Even if the fact that she still has feelings for him makes it so that I can never get between them. Isn't it better to be pursuing a lifelong dream?

A hundred grand...that could change my life.

For a few brief moments, I just enjoy myself. A few years ago, I was working in an office for a tech company, dreaming of doing something different. After quitting my job and studying to be a pastry chef, I ended up landing a job at a

prestigious Michelin-starred restaurant a couple of towns over. It was great experience, but it was grueling. My boss was a decorated French chef who took no bullshit. I learned a lot, but I was glad to strike out on my own with Four Cups.

Now, I could build something even bigger.

I could never have imagined being here, in the town I love, developing recipes that will soon be shared with (hopefully) thousands of people. Maybe tens of thousands. Maybe millions.

“What’s this?” Amanda asks.

I look over my shoulder to see her by the fridge, peering inside at the plastic-wrapped cakes I’ve prepared. “Oh, that’s the trial run for Fiona and Grant’s wedding cake.”

Amanda straightens up, eyes wide. “You’re making a wedding cake?”

I nod, returning to the dishes I’d been stacking to put through our industrial dishwasher. “Yeah. They want two flavors, so I’m trying to find a frosting that will work for both.”

“Jen.” Amanda sounds exasperated, so I glance at her again.

“Yeah?”

“You never once mentioned you were making a wedding cake. You made the chocolate layer cake, but you didn’t mention this.”

Frowning, I stop what I’m doing. “Okay...” I tilt my head. “Was I supposed to?”

She laughs. “Yes! Yes, you were supposed to. Cakes are a chapter in your book, remember? A tiered cake recipe would be a great inclusion. See? This is what I mean about promoting yourself. You need to *talk* about these things. Normal people don’t just whip up practice cakes for their friends’ weddings!”

Amanda beams at me and starts talking about photo styling for a wedding cake. She starts telling me we could do a whole series of social media posts, that I could teach people basic

cake decorating and refer back to my book. She's brimming with excitement...for me.

And that's when I know I was right to push Fallon away. We kissed *once*. So what?

So what if Amanda is Fallon's ex-girlfriend?

So what if she seems to bat her eyelashes a bit more when he's around?

So what if he invited her to town before he ever showed any interest in me?

Isn't this book more important than some guy who kissed me a single time in a moment of weakness? Shouldn't I be finally, *finally* pursuing something *I* want?

But just as the thought enters my mind, the back door opens and Fallon enters. He'd stepped out when Amanda arrived ten minutes ago, saying something about needing a break. Now he glances at the two of us, eyes lingering on mine for a moment, and gives us a silent nod.

Then he's back at the stove, glancing at the screen as an order for breakfast comes through, and he gets to work prepping some eggs Benedict with the ease of someone who's done it a thousand times.

And even though I only just told myself that I don't care about him, that he isn't what's important to me...damn it, but my heart does skip a beat whenever he's close.

His presence shouldn't affect me the way it does. That ship has sailed. I made my choice.

Since then, things have changed. We've barely talked, but not in the comfortable, silent way that we used to not talk. Our silence is charged, heavy. He's angry with me. Angry at my cowardice, at my decision not to pursue whatever fleeting thing existed between us.

I steal a glance at Amanda to see her cheeks flushed. She straightens her top and lets her gaze stay on Fallon, and my heart sinks. She walks over to him and leans a hip against the counter, saying soft words I can't hear over the sounds of the

kitchen. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hand brushes the top of her shirt in a flirty, sensual movement. Then Fallon says something and she laughs too long and too hard, touching his arm with her hand.

I'm not imagining it. She's still hung up on him.

And that means I need to stay out of their way. No matter how much Fallon swears up and down he doesn't want to be with her, it doesn't matter—because she's the one who can make this book a reality. And if I give in to this attraction to Fallon, I risk losing it all.

I've spent many years on my own. I've lived without a man my entire life, barring three brief years with a boyfriend during college. I've always thought I was better off that way. Haven't I always been independent?

But this feels like I'm giving something up that I didn't even know I wanted.

Needing to leave the kitchen, if only for a moment, I make my way to the front of house to check the display cabinet stock once again. I arrive in time to see Trina entering with a man I don't recognize, who holds the door open for her with a hopeful, flirty smile.

Jesus. Another one. That woman has men trailing after her like lost puppies in need of a good feed. I wonder if she even knows the effect she has on them? From the way she's walking to the counter without paying the man any mind, it doesn't seem like she realizes he even exists.

*Trina*

I need to get out of here. This dad—what was his name again?—is flirting with me nonstop. He drove ahead of me and made sure to wait by the door so he could hold it open. It's sweet, obviously, but I'm just not interested in him. I'm still reeling from seeing Mac dressed like a second grade teacher and not a badass biker babe.

I scan the coffee shop when we enter, looking for my sister, slightly relieved when I don't see her. That means I'll have an excuse to escape. When I get to the counter, I smile at Fiona. "Hey. Have you seen Candice?"

"She's upstairs with Simone," Fiona answers. "The usual?" She nods to the coffee machine.

I nod. "Thanks."

When I reach for my purse, the dad cuts in. "I got it," he says with a grin. "We parents need to stick together."

"Oh, that's okay," I protest, but he's already got his card out and is thrusting it at Fiona.

She arches an eyebrow at me, but thankfully says nothing.

Mac's face when I agreed to come to Four Cups with this guy was nothing short of thunderous, but what was I supposed to do? *Not* come see my sister? Make some excuse that sounded fake? Linger awkwardly just out of sight until I saw him leave?

Actually—yeah, I probably should have done that.

Sven hands me my usual Americano, his eyes darting to the man beside me as well. No doubt everyone will be



questioning me about this little appearance within the hour. Desperate to change the subject, I nod to his fresh pink shirt with the glittery *Heart's Cove Hottie* writing across the chest. "New shirt? This one doesn't have the sleeves ripped off."

"Fiona told me I needed to be professional," he answers.

"Oh please," Fiona quips. "I know how to pick my battles."

Sven just laughs, which gives me the opportunity to turn to...Rick! His name is Rick. Thank goodness. "Rick, it was lovely to meet you, but I really do need to go speak to my sister. She's expecting me."

"Oh, of course. Look, I was hoping I could call—"

"Thank you so much for the coffee. Got to run. Bye!"

I make my escape, feeling foolish and panicked and rude. But honestly, the last thing I need right now is some single dad from my child's class asking me out to more coffee dates. I can just imagine Mac's reaction.

Wait—no. I don't care about Mac's reaction. Mac is my daughter's teacher. I shiver. Just the thought of it feels wrong, wrong, wrong.

Coffee sloshing out of its takeaway cup, I make my way to the bright-red door beside the café and climb the steps to the library above. Wes, Simone's husband, refurbished the space as a gift to her. It's one of the most romantic things I've ever heard. I was in town for their wedding recently, and it was the first time I had actual fun since my separation from Kevin.

Needless to say, the library above the café is a special space. When I push the interior door open, I find Simone tapping away on her laptop near the window and Candice at another desk, frowning at the screen in front of her. She looks up when I enter, relief washing over her. "Thank goodness. If I have to look at this spreadsheet for one more minute, I might explode. I am *not* a bookkeeper. I don't know how you did this for Kevin for years, Trina. I'm going cross-eyed."

Simone snorts. "I told you to leave it for Jen or Fiona. Play to your strengths, Candice."

My sister lets out a sigh, then nods at me. “What’s up? You look weird.”

I look down at my outfit, frowning. I thought I looked cute this morning. I only agonized over my look for over an hour. There’s not exactly a handbook for the appropriate outfit to go see your daughter’s teacher who happens to be sex on legs who *also* happens to be the man you had dirty sex with the day before.

“I don’t mean your clothes, Trina. I mean your face. Specifically, the expression on it.” Candice takes a step toward me. “What’s wrong?”

Welp. Here goes nothing. “Mac is Katie’s teacher.”

Simone stops typing and swivels her head toward me. Candice’s face is frozen.

I wipe my sweating palms on my robin’s-egg-blue-colored linen pants, then spread my arms wide. “I kind of, maybe, sort of...hooked up with him on Saturday.”

The rest of Simone’s body swivels to face me. Candice’s eyes widen a fraction.

I clear my throat. “And maybe also slept with him yesterday too.”

Silence answers back.

Now my hands are wringing together in front of my body. I cringe, glancing at Simone. “Say something.”

Without hesitating, Simone answers, “How was it?”

I drop my hands to my sides. “*That’s* what you want to know?”

Simone’s lips twitch. “Well...yeah?”

Candice clears her throat. “Can we go back to the part about Mac Blair being a *school teacher*? How did we not know this? Did you not ask each other about work?”

“Are you blaming *me* for this?” My voice comes out screechy, and Candice throws her hands up.

“No. No, of course not. I’m just wondering. Did you never ask him what he does for work?”

Helpless, I shrug. “It never came up.”

“They were too busy fucking like rabbits,” Simone cuts in.

I give her an exasperated glare.

She just grins. “What are you going to do?” Simone leans her elbow on her desk, brows arching high.

“What can I do?” I ask. “I have to break up with him.”

“What?” It’s Candice’s turn to shriek. “Why?”

“Did you miss the part about him being Katie’s teacher?” I cross my arms.

“Okay.” Simone stands up and heads for the kitchenette. “Let’s think about this for a second.” She takes a can of diet soda out of the mini fridge and cracks it open, turning around to lean against the counter. “He’s teaching Katie, right?”

I nod.

“And does the school have a policy against teachers dating parents?”

“Well...” I frown. “Probably. I don’t know, but...” I look at Candice for support. “It just *feels* wrong...right?”

Candice cringes. “It kinda does, Simone.”

Simone takes a sip of her drink and lets out a sigh. “I know. But he’s just so damn *hot*, you know? And I saw how he looked at you when he was in the café the other day, and how he was ready to rip your asshole ex’s head off for speaking to you like that. I just... I just want that for you.”

Glancing out the window, I let out a long breath. “I want that for me too.”

“Can you just wait until the school year is over?” Candice asks, hopeful. “You can tell him that you’re into him, but you’re not comfortable dating him while he’s teaching Katie?”

I chew my lip, then let it slide out from between my teeth when I think of Mac’s eyes darkening whenever I bite my lip

in his presence. “I guess so. But I mean, would he even want to wait that long?”

“What, a few months?” Simone snorts. “That’ll go by in a flash. I’ve been in town three years and it feels like I just arrived last week.”

I rub my forehead with my fingers, then square my shoulders. “Okay. I’ll talk to him tonight. I’ll tell him I’m not comfortable dating him while he’s teaching Katie, but I’m willing to see if there’s still a spark after the school year is over.”

“I’m sorry, Trina. I can tell you really like him.” Candice walks over to me and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “If he really likes you, he’ll understand.”

I try to force a smile, but I can’t help but wonder if Mac *does* actually like me. What if he was just looking for a hookup? What if he doesn’t actually like me enough to wait for me? What if that woman was right, and I was just the new mom he wanted to flirt with? What if I ask him to wait, and it comes off as desperate?

Because that’s how I feel right now. Desperate. I feel starved for affection. I feel like my marriage drained me so dry, I need someone to treat me right just so I’ll make it through another day.

“What if he’s just a rebound?” I find myself saying. “Maybe this is for the best.”

Candice and Simone exchange a glance. Simone moves closer, her soda forgotten on the counter. “I mean, maybe, but we all saw how he looked at you. Remember that night at the Grove? Just looking at the two of you made me blush.”

“Yeah,” I answer, but I’m not convinced.

That night at the Grove feels like it happened in another universe. I was a different person. I wasn’t a single mother that night—I was someone who goes out with girlfriends and doesn’t have a care in the world. For a few hours, I was unburdened, and that’s just not the reality of my life right now.

The door opens, and Fiona bursts through. She holds the doorjamb and looks at me with wide eyes. “Okay, who was *that*? And where do you find these guys? I mean, seriously, Trina, you have a gift for collecting hot men.”

My sister frowns at me. “Wait, what? There’s another one?”

I groan. “He’s just a dad from Katie’s class. He kind of, maybe...sort of...asked me out in front of Mac this morning.”

There’s a beat of silence, then Simone bursts out laughing. “Girl, you’re a mess. A walking disaster.”

I groan and fall into one of the sofas. “Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Simone says, taking a seat beside me. “You’re a hot mess. I *wish* I was as put-together and glamorous as you when my whole life is falling apart. But”—she whistles—“you’re not making it easy on yourself.”

I slouch down, throwing an arm over my face. But my lips twitch, and pretty soon, I find myself laughing.

Yeah, I’m a disaster. But even so, I’m happier than I’ve been in years. My kids took to their new school like ducks to water this morning. Kevin’s snide comments aren’t being hurled at me daily. Sure, I may be living with my mother, but I’m in a new town with more friends and support than I’ve had since I was in school myself.

Do I really want to ruin that by dating my daughter’s teacher? Do I really want to invite more drama and heartbreak into my life?

I like the guy, but what if there’s nothing there? What if he’s a rebound, and what we had was a shallow attraction?

I slump down on the sofa, pretty sure that what I *should* do is the exact opposite of what I *want* to do—and what I should do is say goodbye to my romance with Mac. Focus on myself. Focus on my kids.

Move on.

*Mac*

**T**oday was the longest day of my life. By the time the kids are all picked up, I sink into a chair in my classroom and let out a long sigh.

Katie's a good kid. She was fearless, happy, and already has half a dozen best friends after just one day. I saw so much of her mother in her that it made it hard to focus on my work.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to date Trina. Maybe we could make it work...somehow. But if anyone found out and started treating Katie differently, I'd never forgive myself. Not to mention the fact that I could ruin my reputation for good. Letting out a long sigh, I lean back and stare at the ceiling tiles, trying to find some way out of this situation.

The logical thing to do would be to tell Trina it's inappropriate for us to see each other, and to break up. But even *thinking* of doing that makes me feel sick. I haven't met a woman like Trina...ever. Thinking about how she flinched when her ex-husband hurled those insults at her makes me want to drive to her place right now just to make sure she's safe and happy.

I've never wanted to do that. I've never cared about a woman's happiness, her safety, her *mood* the way I care about Trina's.

And after what happened Saturday in my studio, and Sunday in my bed, I know I want to be the man who gets to lay down beside her every night and wake up beside her in the morning.

But am I really willing to give up my job for that? Am I willing to throw away all the years I've spent building my reputation at this school for a woman who just got out of a relationship? Do I actually *want* a relationship?

I've always told myself I was better off on my own. After Belinda, I vowed to keep even casual sex as far away from my work as possible.

My phone buzzes. I glance at the screen and see a message. Trina wants to talk.

With a sigh, I send her a response. Is it bad that I still want to take her out to dinner? I'm still desperate to see her again. Touch her again.

But Trina refuses dinner. Instead, she tells me she'll meet me at my place once the kids are in bed. So for the next few hours, I find myself tidying my house, changing my clothes half a dozen times, throwing back a beer, and fidgeting constantly—all while trying to come up with some way to get around this situation. Trying to think of *something* that will let me be with Trina.

But it all comes back to what happened with Belinda. The four years of awkwardness that followed our hookup, and all the ways I failed to be honest with her about how I felt.

I respect Trina enough to not make that mistake again.

I respect myself not to throw away the years of hard work that gave me a good name at that school. I can't date parents.

So when she texts me that she's on her way, I find myself walking to the studio just to be somewhere that makes me calm—but then I take one look at the workbench and walk right out. I don't feel calm when I think of what we did in there just a few nights ago. Not even a little bit. So, I head back into the main house and crack open another beer.

I live in a three-bedroom bungalow on an acre plot. It's secluded enough that I can do pottery late in the evening with music playing without disturbing the neighbors, but close enough that my commute during the school year is just twenty-five or thirty minutes. I've lived here for twenty years.

Most of the furniture is from local artisans—what little of it there is. Apart from the multitude of hand-thrown pots, plates, and mugs, I'm mostly a minimalist.

Still, I straighten the few cushions on my couch and let out a long sigh, feeling every second trickle by slower than the last.

The sound of a struggling engine tells me Katrina's clunker of a car is near. My heart thumps and I run my hands through my hair once again, pacing my kitchen until I hear the doorbell.

And even though I've had hours to prepare myself, the sight of her standing on my threshold still nearly knocks me back. She's changed into a knee-length black dress that clings to every perfect curve. Thin straps hold it up over her shoulders, with a colorful shawl hanging from her arms. A long silver pendant drops down her front, drawing my eyes to her chest. I close my eyes for a beat, trying to forget what it felt like to touch her perfect tear-shaped breasts, and I step aside to let her enter. She even smells amazing, and I fight the urge to throw all my convictions away just to tug her close and bury my face in her neck.

Fuck the job. Fuck propriety. I'll quit tomorrow if it means I get to stay with her tonight.

As her heels click on my hardwood floors, her hand hitching her purse higher on her exposed shoulder, I remind myself of all the reasons we can't be together.

It would be unprofessional. Inappropriate. It could hurt Katie—either by upsetting her or opening her up to teasing. Other parents could get mad about preferential treatment. There would be whispers, questions, rumors. I'd never be taken seriously again.

Trina finally takes a deep breath and turns to face me. "I wasn't expecting this to happen."

A dry snort slips through my nose, and I rub the back of my neck just to stop myself from fidgeting. "Me neither."



She bites her lip, and I fight a groan. I've thought of that image of her on her knees in front of me every day since I met her. I barely got any prep work done Sunday night because I couldn't get her out of my mind. My sheets still smell like her. Even now, when everything in my mind is screaming that we can't be together, my cock is swelling with every second spent in her presence.

Trina gulps. "Mac," she starts. "Look. I... It's been really nice getting to know you, but I don't think I'm comfortable seeing you while you teach my daughter."

Even though I agree—even though I've spent the whole day convincing myself of the same thing—her words still hit me in the gut. I hide it with a nod. "Yeah. I agree."

She glances away from me and stares at the wall. "Right." There's tension in Trina's shoulders, in the line of her neck, in the way her hands are clenched together in front of her.

I fucking hate it. I hate seeing her turned away from me. I hate the fact that I can't wrap my arms around her and tell her to forget it all and be with me.

"Listen, Trina..." I take a deep breath. "I like you." *Understatement of the century.* "But..." I grit my teeth, looking for the right words.

"That woman," Trina cuts in. "Was she the only one?" Her eyes lift to mine.

I nod. "Until you."

Trina holds my gaze, then lets out a long breath. "So, what do we do?"

A lump lodges itself in my throat. This is the moment where I tell her that up until Monday morning, I could see a future with her for the first time in my life. I could see myself actually *wanting* to let her in. Opening up. Letting her see all the vulnerable parts of me that have been locked up since I was a child.

But my silence must wear her down, because Trina lets out a bitter huff. "Can we not do this? Can we not dance around it

and try to let each other down easy? We've known each other a couple of weeks. We had fun. We hooked up. Now it's over."

I flinch back. She wouldn't even give me a few seconds to think of what I'm trying to say? She won't let me untangle the mess in my mind? Figure out if these feelings are real or not?

She's just like everyone else. More than ready to walk away from me. Using the first excuse to run.

I grit my teeth and nod. "Yeah. I don't date students' parents." My words are hard, brittle. They taste bitter, but they feel good to say. Like I'm wrapping armor around myself, retreating into the safety of solitude.

I don't need Trina. I don't need to open up to anyone. Haven't I made it on my own? Haven't I been perfectly happy up until now?

She's hot, and she was fun to fuck, but that's as far as it goes with me. Always has been, always will be.

So when I cross my arms and meet Trina's gaze, my eyes are hard. All my emotions are tamped down, buried deep where they won't come out to haunt me.

Something flashes in Trina's eyes. Some lingering sadness, a deep kind of hurt. But it's gone as quickly as I see it, and she just lifts her chin. "I understand. I won't waste any more of your time." She gives me a tight smile, then turns to leave.

It's the sight of her back that splinters something in my chest. The feeling of sand slipping through my fingers, of a scent on the wind that I can't quite catch.

I'm losing her.

"Trina," I start, but stop when I realize I don't know what to say.

The truth is, letting her leave is the right thing to do. Is she really worth losing my job over? Is she worth throwing away my reputation? All the years I've spent on my own, building my life just the way I want it—is Trina worth destroying all I've built?

No matter which way I twist the questions around, the only answer is no.

It's not worth the risk. A relationship with Trina would be messy, and it would end in disaster. Just look at how easily she's walking away now.

So even though Trina's eyes are glassy and it fucking kills me to clamp my mouth shut, I know there's no other choice. She glances at me once more, pinches her lips and gives me a nod, then walks out the door and back to her car.

Just like that, it's over before it could really begin.

And the worst part? I was right. She walked away, just like I knew she would.

*Trina*

**W**hen faced with something that feels suspiciously like a broken heart, I do what any normal, rational woman would do: I pull over to the side of the road to cry, then wipe my cheeks and decide to do something drastic with my hair.

That's how I end up with kitchen scissors in my hand, hacking new bangs into existence across my forehead. Turning the wholly inappropriate and woefully dull scissors upright, I try to snip vertically to blend the bangs in the way I've seen hairdressers do it. Then I spend a while straightening and styling them just to prove to myself that I haven't made a huge mistake.

It's not until the next morning, when I walk downstairs and see my mother's brows arch high, that I start to regret my impulse.

"When did that happen?" she asks, turning back to the cat food bowl as Mr. Fuzzles yowls impatiently.

"What, my hair?"

Mom throws me an amused glance. "Yes, honey. The hair. You haven't hacked your hair off since you were six years old."

"That's not true." I pour myself a mug of black coffee. "I used to cut my hair all the time in college."

"Uh-huh." She refreshes the water bowl but says nothing else.

From there, the morning is swallowed up by kids and breakfast and backpacks and school runs. I drop them at the school gate and watch Katie sprint toward a group of children, already accepted into her new fold. Toby's still in the back seat.

I glance back. "You okay, honey?"

"Why did you and Dad get a divorce?"

Oh, dear. The question catches me off-guard, even though I've known it's been coming. Ever since we moved out here, Toby hasn't been himself. He brightened up when we adopted the cat, but now seems to be slipping back into a funk. The therapist we saw last week, a young, gentle woman named Andrea, told me it was normal, but it still makes my chest ache.

Is *everything* in my life going to end in heartbreak? Can nothing just be easy, for once?

I gulp past the growing lump in my throat and shift my gaze to the school gates. "We..." I pause, looking for the right words. I don't want to lie to him or conceal the truth, but I don't want to turn him against Kevin—no matter my own feelings about my ex. So, with a sigh, I do my best. "We had a grown-up problem, and decided that we didn't want to be married anymore. It had nothing to do with you and Katie. Both your father and I still love you with all our hearts."

Toby's lips pinch into a thin line, and he makes no move to leave the car. "It was Dad's fault, wasn't it? He did something that hurt you. I saw you crying before we moved here."

"I..." Ouch, my heart. I reach back to put my hand on Toby's leg. "Honey, I'm fine. I was sad because I loved your father very much. But I'm happier now."

"I know." He crosses his arms and juts his chin out at me. "Do I have to spend the weekend with Dad when he comes next time?"

Another sigh slips through my lips, and I give my son a small nod. "Yeah, Toby. I'm sorry, but the courts said he gets

the two of you for one weekend every month. If I keep you, I might get in trouble, no matter how much I might want to.”

“What about what *I* want?”

I squeeze my son’s thigh and give him a soft smile. “Let’s just give your father a chance, okay? And we can ask Andrea about it on Wednesday.”

“Dad said therapy was useless.”

“When did he say that?” My voice goes screechy. That *dick!*

“When I told him about it on the phone last night.” Toby unlatches his seatbelt. “But I still want to go. Andrea’s nice.”

The school bell rings, so Toby opens his door. To my surprise, instead of running off the way Katie did, Toby knocks on my window. I roll it down, and he reaches in to give me a hug through the opening. Then he says, “I like your new hair,” before flashing me a little grin and scampering off to school.

All in all, I’m pretty proud of myself. I only cry for about twenty minutes when I get home.

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FROM THERE, routine sweeps me away. I start looking for work, sending out half a dozen applications every week. At the back of my mind, I wonder about the whole stylist business idea. But I can’t do that. I’m good at it, sure, but I can’t start my own business. No one would hire me. I’m not good enough. No way.

So, I send application after application out, and get crickets back. The kids get signed up for all kinds of activities—soccer and karate for Toby, soccer and piano lessons for Katie—which require pick-ups and drop-offs. There are groceries to buy, rooms to clean, meals to prepare.

I avoid going to Katie’s classroom, and she’s all too happy to leave me at the school gate. Toby goes to see the therapist,

Andrea, even though his father gives both of us snide comments for it. I'm proud of my son for not caving to his father's pressure.

Mac and I don't talk, and it's for the best. That's what I tell myself, anyway. And any time I feel weak and I want to pick up my phone, dial his number, and hear his deep, warm voice in my ear, I just remind myself of what he told me.

He doesn't date students' parents.

No softening the blow, no explanation, no indication that he ever had feelings for me. Just eyes that were hard and cold, and the latch of his door closing behind me.

I try not to think of all the other mothers I've met at drop-offs who point to his motorcycle and talk about how sexy he is. I try to just be a mother to my children and forget about men altogether.

Men are too much work, anyway. It's not worth the pain.

Even though some nights, when sleep evades me, I think of the way it felt to be on the back of Mac's bike, flying over the asphalt with not a care in the world. I think of his kiss, the brand his hands left on my body...and I miss him.

A few weeks pass. My existence becomes split into a series of upcoming milestones, because it's easier to think about the future than it is to be present with my life the way it is. There are holidays to plan for, kids' sporting events to train for, Kevin's visits to brace for.

His next visit is the last weekend of September. My ex-husband picks the kids up on the Saturday morning, and I hate to say it, but he looks good. He stands on the doorstep while the kids put their shoes on and gives me one of the smiles I fell in love with. "Don't miss the kids too much while I've got them."

"Impossible."

Kevin's eyes crinkle. "You always were a great mother."

Um, what? Is that...a compliment? Is he being nice to me right now? I frown, trying to figure out what his angle is.

Kevin sees my expression and lets out a quiet sigh. “I mean it, Katrina. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

*Gratitude?* What alternate universe have I stepped into now?

“Ready!” Katie cries, throwing her arms around my waist. “Bye, Mommy!”

“Be good.” I give her a kiss, then reach for Toby. He gives his father a suspicious look, then accepts a hug from me. Then I watch my kids leave with my ex-husband, close the door, and wonder what the hell I’m doing with my life. I do a deep-clean of the house just to fight the feeling of emptiness. When my mother finds me scrubbing a toilet like my life depends on it, she takes the toilet brush from my hand and shoves me toward the tub with stern instructions to shower and get the hell out of the house.

That’s how I find myself entering the Four Cups Café an hour later.

Kevin’s there with the kids. Wonderful.

I make to leave, but my ex-husband calls out my name. When I turn, he’s jogging toward me. He’s wearing one of those linen shirts he likes so much, and there’s a little splatter of paint on the sleeve. His jeans hang on his long, skinny legs, a rumpled sort of masculinity. He doesn’t have the brawn or the sheer sex appeal that Mac does, but I still know why I fell for him. It’s because of looks like he’s giving me now, when his whole, undivided attention is on me. When I just *know* he’s wondering how he’d paint me in this moment.

Kevin blinks, and his eyes seem to focus on me. “Toby told me he has a big soccer game next week. The school’s main rivals, he said.”

“He does,” I answer slowly. My eyes dart to the counter, where Fiona’s standing with her head angled toward us.

“Well, I was wondering if you’d have any problem with me coming.”

I frown. “You want to come to Toby’s soccer game?” Who is this man? “You’ve never gone to any of the kids’ activities.”



Something like shame tugs Kevin's lips down. "Maybe I'm realizing what a mistake that was." He arches his brows. "So? Would you mind if I came? And maybe I could have the kids for a night next weekend to celebrate after the game?"

I bite my lip. According to our custody agreement, no, he absolutely can't have the kids one single night outside our agreed times. But what about my whole speech about effective co-parenting? What about giving Kevin a chance to be a good father to Toby when that's what Toby needs most?

I hate the suspicion in my son's eyes whenever Kevin's around. Wouldn't something like this be exactly what Toby needs?

So, letting out a sigh, I nod. "Of course, Kevin. Toby will love that."

When my ex-husband smiles at me, something weird happens to my chest. It's like an echo of how I felt before. A physical memory of the layers and layers of feelings I had for Kevin. *Have* for Kevin, maybe?

No. God, everyone knows my ex is an asshole. Even I know that.

I'm just an emotional mess right now, and I'm not used to being on my own. Maybe breaking up with Mac was a good thing. I need to get used to standing on my own two feet.

Kevin leans toward me as if he's going to hug me, then stops himself with a rueful smile. "Sorry. I just— Thanks." He nods, then heads back to the kids.

Fiona appears at my elbow with a coffee. "On the house, girl. Figured you probably wouldn't want to stick around."

"Was it that obvious?" I take a sip of coffee and let my eyes dart back to my ex-husband and kids. He's got Katie on his lap, and Toby's laughing at something.

A snapshot of a perfect family.

I shake my head and lift my cup. "Thanks, Fi."

And with one last look at the family I could have had, I walk out of the café, wandering until my coffee is cold just to

try to clear my head.

It doesn't work.

*Trina*

**T**oby's soccer game is at the elementary school on Friday afternoon after school, so I make my way there at the end of the school day. I pick Katie up from her after-school care group and hold her hand while we go back outside. My heeled boots click on the asphalt as I make my way around the building to the field at the side of the school. Katie darts off toward the playground, and my stomach knots when I see Kevin on the sidelines of the field. I walk up to my ex-husband and give him a nod. "You made it."

"You sound surprised." His eyes soften. "But I probably deserve that."

Self-awareness? Did he just say something that sounded like...regret?

Okay. This needs to stop.

What is going on? Where's the asshole who marched into the Four Cups Café and called me a whore? *He* was easy to hate. He made it clear that I was making the right decision. This Kevin—the one who reminds me of the man I fell in love with—makes me remember things I'd rather forget, like how happy I was when we first married.

"Daddy!" Katie comes sprinting from the playground. My daughter crashes into his legs and wraps her arms around them, beaming up at him.

"Hey, little monster." Kevin smiles as he hauls her up for a hug and spins her in a circle.

Emotion clogs my throat, and I turn my back to the two of them. Was it really less than a year ago that we were all together? A seemingly happy, well-adjusted family? How is it possible that my life has imploded so quickly and so thoroughly in such a short amount of time?

As I angle my body away from Kevin and Katie's, my eyes lift to see a man push open the school doors and jog toward the field.

Oh no.

Mac is wearing athletic shorts, white socks pulled high up his hard calves, and has a big mesh bag full of soccer balls slung over his shoulder. If this were a movie, it would be some weird *Baywatch* remake, but instead of beach babes in tight swimsuits, there's only Mac running in slow motion toward me wearing a soccer coach's uniform.

I see the exact moment Mac spots me. It happens to be the same time he has to jump over a little lip in the pavement, and his toe catches the edge of it while his eyes grow wide. This time, instead of crashing into a table and spilling beer everywhere, Mac recovers with a quick stumble, his eyes still on me for a moment before he changes trajectory to make his way to the team.

"Mr. Blair!" Katie shrieks at top volume. Kevin sets her down as she thrusts her arm toward her teacher. "Daddy, that's Mr. Blair!"

Mac gives her a wave and a smile, but doesn't come any nearer. He drops the mesh bag of balls on the ground and opens it up while the other coach instructs the boys to start warming up. Toby starts dribbling one of the balls through a line of cones, not even throwing a glance our way.

My eyes drift to Mac again, then dart to Kevin.

My ex-husband is frowning as he stares at Mac, his hand still around Katie's shoulders. "He looks familiar," Kevin says.

I close my eyes. Please, *please* let him not recognize him from the café.

“That’s because his picture is online,” Katie informs her father. “Mommy showed me before the first day of school.”

“You’re probably right, kiddo,” Kevin says, but he throws Mac one last questioning glance before shifting his gaze to Toby. “Your brother is good.”

“He’s the best on the team,” Katie announces. “He scored three goals last week.”

My daughter’s voice fades into the background. Mac jogs onto the field and starts coaching the boys, clapping his hands and directing them into lines, calling for sprints and drills for their warm-up. The group moves closer, and I watch Mac take a ball to demonstrate the next drill.

Of course he can play soccer. Is there anything the man can’t do?

“Trina,” someone calls out behind me. I turn to see Rick, the dad from Katie’s class. He smiles warmly at me, then shifts his gaze to Katie and Kevin, and his steps slow. His son Ricky is at his side, eyes on the field where the older boys are playing.

“Hi, Rick,” I say pleasantly, while on the inside, I scream. Why the hell is he here? Why the hell is Mac here? Why couldn’t they both show up *last* game, when Kevin was safely in another city? I shift my gaze to the field and hunt through my panicking brain for something to say. “Which one is yours?”

“Number twelve,” Rick answers, pointing. “Nate.” He scrubs his son Ricky’s head and points to a stray soccer ball. “Go kick a ball around.”

Ricky glances at my daughter. “Wanna come play, Katie?”

“Can I, Mom?” She looks at me.

“Of course.”

The two kids dash off, and I’m left with my ex-husband on one side of me, the man who wanted a coffee date with me on the other, and my daughter’s second grade teacher—who I

slept with a few weeks ago—jogging off the field toward the team bench.

Wonderful.

“I haven’t seen you at any of the other games,” I tell Rick, keeping a pleasant smile on my face.

“Nate’s mom usually handles the extracurricular activities, since I work late most nights. Had the evening off, so I figured I owed it to Nate to come support him.”

“How nice.” I smile. Just *great*. Must be the theme of the weekend.

Mac jogs closer, and my stomach tightens. He looks really good in shorts, I notice. Defined calves, strong thighs. Legs made to be shown off. Standing about twenty feet away and facing me, Mac instructs the boys to start jogging as he delivers balls to them in some sort of give-and-go drill. His eyes flick to me, and I look away.

Kevin clears his throat.

Ah, right.

“I’m Katrina’s husband,” Kevin tells Rick while extending his hand, and I nearly have an aneurysm.

“*Ex*-husband,” I correct, giving him a death glare, which he completely ignores. The two men shake hands in front of me. Some weird male stare-off happens for a few seconds while I stand awkwardly between them.

I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth, fighting to keep my hands still and not fidget. Everything is fine. Everything is perfectly, wonderfully fine. We’re just a bunch of parents watching our kids play a sport. A totally normal interaction. Nothing to worry about.

I glance back at Mac and make eye contact again.

*Damn it.*

Just one short hour. That’s how long I need to last. One hour till Toby’s done with his game, then I can give my kids a kiss and send them off to their dad’s for the night and run far,

far away from here. Hopefully without ever having to speak to Mac.

Mac kicks a ball toward the kid in front of me—hard. The kid catches it and brings it down under control with his foot, and Mac claps. “Good work, Nate.”

I’m staring at Mac’s thighs again. The way the muscles contract when he moves. How he lunges, and the shorts hike higher to show off the paler skin, the sparse, coarse hair of his upper thighs. I saw those legs completely bare just a few weeks ago. I saw what the shorts are hiding too.

I need to stop staring. Just—look away. Look away *now*.

Oh, Kevin’s frowning at me. Wonderful. Did he see me ogling my kid’s soccer coach?

Side note—why is Mac even here? He wasn’t coaching any of the other games! So I have to ask: Why me? Why today? Why now?

And why does he have to look so damn good all the freaking time?

I clear my throat and glance at Rick, then ask him what he does for work. I’m too busy thinking about Mac’s legs to actually hear his answer, though. That’s why I don’t see the soccer ball come flying at my face until it’s too late to dodge it.

Mac shouts a warning that I hear a split second too late.

The projectile smacks me right in the middle of the face, and I fall flat on my ass, smacking my head on the ground behind me. Pain explodes through my nose and my eyes immediately start watering. That’s when I hear shouts and noises, and see my ex-husband’s face appear above my head on one side, Rick’s face on the other.

“You okay, Trina?” Kevin says, something like real concern on his face. Huh. How about that.

“Yeah.” I try to sit up, but my head is killing me from the fall and as soon as I move, blood starts gushing out of my nose.

That's when Mac shoves aside the small crowd of parents that has gathered around me, his eyes wide as he crouches beside me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. Before I can stop him, he shifts his weight, tears his T-shirt off, and shoves it under my nose to catch the blood.

It smells like him. Oh, God. Mac is shirtless beside me, keeping one arm around my shoulders and holding the shirt against my nose with the other hand. It's only been a few weeks, but I missed his touch. His scent. His voice. I missed how safe I feel in his arms. I close my eyes for a moment, then I hear Kevin's voice.

"She's fine," he says, annoyed. "Back off, buddy."

"Where does it hurt?" Mac says, ignoring my ex-husband.

"Mostly my pride," I answer, muffled by the tee bunched up near my nose, because did I mention Mac is shirtless?

He gives me one of those sexy half-grins, and my core spasms.

"Lie down." That comes from Kevin. He's stripping *his* shirt off now too. Why? Why would he be doing that? He unbuttons it and bunches it behind my head, now wearing nothing but a thin undershirt. He glares at Mac. "What the hell was that kick for? Were you *trying* to hurt her?"

"Fuck off," Mac grits out.

Mac's arm moves from my shoulders, and Kevin helpfully replaces it with his own. There is way, *way* too much testosterone here right now.

Kevin tightens his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his body. Mac's jaw tightens at the movement, but he stares into my eyes, concerned.

"I'm fine," I say, tasting blood. "Really."

"You hit your head on the way down. I need to check you for a concussion." Mac ignores my ex-husband's soft stroking of my shoulder and pulls his shirt away from my nose to prod at my aching face.



I wince, and Kevin gets in Mac's face. "You've done enough. Back. The fuck. Off."

"Guys, there are kids around," I say. "Stop swearing so much."

A whistle blows, and Mac glances up. "Shit."

"Go," I tell him. "I'm fine."

Mac hesitates, then glances at Kevin's hand on my thigh, his other arm braced across my back. He flinches back, eyes going cloudy. Then he nods. "I sent one of the supervisors to get the first aid kit. Just...let me know if you need anything else. Please." Then he's up, grabbing a zip-up hoodie from the sidelines and covering up his gloriously bare torso to the great displeasure of all the moms in attendance.

I shrug out of Kevin's hold. "Stop fussing."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" He holds up two fingers, and I roll my eyes.

"Two." I hold up my middle finger. "How about me?"

Surprisingly, Kevin cracks a smile. "There's the woman I married."

Uh, *what?* I hold Kevin's gaze until Katie comes into view, her little brows drawn together. "Are you okay, Mommy?"

"I'm fine, honey."

She gives me a kiss, then burrows into Kevin's arms. He picks her up as she wraps her arms and legs around him, and my heart gives another stutter.

Was I wrong to divorce him? Did I act too quickly? I've denied the kids the chance to grow up with their family together, and for what? People forgive each other for infidelity all the time. Maybe I should have tried harder to get marriage counseling, to keep us together.

Doubt worms through my heart as I watch the father of my children be, well...a *father*.

Then I glance at Mac, and I know that no matter how great and caring and sexy he is, he'll never be Katie and Toby's dad.

He must sense my gaze, because he glances over his shoulder. I'm still holding his bloodied T-shirt, and his eyes flick to the red stain on the fabric. Then he looks at Kevin, his lips pinch, and he looks away.

Well. That's that, then.

He made it clear how he felt about me. A soccer ball to the face obviously hasn't changed his mind.

*Mac*

**T**he only reason I'm driving to Katrina's house is because I want to make sure her face is okay. It's purely medical. I'm the one who kicked that ball; I'm the one who should be checking on her.

It's not because my stomach has been writhing like a pit of snakes since I saw her ex-husband with his arm around her. It's not because she dismissed me and stayed with him on the sidelines.

I was being a fucking idiot when I kicked that ball. I'd seen her hungry gaze on me every few seconds since I ran out of the school, and like a hormonal, idiotic teenager, I wanted to show off. I kept hitting the soccer balls harder and harder in the warm-up drills, until that one hit my cleat wrong.

The sound of that ball hitting her face has been echoing in my head ever since.

So, when I pull up outside her house and cut the engine to my truck, I look at the yellow light spilling from the curtained windows and I let out a deep breath. Grabbing the flowers I bought at the grocery store from the passenger seat, I run my fingers through my hair and push the car door open.

One thing I realized today, when I watched Shitstain Kevin be the one to comfort her, is that Trina *is* worth it. I need to get over myself, get over my fears, and tell her how I feel. Who cares that she's a parent of one of my students? Who gives a fuck?

Not me, that's who.

Okay, so it might not be a purely medical visit.

These flowers might not be saying, “I’m sorry I hit you in the face with a soccer ball,” but instead they mean, “I’m sorry I pushed you away because I think I might actually be in love with you.”

I freeze halfway up the path as that thought clangs through me.

Am I... Am I falling in love with Trina?

I stare at the colorful bunch of flowers in my hand, smelling the sweet scent of them as the world whirls around me.

I am. I’m in love with Trina. What other explanation could there be for these feelings? For the abject misery I’ve felt since she showed up in my classroom wearing those pale-blue pants? For the complete disinterest I’ve had in every other woman? For the near-obsession I feel every morning, hoping she’ll show up at my classroom door with Katie even though I know she won’t?

What other feeling could be so great and also so damn horrible? It has to be love.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I’m hurrying up the last few steps to the door and pressing the doorbell. I hear girly laughter and a little squeal—Katie—as my heart bangs against its cage. Because my ribs feel like a cage right now, like they’re the only thing preventing my heart from jumping right out of my chest and into Katrina’s hands.

Then the door opens, a halo of golden light around her head, and I’m breathless. She’s so fucking beautiful it hurts, with those wide, hazel eyes and her perfect rosebud mouth.

There’s a bruise forming around her eye—from the soccer ball, no doubt—and I hate that I’m the one who put it there.

“Mac.” Her brows jump as she takes me in, then glances at the flowers.

I thrust them toward her. “For you.” Nothing else comes out.

Tentatively, she wraps a delicate hand around the stems, then glances at me again. “Thank you.” Those lips I miss kissing curl into a smile. “Is this because you kicked a ball in my face?”

I angle my face away and rub the back of my neck. “Look, I—”

“It’s fine.” She laughs, and my heart nearly breaks at how good it sounds. “Although I’m going to have a nasty black eye thanks to you. Concealer works wonders, but even I’m not sure it’ll be able to cover this up.”

“I hate that I did that to you.”

“Stop it.” She lifts the flowers to her nose and smiles as she inhales. “Thank you for the flowers.”

There’s a pause, and I know this is my chance. This is when I open my coward mouth and tell her how I feel. This is when I say that I’m sorry for pushing her away, that she’s nothing like Belinda, that I don’t give a shit about propriety and professionalism.

This is when I tell her that I’m falling for her, even if it freaks her out, because I don’t think I can keep those words held in.

But just as the words are about to tumble out of me in a rush of emotion, a man’s voice calls out behind her. “Trina?”

Trina stiffens in the doorway. “I’ll be right there,” she calls over her shoulder.

“Who’s at the door?”

Trina glances at me, and the short, sharp inhale she takes tells me everything I need to know. Then I catch a glimpse of a tall, familiar man walking across the living room windows, and it feels like a slap in the face.

Her ex-husband is inside with her.

She took her ex-husband home with her tonight. The man who called her a whore just a few weeks ago. The man she was so comfortable cuddling with on the sidelines when she needed comforting.

“I have to go,” she tells me, and I notice that she never told Shitstain Kevin it was me at the door.

“Trina, wait.”

“Thanks for the flowers. I... I can’t talk right now. Goodbye.”

Then the door closes.

I stand there, stunned, listening to the lock flick shut as Trina goes back to her ex-husband and her kids, and I’m left outside in the cold. I stare at my hands, which had just been holding a bunch of flowers that I wasn’t even sure she’d accept. They’re trembling.

I don’t even realize I get in my truck and drive to the Grove until I’m pushing open the heavy timber doors and stumbling inside. My brother looks up from the bar and frowns as I slide onto the closest stool.

“Drink,” I gasp. “I need a drink.”

Lee doesn’t get me a drink. He leans his broad palms against the worn wood of the bar and stares at me. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Get me a fucking drink, Lee,” I bite off.

“No. Not when you’re like this. You’ve never used alcohol to cope. Tell me what the fuck’s the matter.”

“She’s with *him*,” I hiss. “She went back to him. I pushed her away, and she’s back with her ex.” I tug at my hair, trying to make sense of it. “And I fucking love her. I’m *in* love with her. I can’t stop thinking of her and dreaming of her and remembering what it felt like to bury my face in her hair and *she’s with him*. That’s what the fuck’s the matter.”

Lee pushes off the bar and, without another word, gets me that drink. He makes it a double.

*Trina*

I lied to Kevin. I told him it was the school who brought the flowers over on a welfare check to make sure I was okay after the incident at the soccer game.

Well, I guess it's not *exactly* a lie—except I'm pretty sure Mac wasn't there on behalf of the school.

I let out a long sigh and glance across the room at the vase full of flowers. Blushing pink roses, a few white lilies, frilly carnations, and enough greenery to make the bouquet look full and bursting with life.

When Kevin saw the bouquet, his lips did that pinching, downturned thing he used to do when he was upset with me. It made a sour taste coat my tongue as I busied myself putting the flowers in water. Then Kevin told me—didn't *ask*, mind you—that he would be showing a few pieces at the pop-up gallery opening in Heart's Cove in January. He said his agent recommended it, since there are so many artists who live here, and the town has a reputation for fantastic art. But isn't it great, he said, that he'd be able to spend an extra weekend with the kids?

And when he said it, I wondered—is this healthy co-parenting, or is he stomping on my boundaries? Is he inserting himself in my life where he shouldn't, or is he just trying to be a more present father than he was before? Should I refuse to give him more than the court-ordered time? Is that spiteful and vindictive on my part? What's best for the kids?

I don't know the answer to any of those questions.

Now, after he's taken the kids to his rental for the night and I slump down on the sofa with Mr. Fuzzles curled next to me, I can't stop thinking about the look on Mac's face when he heard Kevin's voice. I wanted to explain that Kevin just came over to make sure I was okay and get the kids' stuff for the night, but I also didn't want to be standing there so long Kevin would come investigate and see Mac on my doorstep.

I still don't think Kevin's put two and two together. He still doesn't know Mac is the motorcycle man from the coffee shop, and that's how I want to keep it. Especially since Mac made it abundantly clear that he never wants to be with me.

Except, tonight, there was a moment...some look in his eyes when I first opened the door that made me think he wasn't just here to apologize.

Then there was the other look. The one he gave me when he heard Kevin's voice, and when I started closing the door to keep him out. A look of pure, intense hurt. Anger. Shock.

Mr. Fuzzles's fur is silky-soft as I run my hand along his body in smooth, even strokes. I lean back on the sofa, trying to dispel the image of Mac on my doorstep.

How did I get here? How did I end up caught between these two men when I'm supposed to be divorced and living my best life?

In an interview, goddess and legendary singer Cher once said that men are like dessert. "I adore dessert; I love men," she said. "But you don't really need them to live."

Why am I ping-ponging between these two men like it's my job? Why am I worried about the look on Kevin's face when I brought flowers into *my* house? Why do I feel guilty about the look on Mac's face when he realized the father of *my* children was inside *my* house?

I don't need these men to live. I've been fine without Kevin. Even though he's recently reminded me of all the reasons I first fell in love with him, I still viscerally remember how it felt to have to carry our family on my shoulders when we were married.



And I don't need Mac. As wonderful as he makes me feel, I don't need him to push me away, then steal lingering glances at me whenever I'm close. I don't need some weird, awkward flirtation with my daughter's second grade teacher.

What I *need* is to stand on my own two feet. I need to be a mother to my children and a woman they'll be proud of when they grow up.

Pushing myself up from the couch, I give those flowers one last glance and march to the door. I stuff my feet in the first shoes I see—a pair of sneakers that are usually reserved for yardwork—and grab the keys from the bowl by the door. Then I'm in my car (a hunk of junk, sure, but a car I bought *on my own*, without a man, and negotiated it down from the dealer's first offer by fifteen percent, by the way!) and I'm driving toward the center of Heart's Cove.

The lights are on in the library above Four Cups. I park the car and jump out, kick the door closed, lock it, then take the steps two at a time. When I burst through the door, my sister and her three friends are lounging on the sofas around the room, drinking tea and laughing. As usual.

They all stare at me in the doorway.

"I don't need men in my life," I announce. "Not Mac, and definitely not Kevin. I can do this on my own."

"Hear, hear!" Jen lifts her mug. "They're more trouble than they're worth."

Candice sits up, studying my face. "Although I admire your strength, I'm wondering where it's coming from. And—is that a black eye forming on your face?"

Everyone stiffens.

I wave a hand. "Mac kicked a soccer ball in my face. My nose isn't broken. It's fine."

"He did *what*?" Simone screeches.

"When? How?" Fiona frowns as she stares at me.

"Forget about that! I just had an epiphany. I've been running around after men for years and *I don't need them*.

They're just dessert!"

Simone grins. "Cher. Classic."

I take a deep breath, open my mouth, and start talking without even knowing what I'm going to say. All I know is I need to *do something*. I need to be someone I'm proud of. I need to push all thoughts of Mac to the deepest, darkest part of my mind and lock him there, or maybe just let them fly free. I need to acknowledge that Kevin has some good qualities, but he's not the man for me.

I need to focus on the main course. Me.

But what comes out of my mouth startles me. "I'm starting a personal styling business," I announce, then clamp my mouth shut because, well, *where the hell did that come from?*

Four surprised faces look back at me, but they're soon jumping up to offer me all kinds of congratulations and encouragements. Simone offers to help me with a website and social media. Fiona volunteers herself as my first customer. They tell me I can put flyers on the café counter if I want to.

I giggle, then clamp my hand over my mouth, then give my sister a big hug.

I said it. I'm going to try it. I'm going to start my own business, and even if I crash and burn, at least I'll know I had the guts to give it a go.

A mug of tea appears in front of me, along with a plate full of fudgy brownies that Jen tells me are still in development. I sit down at a table and let Simone sketch out website ideas, my mind reeling.

I don't know what I expected when I ran up here and announced that I was swearing off men. But maybe this idea has been taking root in my mind for weeks, months. And it fills me with a bright, effervescent sort of excitement.

I mean, yes, I've always wanted to do it. But starting my own business? Going out on my own? When I was married to Kevin, it never seemed possible. I was The Mom. I was the person who took care of everything at home, of dentist appointments and doctors' visits. I bought presents for every

family event—Kevin’s and mine—and dealt with schools and daycares and almost everything child-related.

I couldn’t have started a business even if I tried.

So why does this feel like it’s actually possible now? Why does it feel like if I *don’t* try, I’ll regret it forever?

The memory of Mac’s face looms in my mind, but I just ignore it and think about fashion.

By the time my tea is down to the dregs and the brownies are reduced to a few crumbs and chocolate smears on the plate, Simone has a sketch for the website branding and logo design, and I’ve started talking about intake forms and consultation prices with Fiona.

And, best of all, I’m not thinking about Mac, or Kevin, or the kids, or my mother, or any other of the thousand things that have taken up the top of my to-do list for years.

I’m thinking about *me*.

It’s only when Jen and Candice are at the kitchenette, and Simone is at her computer to come up with some rough ideas for my branding, that Fiona reaches across the sofa cushion separating us and squeezes my hand. “You okay?”

I force a smile. “Yeah. I’ve always wanted to do this.”

Fiona lets out a snort. “Not the stylist thing, Trina. We all know you could do that in your sleep. I mean are *you* okay. It kind of seems like you’re throwing yourself into this project right now because you’re trying not to think about something...*someone*...else. I mean, you did just burst in here and announce that you were done with men after one of them accidentally gave you a black eye.”

I snort out a laugh. “I did, didn’t I?”

“You okay?”

I release a sigh and give her a tentative smile. “I think... yeah. I think I am. I saw both Mac and Kevin today, and you know, when they were both stripping down and giving me their shirts—”

“Wait, what?”

“—I was just sitting there thinking, how did this happen? How are they both trying so hard right now? Where was Kevin for the past *nine years* of our relationship, ever since Toby was born and he checked out? Where was Mac’s affection when he was telling me that he could never be with me because of some silly rule he has for himself?”

Fiona hums. “You realized you were letting them rock the boat in your life. They were in control of your feelings when they had no right to be.”

“Yes!” I sit up and lean my elbows on my knees. “Why do *they* get to make me feel out of sorts? They don’t get to just march into my life and make me feel like I’m missing out, when I know for a fact that I’m not.”

“Maybe you just need to be single for a while,” Fiona muses.

I glance sideways and give her a grin. “Are you sure you weren’t a therapist in a past life?”

She snorts. “Simone has been my best friend since college. I’ve seen it all.”

“Rude!” Simone spins around in her office chair to mock-glare at us. “But true.” Then she turns right back around to tap away on her laptop.

“Well, I think it’s great.” Candice drops down in the armchair to my right and gives me a decisive nod. “You deserve to have your own thing, Trina. I can talk to Blake about it too. He might have some Hollywood people who need a stylist.”

My eyes widen, and nerves immediately start twisting in my belly. “Maybe I should start smaller than a literal Hollywood movie star.”

Candice grins. “Why? Why keep making yourself smaller? Rise up, Trina.”

Those words whirl in my mind for many hours after that, when I’ve said goodbye to the girls and gone home, when I’ve

had some leftovers for dinner, when I'm lying in bed thinking about what I've just committed to tonight.

Rise up.

It's a challenge. A gauntlet. Why wouldn't I be able to pursue my passion and be damn good at it?

As I lie in bed and think about the two men in my life—the sour expressions on both their faces when they realized I wasn't acting how *they* wanted me to act—I realize that yeah, this is the right decision. No matter how much I might like the company of a man, I can't keep running after them.

I'm going to take care of me, for once. And it's going to be awesome.

*Trina*

“I heard you do fashion.” Agnes stands next to my table at the café, arms crossed, eyes hard.

I look up from my laptop, where I’m trying to untangle all the back-end website dashboards that I need to figure out how to use, and give the older woman a nod. “Yeah.”

“You fixed Fiona’s closet.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d say ‘fixed,’ but I helped her, yes.”

Agnes studies me for a moment, face unreadable. It’s only been a week since I announced I’d start trying to strike out as my own stylist. I’ve had a logo made, a simple, one-page website built, and I’ve started all-new social media business pages. I had no idea how good Simone was at her job until I started working with her. She’s coached me on all types of social media strategies, and even created a framework of a business plan for me to fill out.

I’ve started doing a series of videos on my social media pages where I break down celebrity street-style outfits that work and don’t work, and my following has already grown to a thousand people on all platforms. It’s crazy.

And...I’m having fun. It’s the first thing I’ve done that’s been entirely for me—well, that’s if you don’t count my short tryst with Mac Blair, of course.

But styling—that’s my thing. It’s not related to mom duties, it has nothing to do with art or my ex-husband, and it’s unashamedly girly. Like me. Plus, I get to use my business

brain. I remember when Kevin was starting out and I was helping him with bookkeeping and managerial duties. I loved it. It felt like we were building something together.

And now...I get to build something for me.

So when Agnes tilts her head to the side and tells me she wants to hire me, it comes as a shock and a delight all at once.

“I have short, stumpy legs, and I’m sick of looking frumpy,” she tells me.

“Have a seat.” I smile at her, and even though the grumpy older woman doesn’t smile back, her expression softens.

Clothing has the ability to make people feel powerful, confident, or vulnerable and self-conscious. A woman like Agnes, who’s usually hard as nails on the exterior, is exactly the type of client I’d love to help.

I take her through my new intake questionnaire, ask her questions about budget and style, and plan to meet her to go through her closet in a few days. When she gets up to leave, there’s a buzzing in my blood, an excitement I haven’t felt in a long, long time.

I’m doing it. I’m *freaking doing it!* I have my second client already!

So when Agnes exits the café, I have a broad smile on my face, and it doesn’t even completely fade when my phone rings with Kevin’s name on the screen. Taking a deep breath, I swipe to answer. “Yes?”

“I want to come see another one of Toby’s soccer games, and Katie told me she had a piano recital coming up,” my ex-husband says without preamble. “Can you send me their schedules? If I can make it the same weekend as my gallery opening, even better.”

*Let me just get right on that, Mr. Demanding. I’m sure my children’s activities will be happy to reschedule around you.*

“One sec. I’m on my laptop right now.” With a few clicks, I’ve got the schedule sent. Then I pause, letting my frustration

ebb as I try to find the right words. “The kids will appreciate you showing up again, Kevin.”

What I really want to say is, *I’m proud of you for trying*. But is that really something that needs praise? For a father to have the slightest bit of interest in his kids’ activities?

Not to mention he’s trying to make it coincide with his *own event*. So is that even really something that needs to be praised?

He lets out a breath. “Yeah. Okay, well, I’ll let you know when I’m in town. We might need to juggle my weekend around.”

Then he hangs up before I can answer, and I send out a silent thank you that I’m not still married to that man. Life is a lot easier when I don’t have to be his assistant, his mother, and his maid.

Sure, he might have some redeeming qualities, but some other woman can appreciate them from now on.

It’s like a switch flicked in my mind that night of the soccer game. I saw these two men who demanded so much from me, and I realized I didn’t want to carry them on my shoulders. Now, I feel lighter than ever.

Fiona walks into the café in one of her new outfits. It’s nearly November now, and there’s a definite chill in the air. She’s wearing a cropped bomber jacket with a silky scarf, jeans, and cute suede booties. She sheds her jacket to reveal a simple, elegant cardigan-cami combo. I grin when I see the way she tucked the cami just like I showed her.

Seeing me across the café, she spreads her arms and gives me a twirl. “What do you think?”

“Two thumbs up,” I tell her.

Fiona smiles at me, all confidence and swagger, and moves to the till to order her coffee and talk to Sven.

I shut down my computer, pack up, and say goodbye to the girls. And I realize as I’m hugging Fiona goodbye that I no



longer think of her as my sister's friend—she's *my* friend too now.

My steps are light as I walk outside, inhaling the crisp scent of autumn, then my heart jags at the sound of a motorcycle.

Damn it.

I wish my body didn't react that way. I wish I could hear a loud engine and not think of Mac. I wish I didn't still miss him.

I'm not supposed to miss him. I'm supposed to be a strong, independent woman who don't need no man. I'm supposed to be avoiding dessert for a while. I'm on a no-man diet. Main course only.

Hamish comes into view with Margaret on the back of his bike. She waves at me as they come to a stop in front of the café, and I hike my laptop bag strap higher on my shoulder before giving her a quick hug.

“You look like you belong on that thing, Margaret.” I nod to the bike.

Hamish gives a grunt of approval. “She's a natural.”

Margaret laughs, smooths down her helmet hair, and gives Hamish a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for the ride.” She winks, then heads inside the café.

Hamish, still seated on his bike, shakes his head. “That woman makes me feel young again.”

“You guys are good together,” I say, and I mean it. Smiling and inhaling to say my goodbyes, I stop when Hamish speaks first.

“You haven't been spending any time with Mac.”

It's not a question, so I wait for a beat, then finally shake my head. “No.”

“He was happier when he was with you.”

Damn it. My heart gives a sharp tug, and it's hard to hide the pain in my face.

But it's the same story all over again, isn't it? *He* was happier. I should change my life around because it was better for *Mac*. When is it my turn to be happier? When do my needs start taking priority?

I let out a sigh and give Hamish my best smile. "Maybe, but it wasn't meant to be. See you later."

The old man says nothing as I walk away, and I'm grateful.

*Mac*

I'd be lying if I said I didn't count the days until the first parent-teacher interview I have with Trina. The first one is a couple of weeks after the soccer ball incident, and I spend the minutes before our scheduled time together combing back my hair, fidgeting with my shirt, pacing my classroom.

I haven't seen her since the day I hit her in the face with a soccer ball—since the evening she made it clear she saw me as nothing more than a rebound, and might even be getting back with her ex.

Then Trina walks in, and all the breath leaves my lungs.

For weeks since the start of the school year, I've thought of the way she felt to kiss, to touch. It's been one long cycle of torturing myself with thoughts of her, then torturing myself with guilt for it. Weeks and weeks of my dreams offering up visions of Trina naked and splayed for me, waking up with my cock a steel bar begging to be attended to. And after the attending was done, self-flagellation for being weak, for giving in. Two long months of trying to remember the taste of her, wishing I'd had more than two stolen moments with her.

And the past two weeks?

They've been even worse, because I know I lost my chance. When it comes down to it, Trina doesn't want me. She made that abundantly clear last time we saw each other.

She's wearing painted-on jeans, a tight white top with a lacy neckline, and a deep-blue blazer. I want to peel those clothes off her body, one item at a time, and kiss every inch of creamy skin that I reveal. I want to lock the door and take my

time with her. I want to throw out every conviction I've ever had about propriety and professionalism.

Even after the soccer ball incident, I can't help the way my body reacts to her.

*But she walked away.* First she came to my house, told me our hook-ups were fun, but that she didn't want to see me again. Then when I was ready to throw all my inhibitions away, she'd already chosen her ex-husband.

I gesture to the two adult-sized chairs I've placed near a too-small desk. "Hi, Trina. Come in."

She smiles at me, and it's like the sun breaking through the clouds after a long, grey winter. My heart seizes, and I stumble over a wrinkle in the carpet. Catching myself before I fall, I take a seat and shuffle the papers I've prepared on Katie.

Trina has sexy, heeled, ankle-high boots on, and she sways those perfect hips over to her chair. She's all grace and control as she sits down, folding her hands over her lap like she was bred to sit at expensive fundraisers talking to senators and CEOs. She lets out a little huff and shakes her head. "I always get nervous at these things. I feel like I'm in trouble." She nods to the door and gives me a little smile. "My son's teacher just told me that he's 'extremely bright but struggles with being disruptive.' Hearing that felt like *I* was doing something wrong." She laughs nervously, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Well, I have only good things to say about Katie."

"Oh, good." Trina lets out a sigh of relief, color sweeping over her cheeks.

I can't help but smile, even though the sight of her makes my chest ache fiercely. For the first time since the soccer game, the tension in my body unwinds in her presence. I've been keyed up, stressed. Like a piece of me has been missing. Or maybe I've just been crazy with need for her, and being in her presence is like a single drop of water on my parched tongue. Gaze lingering on hers, I hold back a groan when she

catches those beautiful lips between her teeth. I drop my gaze to my papers and clear my throat.

“Katie’s a joy to teach. She’s very advanced in math, and she’s been a leader in the classroom. I’ve assigned her as class helper six times so far, and she’s always carried out cleanup duties very efficiently.” I glance up and grin. “She’s extremely good at delegating.”

Trina laughs. “You know, just yesterday she somehow convinced me that it was my turn to do Mr. Fuzzles’s litter box when I know for a fact she hasn’t done it in a week and a half.”

“Executive management in the making.” I grin.

Trina leans back in her chair, her shoulders dropping a bit.

This is easy. It’s always been easy with Trina. But today... there’s something different in the set of her shoulders, the way she carries herself. I half-expected this meeting to be awkward, but Katrina is completely at ease with herself, with me.

It’s fucking hot, to tell the truth. And it makes me feel like an asshole for expecting the worst from her.

And I can’t help myself. I veer off the parent-teacher conference plan and hear myself asking, “How have you been?”

“I’ve been good,” she says, meeting my gaze over the child-sized table. “I, um, started a new business—well, I don’t know if you can call it a business yet, but I’ve started a project that feels like it could be a business.” She gives me a wry grin. “Still driving my old car, though, so some things haven’t been upgraded yet.”

I clench my hand in a fist to fight the urge to reach over and touch her. “That’s good. I’m really happy for you.” I clear my throat. “You never mentioned this project before, did you?”

A blush sweeps over her cheeks. “Actually, I didn’t really consider seriously pursuing it until that night after the soccer game.”

I tilt my head. “The night I came over?” *And you were with your ex.*

She laughs. “Truth be told, I was pissed that you came over and made me feel like I’d done something wrong. Then I was pissed at my ex for making me feel the same way when I was gracious enough to let him cross the threshold in the first place. So I guess I have to thank you for giving me the push I needed.” She blinks and shifts her gaze to meet mine.

My heart clenches, and something bittersweet buds somewhere deep and hidden inside me. So...she wasn’t with her ex that night?

Still, it feels like she’s moved on. Like I lost my chance. So, all I can say is the truth. “I’m sorry.” I clear my throat. “I shouldn’t even have gone over to your house that night, and I definitely shouldn’t have made you feel bad about yourself, or about...us...or about anything. Especially considering I kicked a ball in your face.”

Trina just grins at me. “Yeah. Especially considering that.” Her eyes sparkle, and I want her. I want her so bad it hurts. “Why were you coaching that day, anyway? I hadn’t seen you before or since.”

“The other coach had a family emergency,” I explain. “I was filling in. Just the once.”

“Ah.” She nods, and is it just me, or did it sound a bit like disappointment?

This isn’t how it felt with Belinda. We’d flirt over the course of the school year, every single interaction sexually charged. It was all out in the open. She knew she wanted me, she knew I wanted her, and we were both all too happy to make bad decisions together.

Being with Trina feels different. Somehow, I know that a drunken fuck on the last day of school wouldn’t be enough to get my fill of her. She’s burrowed her way under my skin. I want to listen to her talk about her kids. I want to hear her laugh. I want to wake up beside her and wrap my arms around

her body, feel her melt into me like she knows she belongs there.

I want to hear about this new project and support her however I can. I want her to be the entrepreneur she wants to be, because I know she'll accomplish anything she sets her mind to. Anyone with a brain could see that she's capable of big things.

But there's a wedge between us. There's this job. There's the fact that she was so quick to tell me I wasn't worth it. There's her divorce, her baggage. *My* baggage.

There's the fact that our conversation right now is friendly, but sterile. It feels a lot like Trina has moved on.

"Do you ride your motorcycle all through the winter?" she asks. When I arch my brows, Trina smiles. "I saw it parked outside and was surprised. We've gotten quite a bit of rain lately. Seems like it'd be unsafe."

"You worried about me?"

Her blush deepens, and a spark of hope fires in my chest. Maybe she hasn't moved on?

She shrugs. "Just curious."

I chuckle, ignoring the curl of heat deep in my gut. We can't be together. We decided. We're being polite, appropriate. Things are how they should be. I bet she's not imagining her body bent over my desk right now the way I am. "I'll probably only get another week or two of riding before I have to keep it in the garage for the winter. Apart from being unsafe, riding in the rain isn't very fun."

She smiles, and another spear of warmth pierces my chest and moves lower. "Between the pottery, the motorcycle, and teaching seven-year-olds, you don't seem to be the type of man who would mind getting wet and dirty."

As soon as the words leave her lips, Trina's eyes widen and her cheeks turn bright red. Heat builds at the base of my spine, and the flush of her cheeks makes me want to reach over and tug her onto my lap to show her just how wet and

dirty I'd like to get. I grip the edges of my chair and try to school my face into a placid expression.

I fail. I know I fail when Trina flicks her eyes up to mine, and I hear a sharp intake of breath at the look on my face. Her blush deepens, and the air between us grows charged.

She stands abruptly. "I should go."

"Yeah." I stand as well, keeping the papers clutched in my hand to hide my growing erection. I hand her the summary report on Katie's performance in class so far, making sure that my fingers don't touch hers.

"Thanks." Her eyes slide away from mine, shoulders tense.

The wedge between us hammers us just a little further apart. Another reminder of all the reasons we can't be together.

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WHEN I GET HOME that evening, I find myself heading for the studio. I put some music on a bit too loud to drown out the memory of Trina's voice, and I focus on the spinning of the pottery wheel to dispel the image of her sitting across from me, and especially the image of her jumping to her feet and angling for the door.



*Trina*

I slump into a chair at my sister's house. My kids are playing in the living room in the open-plan space while my mother reads a book beside them. Allie, Candice's teenage daughter, is in her room, so I find myself sitting at the kitchen table with Candice, Blake, and a large glass of wine.

I might need the whole bottle after that parent-teacher conference. "Honestly, Blake, you might be the famous actor and all, but I think I deserve an Oscar for what just happened."

Candice laughs. "That bad, huh?"

I drop my head in my hands, peeking out through my fingers at my kids. Those little sponges are listening to every word, even if they look totally engrossed in their game. I look at Candice again and shake my head.

She knows where I was just now. She knows it's the first time since the soccer ball incident that I've seen Mac. She knows I still think about him far too much.

These past weeks have been a strange kind of twilight zone. The days are somehow slow and lightning-quick all at once. Now that I've decided on a direction in my life, it's like I can't wait to get started, but time just flies by without me being able to grasp it.

I remember when Kevin and I first married, it felt like a beginning. Like the start of something big, the true start to my life. I knew for sure I was doing the right thing. Maybe that's why now, even though I feel so excited about my new business, about my kids loving their school, about all the good

things in my life, I still feel slightly apprehensive. Like it might all come crashing down.

“I still don’t get why you can’t date him,” Blake says, topping up Candice’s glass.

“Shh,” I say, glancing toward my kids.

Candice just laughs and shakes her head. “She’s in denial, Blake.”

“So it runs in the family, huh.” He arches a brow at my sister, who swats his arm.

“I wasn’t that bad.” Candice takes a sip of wine before sticking her tongue out at him.

“I came into the café every day for *weeks* before you admitted to yourself you wanted me.” Blake rests his arm across the back of her chair, and Candice can’t help but laugh.

“Fine. Maybe a *touch* of denial. But Trina’s situation is different.”

Blake waves a hand. “Just go for it, Trina. So he’s your kid’s”—he drops his voice—“teacher.” A shrug as his voice returns to normal volume. “Life’s too short to worry about that kind of shit.”

“Blake said shit!” Katie shouts without taking her eyes off her game.

Yep. Little sponges listening to everything. I glance at my daughter, then shift my gaze to Candice, who gives me a knowing smile.

“Katie, just because an adult says a bad word doesn’t mean you can say it too.”

She looks up, frowning. “I wasn’t saying it, Mommy. I was just quoting *him*.”

Damn that infallible seven-year-old logic. I give her my best stern look, and my daughter replies with an impish grin. Toby looks at his sister, then at me, and smiles wide. And I’m probably being a bad mother for not chastising the both of

them, but the sight of those two smiles hits me right in the chest. I wouldn't be able to discipline them if I tried.

I take that as my cue to stand up, drain the dregs of wine left in my glass, and usher my kids toward the door. Mom offers to drive, which is great, because I feel all out of sorts. We still only have my old clunker car, which I swear I'll upgrade once I have a bit more stability. Whenever that happens.

By the time the evening routine is finished and the kids are down for the count, I find myself in my bedroom, lying on the bed as I stare at the ceiling.

This is good. Life is marching on, and I'm finally doing something. Moving forward.

So what if Mac looked like pure, off-limits sex in his smart button-down and combed hair? So what if I sat across the tiny table from him and wondered how he'd react if I walked over and straddled him? My heart thumped the whole meeting, and I could hardly stand to be so close to him without squirming.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

That's done. I don't need him. He's dessert.

With a sigh, I force myself to think of something else—and the next thing on my long list of engagements and to-dos is Fiona's wedding.

When we worked on her closet, she asked me to help with the reception. She offered a generous payment for me to style the whole wedding party, which I of course tried to refuse. She and the rest of the girls have done so, so much for me over the past months. When Fiona insisted on paying me, I told her my services would be her wedding present. So now I've got Agnes's closet and Fiona's wedding to focus on, which will hopefully keep my mind off whatever happened at that parent-teacher conference.

The look in Mac's eyes when I made that stupid, *stupid* comment about being wet and dirty. The way my whole body tightened and heated. The way that even though I tell myself I've moved on, that I'm happy with my new projects and my

kids and my independent life, I still remember how it felt to be in Mac's bed.

If I just keep myself this busy and don't think about motorcycles, pottery, soccer balls, or elementary teachers, then I can get through this school year unscathed.

Hopefully.

*Fiona*

When Grant first proposed to me, I never envisaged a big wedding. I thought the second time around for me should be low-key. But over the past months, that has changed. The invitation list has grown to include most of Heart's Cove, and Grant himself insisted on making an event of it.

So that's how I've ended up with an ivory, tea-length dress with a Bardot neckline, my hair tied in a complicated updo with a veil nestled in the bun at the back of my neck. Looking in the mirror in the dressing room of the old cannery-turned-wedding venue, I let out a deep breath and turn to the girls. "What do you think?"

"Gorgeous," Simone says with tears in her eyes. "Just beautiful."

"Congratulations, Fiona," Candice says, just as teary as Simone.

Jen adjusts the hem of my dress, then squeezes my arm.

Trina stands off to the side, as if she doesn't feel like she belongs. What she doesn't understand (yet) is that she's one of us. She gives me a smile and a nod. "You look incredible, Fiona."

"Thank you for helping with everyone's outfit, Trina. We wouldn't look half as good as we do without you." I smile at her, then glance at everyone's outfits. I didn't want to make them buy bridesmaids dresses they'd never wear again, so I just told them to wear something with green in it. It's festive, but still classic. Trina knocked it out of the park.

Simone is wearing a fitted, deep-forest-green dress with matching heels. The tailoring on the dress is exquisite, with each seam hugging her curves like it was made for her. A square neckline gives it a sophisticated air, and Trina added a delicate gold chain to set off the look. Simone's red hair looks insanely vibrant against the color of the dress, swept up in a mess of curls with tendrils framing her face.

Jen looks *ah-mazing*. She's wearing a dark-green skirt-and-top set. The crewneck, short-sleeved top fits her perfectly, and the skirt is high-waisted and hits her mid-calf. She looks like a 1950's queen.

Candice opted for a fluttery dress with a nipped waist and a plunging neckline.

Trina was surprised when I told her I wanted her in green as well. She went with straight, wide-leg pants in a rich, emerald color, combined with that fitted white bodysuit with the low back. She's wearing green earrings, and her bangs, which have grown out to frame her face really beautifully, look awesome. The woman could put on a paper bag and look like she just walked off a runway.

Finally, I let my eyes land on Clancy. My soon-to-be stepdaughter is wearing a dress cut similarly to mine, hitting her mid-calf with the same Bardot neckline, but hers is cut in green silk. She looks so beautiful it makes my heart hurt. I've been so lucky to be able to spend the last couple of years with her, and I spread my arms for a hug.

Clancy's lip wobbles as she wraps her arms around me, squeezing me tight before pulling away and readjusting my veil. "I'm happy you'll officially be my stepmom, Fiona."

"Me too." My voice is choked with emotion, and I accept a tissue from Jen to dab at my eyes before I ruin my makeup.

Looking over my closest friends, I let out a little squeal and spread my arms. I'm marrying the man of my dreams. I'm living my dream, and Clancy will officially be my stepdaughter by the end of the afternoon.

But this matters too. My girlfriends—the women who built me back up and gave me a purpose in Heart’s Cove with the Four Cups Café and everything that goes along with it.

“I’m ready,” I announce.

“I’ll let them know,” Jen says, leaning over to tick something off on her tablet. Without me asking, she took over the organization of the day, applying the military precision she uses in baking to making sure everything went off without a hitch.

I love these women.

The venue is mostly exposed brick, with rich oak flooring throughout. The main ceremony will happen in a room just off the reception hall, with chairs set up in neat rows and an organza archway to serve as the altar. I stand just outside of it, breathing hard, with a sudden explosion of butterflies in my stomach. I smile as Simone gives me one last hug, then heads into the room.

When I asked Simone if she’d consider being our wedding officiant, seeing as she’s the one who brought me to Heart’s Cove and pushed me to stay with Grant, she burst into tears, then immediately went online to figure out how to apply for her license.

Jen gets our attention as Grant’s groomsmen appear—Wes, Fallon, and even Mr. Cheswick, the man who first introduced him to woodworking many years ago—and lines everyone up, then thrusts a bouquet of flowers in my hands. Then, the most beautiful minutes of my life pass as I walk down the aisle toward Grant, more than ready to be his wife.

The thing is, it feels like the first time. I know I’ve been married and divorced already, but this feels so right that everything that came before pales in comparison. As our procession walks down the aisle, I can’t keep my eyes off Grant. The man looks like he was born to wear a tux. He stands tall next to Simone as tears fill his eyes and a smile spreads wide across his face.

We take our places, and in a short, sweet ceremony, my best friend marries me to the man of my dreams in front of all the people who matter most to me.

When Simone gives us the go-ahead to kiss, Grant bands a strong arm across my back and tugs me close. “I love you so much, Fiona,” he says in a gravelly voice, then kisses me like no one is watching.

When the shrieks and hollers get too much, we fall apart, head next door to the reception hall, and start to party.

I feel so incredibly lucky. The food is divine—overseen by a hawk-eyed Jen—and every single speech leaves me a sobbing mess. Especially Clancy’s. When she showed up on Grant’s doorstep, I never thought we’d end up here. I know step-relationships can be tough, but the two of us have carved out a perfect relationship that’s as close to mother-daughter as it could be.

And when Grant takes my hand and leads me to the dance floor for our first dance, I rest my head on his shoulder and let all my happiness buoy me. Grant chose our song, and as we sway, I listen to the words of “I Found You” by Alabama Shakes and feel love permeate every bit of me. It’s bluesy, soulful, and it makes me cry.

Then we break apart, and Simone, Candice, Jen, Clancy, and Trina are there to hug and dance and cheer with me. I cry so much I must look like a mess, but I don’t care. I’m married to the man of my dreams, my wedding has been perfect, and all the people I care about most are here to celebrate.

After speeches and dinner, there’s cake. Jen made a delicious three-tiered cake with alternating chocolate and vanilla layers, chocolate ganache and raspberry fillings, and the most delicate sugar work I’ve ever seen to decorate it. It’s the perfect cake for a beautiful wedding.

I’ve never been happier.



*Trina*

I can tell by the look on Katie's face that she's tired and on the verge of dipping into Tantrum Land. So, weaving through the multitude of wedding guests to a table near the front of the room, I find Fiona and Grant and offer them one last congratulations, then gather my kids up and head for the door.

I feel...light. Seeing Fiona and Grant together, Candice and Blake, Simone and Wes—it made me think about myself, and how there could be hope for me too. It made me feel like divorcing Kevin was absolutely the right decision, since there's no way he's in the same league as the men in this room.

I try not to think of Mac. He was just a rebound, and I need to focus on myself. I *have* been focusing on myself, and I've been happier than ever.

On my way out of the room, I pass Margaret and her plus one, Hamish, arm in arm on the dance floor. Margaret gives me a smile while Hamish winks, and I try to ignore the squeezing in my chest at the sight of them. I haven't been back to the Cedar Grove since our girls' night, and I have no plan to go back any time soon. My future as a pool shark is unfortunately dead in the water.

Loading up the kids into the back of my old car, I give Katie a kiss on the forehead and glance over to make sure Toby has his seatbelt on. He's latched in and already leaning against the window, fast asleep. Maybe I should have left earlier, but I have to admit, I was having fun.

Fiona's wedding was laid-back, but so beautiful it made more than a few eyes in the room teary. With the past month being one long marathon of after-school activities and Mom Duties, not to mention the exhilaration of actually pursuing a career as a stylist, today was a welcome relief. It was more than a wedding, really. It was everyone coming together in a celebration of love and friendship. It made me realize just how easily I've been accepted into this little community.

And I hadn't realized how much I needed that. I hadn't realized how isolated I'd felt with Kevin, and how difficult the decision to leave had been. It felt like I was walking out into the void, with no idea if there was even a floor under my next step.

I've discovered more than a floor. Divorcing Kevin and moving to this town has been like stepping into a whole new world full of friendship and light and laughter.

So things with Mac didn't work out. That's okay—or at least that's what I keep telling myself. It was too soon for me to be with a man, anyway. I need to work on myself, focus on my kids.

The engine struggles to turn over a few times, but finally my car starts. I use the window wipers to clear a few fat snowflakes off the windshield and blast the heat. The wedding venue is about a half hour drive out of town, and seeing as I live on the opposite side, I should be home in forty minutes. I turn onto the road and flick my lights on in the darkness, settling in for the drive.

The kids are asleep in the back, and I let out a long sigh.

I can do this.

The thought zings through me, and for the first time, I actually believe myself. I can raise my kids. I can navigate the complicated relationship I have with Kevin. I can make sure Toby and Katie end up as happy and well-adjusted as possible.

And I can be a stylist. I can pursue things *I* want.

Just when a smile starts curling my lips, headlights illuminating a triangle of pavement in the dark of the winding

road, my car starts to clunk. A rattling noise soon joins it and, frowning, I glance down to see the check-engine light flashing angrily at me.

*Uh-oh.*

I'm only about halfway home, in the middle of the woods, with two exhausted kids in the back seat. I'm not even sure anywhere would be safe to stop. Squeezing the steering wheel, I will my car to make it back to town.

It doesn't work.

After another mile, the clunking gets louder and louder until it finally stops...along with the rest of the engine. Biting back a curse, I navigate the car onto the shoulder and turn on my hazard lights, checking the mirror for traffic behind me.

I'm stuck in a gentle bend in the road with dark forest all around, with no traffic lights and limited visibility. The snow is still falling—melting when it hits the pavement, but how long till it starts to stick? This isn't safe. Visions of a semi-truck smashing into the back of my car fill my head, until I take a deep breath and try the ignition again.

Nothing. My car is completely dead.

Pawing my purse in the passenger seat, I find my phone and unlock it, heart pounding. Do I call a taxi? A tow truck? My mother?

With a deep breath, I close my eyes and try to relax.

I can do this. Wasn't it just a few minutes ago that I felt sure I could take on the world? This is nothing. This is a hiccup. A blip.

"Why are we stopped, Mommy?" Katie's sleepy voice comes from the back seat.

"Everything's okay, honey," I tell her. "I just need some help with the car."

"Is it broken?"

"It's no problem, Katie. Close your eyes. I'm getting us help. You can go back to sleep."

Katie, of course, doesn't go to sleep. She sits up and pokes her brother until he blinks awake in confusion. "Where are we?"

"We're nearly home," I tell him. "I just need to make a phone call."

When I step outside, there's a definite bite to the air. I face the direction we came, trying to dispel the fear of someone crashing into us.

No, it's fine. We're well off the shoulder, I've got my hazards on, and everything will be fine. I've stopped in as safe a place as I can manage. I take a deep breath and tamp down the panic rising inside me.

This is fine. I'm capable. I'm a strong woman. Accidents and crises will be thrown at me for the rest of my life, and I made a decision to face them alone. It's a broken-down car, that's all. Everything will be okay.

Glancing at my phone, I make a decision. I pull up my web browser and send a silent thank you to whatever cell phone provider made sure this particular patch of land had service. Then I look up a tow truck company. I wipe a little dot of water from a melted snowflake off my screen and find the phone number.

My plan is to get the car towed and call a taxi after, so I can take the kids straight home. I'll deal with the car tomorrow.

The closest result for a tow truck company is familiar—it's Remy's garage, the man who fixed up my tire and serviced my car back in August. I briefly consider calling someone else, but my kids are more important than my pride. So what if Mac hears about this? Who cares?

"Remy," comes the gruff voice on the phone after one short ring.

"Um, yes, hello," I start, pacing back and forth on the gravel shoulder. "I need a tow truck. Or maybe just a jump or something, I'm not sure. My car broke down while driving and now it won't start."

There's shuffling on the phone, and a noise in the background goes silent. "Where are you?"

"I'm just outside Heart's Cove, on Seaview Drive. About...twenty minutes from the cannery? I'm in the woods."

Remy grunts. "All right. I can be there in fifteen. Name?"

"My name is Trina. Katrina Viceroy."

"That hunk of junk finally gave out on you, huh," comes Remy's reply, followed by a soft chuckle. "Don't worry. I'll be there soon."

I let out a long breath and close my eyes for a moment. "Thank you."

"You on your own?"

"My two kids are here."

He grunts. "Hang tight. I'll organize a ride for the three of you back to town."

"Thank you," I repeat in a low whisper. I don't know why it's such a relief to not have to organize a taxi. It would be simple—one more phone call—but having it taken off my plate feels like a weight off my shoulders. Yes, I'm strong and capable, but I'm also stretched thin.

We hang up, and I slide back into the car.

"What's going on?" Toby asks, his hand reaching to rest on the edge of my seat.

"The tow truck will be here soon."

"A tow truck?" Toby asks, straightening. When I nod, a smile tugs at his lips. "Cool."

Chuckling, I lean my head against the headrest and ask my kids if they enjoyed the wedding. Katie tells me about all her favorite dresses (Jen and Simone's) and how she saw Grant crying when he spotted Fiona. Toby regales us, in great detail, with his thoughts on the food. We've barely been talking ten minutes when I see two sets of headlights coming from the direction of Heart's Cove. The front car gives two little honks,

and I smile when I see the tow truck drive past. Thank goodness.

The car behind it is a pickup truck, but I don't get a chance to have a good look at it. The two vehicles pass us, then reappear a few minutes later heading in the same direction as us, having turned around somewhere safe down the road. When the tow truck pulls up in front of my car, I smile at the kids and tell Toby to open his door and step out.

"Katie, you go out on Toby's side. I don't want you walking out on the road."

She shuffles across the back seat without protest, and pretty soon the three of us are standing beside the car as Remy exits the tow truck and calls out a hello. "Bad place to break down," he says, heading for the back of the tow truck. The snow has changed to a misty, wet drizzle, the cold seeping in through my jacket.

"Tell me about it," I answer, then put my hand on Toby's shoulder. "Give Remy some space to work, honey."

"But I want to watch!"

"Listen to your mother," comes a different voice from behind me.

My eyes widen at the sound of it, and I freeze—but Katie doesn't.

"Mr. Blair!" she cries. "What are you doing here? Our car isn't working. It stopped right here in the middle of the road and Mommy called for the tow truck."

Spinning slowly, I try to stop my heart from giving out.

Mac is striding toward us, a soft smile on his lips pointed at Katie. "I heard. I'm here to take you home."

"You are?" Katie's head tilts to the side, and she glances at me. "Why is Mr. Blair taking us home?"

My throat is drier than it's ever been. I still have one hand on Toby's shoulder, who's busy watching Remy hitch the car up to the back of the tow truck. Katie's hand is in mine, but she's tugging at it to get my attention.

“Did you call Mr. Blair, Mommy?”

I shake my head. “No. He’s Remy’s friend. He’s doing us a favor.” Finally, I let my eyes climb up to meet Mac’s.

It’s been nearly three weeks since that parent-teacher conference, and I thought I was over him. I’d been so busy with the kids and school and the business that I convinced myself he was a rebound, and whatever happened between us was casual. Fleeting.

Well, it feels like the furthest thing from fleeting right now. It feels like my whole body has turned electric.

“You okay?” Mac asks softly, and I can hardly take it. That voice, when it’s sweet and caring, undoes something that I’ve always tried to lock in the depths of my heart.

Unable to make my voice work, I just nod. Then I clear my throat. “You didn’t have to come here.”

“I was at Remy’s place when you called,” he explains. “I wasn’t going to leave you stranded.”

“All done,” Remy says. “You got everything you need from the car?”

“Um...” I glance in the windows, then open the door to grab my purse. The back seat is empty, so I close the door and nod to Remy. “All good.”

“Come on, Katie,” Mac says, gesturing to his pickup. “Let’s get you home.”

“Do you have a tow truck too, Mr. Blair?”

Mac chuckles as I slip my arm around Toby’s shoulders to guide him to the waiting truck. “No,” he says. “I’m just helping someone I care about.”

“You care about Mr. Remy?”

Mac opens the door to his truck and helps Katie up. “Yeah. Him too.” He glances over at me, eyes lingering on mine before dropping to Toby. “Come on, buddy. Let’s get you home.”

In that moment, I decide to ignore his comment. If I think about the fact that he essentially just admitted he cares about me, even though we haven't so much as spoken in weeks, I'll never get my head straight.

I've been good. Really good. The last thing I need is sexy, sweet Mac scrambling my brain again.

With the kids safely clicked into the back seat of the huge four-door cab, Mac opens the passenger door for me and nods to the departing tow truck. "You need a new car."

I snort. "Yeah, well, if you direct me to the car fairy, I'll ask her to drop one off for me."

Mac's lips tilt, his broad hand still curled over the top of the passenger door, effectively stopping me from entering. I watch his hands clench for a moment. "You been okay?"

It's funny how a simple question can hold so much weight. It's the same thing he asked me at the parent-teacher conference. I've been asked if I'm okay a thousand times in my life, but when Mac says it, standing on the side of the road looking at me like he cares about the answer, it makes my throat close up.

"Yeah," I answer softly. "Busy. Good. You know how it is."

He watches me for a moment, the light from the cab of the truck illuminating his masculine, angular face, and it feels almost painful to be this close to him without being able to touch him.

Mac is the type of man who came to my rescue without even being asked. Who dropped everything to drive me and the kids home when he could have just as easily stayed in town, and I never would have known any different. He's the type of man who's reliable, dependable—even when sex is off the table.

We agreed that we can't be together, but he's still here.

I don't know why that affects me so much, why it makes it so hard to look him in the eyes, why it makes my heart feel like it's trying to break through my chest.



He's doing what any decent person would do and helping out a single mother in a bind. But how many decent people really exist? How many decent *men* have ever done something like this for me?

And how fucking unlucky am I that he's the one man I can't have? The one man I shouldn't want?

Throat thick with emotion, I give him a quick nod. "I should get the kids to bed."

He snaps out of whatever stupor he'd been stuck in and drops his hand from the door, but he doesn't immediately move to the driver's side. He waits until I've climbed into the cab of his truck, then he closes the door for me before striding around the front of the vehicle to get in the other side.

I glance behind me and see the kids quiet, their seatbelts fastened and their eyes wide and alert, then watch Mac enter the truck with his usual grace and confidence. Finally, I settle back in my seat and let him take me home.

And I realize that I'm glad it was Mac who showed up with Remy, because from the moment I heard his voice, I felt nothing but relief. I felt safe. I knew for sure that everything would be okay.

*Mac*

I walk Trina and her kids to the door, giving Katie a smile and a wave before she disappears up the steps behind her mother. Then my eyes shift to the woman standing before me.

The weeks haven't dulled any of my feelings. Ever since the last parent-teacher conference, I haven't been able to tamp down the tiny kernel of hope that's taken root inside me.

She didn't choose her ex-husband. She wasn't with him that night.

That means the two of us could have a chance...right?

Trina leans her shoulder on the doorjamb and gives me a soft, reserved smile. "Thanks again, Mac."

I nearly groan at the sound of my name on her lips. I've spent the last three months trying to convince myself she was just like any other woman. Is she, though? I can't stop thinking about her. Dreaming of her. Reading and re-reading the employee handbook to make sure I wouldn't get fired if we were together.

It was never about the rules, though, was it? It was about my reputation. About awkwardness at school for myself, for Trina, for Katie. It was the fact that I've built my career over years and years, and I didn't want anyone to think differently of me for getting involved with a parent.

But it's been torture to know that Trina is here, that she's thriving on her own, and I gave up the right to be part of that when I pushed her away.

It was my own dumb pride, wasn't it? I've been so caught up in the conviction that I should be alone, that no woman could ever be right for me. It was the scars from my childhood that clouded my decisions.

But the truth?

The truth is I've known I loved Trina since she stepped into the doorway of my classroom wearing those pale-blue pants, regal and elegant and unattainable.

"I've missed you," I blurt.

Trina stiffens. "Mac..."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I just had to say it. I was wrong to push you away and I was wrong to tell you we couldn't be together. It kills me that I hurt you. I just want you to know I'm sorry."

Trina swallows, her eyes steady on mine as her hands smooth down her shirt. She takes a deep breath. "Nothing has changed, though, has it?"

I let my eyes slide away, staring at the paved stones beneath my feet. "It feels like everything has changed."

"You're still Katie's teacher."

"I'll wait. The school year will end."

I know I sound desperate, but I can't quite bring myself to care. I've let my pride stand in my way for three months now, avoiding Trina, teaching Katie every day and wishing I was standing by her mother's side. I've dreamed of Trina's body, sure, but what I've missed most is her smile. The way it feels to have her in my arms. The way she laughs when she's at the pottery wheel and the way her breath catches when she feels my touch.

I've missed *her*. I've missed the way she carries herself with her back straight and her head held high. She's emerged from her divorce with grace and strength, and I love her. I love her so much it hurts—physically, I mean. It hurts my heart to be in her presence and not be allowed to touch her, to tell her.

Trina releases a sigh, closes her eyes, and that resolve I admire so much straightens her shoulders. She looks at me and gives me a sad smile. “I’m doing really well right now, Mac. I’ve got a new business and my kids to take care of. I’ve got a lot on my plate. I just don’t have the time or energy to put into a relationship—especially when I know that anything with you would be intense and all-consuming.” She reaches over to put her hand on my shoulder, and the weight of it feels like an anchor. “I just got out of a marriage that I’m still reeling from. It wouldn’t be fair to you or me if I jumped into something new.”

“You sound sure,” I answer with a strangled voice.

She holds my gaze for a moment and squeezes my shoulder. “I am.”

“So you won’t even try?”

When she drops her hand from my shoulder, it feels like losing a limb. Katrina shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Mac. I need to focus on myself and my kids. I can’t give you what you’re asking for.”

My throat is tight, and all I can do is nod. When she closes the door, I stand on the doorstep and let a long breath slide through my lips.

As I walk back to my truck, I sit in my cab for a few moments and glance at her house. This doesn’t feel the same way it did when she came over to my place after the first day of school. That day, I was closed off and so sure that I was making the right decision.

It doesn’t even feel like the last time I was here, flowers in hand and hope budding in my heart. I left angry and hurt, and I ran to my father’s bar to lick my wounds.

No—this time, I feel determined.

I know Katrina is the woman I want. If she says it’s not the right time, then I’ll wait. I’ll make damn sure that when the right time comes, I’ll be standing there with my arms open.

When I roll the doors to my studio open and flick the lights on, I turn on the space heater and let my lips curl into a smile.

I still have a few pieces to finish for the Four Cups order, but that's not what I'm going to work on. Tonight, I'm going to create something that reminds me of Katrina. Something I can show at that stupid gallery opening in January that will mean something only to me.

And if I'm lucky, it'll mean something to her.

*Trina*

**F**or the next week, I replay that conversation with Mac in my head. No matter which way I turn it over, it always feels like I made the right decision.

I'm better on my own. Ever since I decided to pursue this business, focus on myself and my children, things have fallen into place. I can talk to Kevin without needing an hour to recover afterward. I can arrange hand-offs with the kids and even think rationally about the fact that he'll have them for Christmas this year since I had them for Thanksgiving, which had previously been something that broke my heart.

The first thing I do is buy a new car—well, a new used car. No more fear of running out of money. Things will work out, and I need to have a reliable vehicle. Then, in that new car, I take the kids Christmas tree shopping with my mother, and we end up decorating it the second weekend of December. I promise them that Santa Claus knows they'll be with their dad, and promise we'll do a mini-Christmas here before they fly up to see Kevin in Seattle.

It's a new life that feels unfamiliar, but good. Yes, I can have family time with my kids and they can have time with their father, and it'll be okay.

I'm stepping into my life with my eyes wide open. There's no more void beneath my next step, no fear of what comes next. I don't think too closely about that corner of my heart that still aches when I look at that misshapen bowl in my cupboard, or the fact that maybe I did meet a good man so soon after my divorce—then lost my chance.

It ends up taking me a week to find my third client. I do about a dozen free styling consultations that turn into a dozen rejections, but number thirteen ends up being lucky, for once. It's a woman in her late twenties who's starting her first corporate job after the holidays. She needs a professional wardrobe that still has personality, and our sessions together end up being a blast.

It's more affirmation that I'm doing the right thing. When the young woman sends me photos of her planned outfits for her first week of work, my heart feels so light I might burst.

I've never felt like this, ever. Like I have gifts that are worth something. I can make money and serve other women and make them feel *good*. I can be as girly as I want, and it's not sneered at.

In the days before the kids leave for Seattle, Katie comes into my room on a Saturday morning and climbs into bed with me. I wrap her in my arms and kiss her silky hair, loving the way she nestles against me.

With her head on my shoulder, my daughter grabs my hand and looks at my nails. "You need a manicure," she announces.

I look at the regrowth on my shellac. "You're right."

Katie lifts her head and looks at me. "Can I come too? I want red and green nails." She wiggles her fingers and beams at me, hopeful.

I don't know why that fills me with joy. It's just my daughter wanting to do something with me, but it's more than that. She's not ashamed of liking pretty things. She's not looking down on me for wanting to do something girly. So, I smile and nod, and take her to a nail salon in town for a mani-pedi. We only give her normal polish, obviously, since anything else would require upkeep and could damage her nails, but my daughter is wide-eyed and giggly the whole time.

"Look, Mommy!" She thrusts her hand at me, and I see the red and green alternating nails with tiny snowflakes dotted on each finger. She brings her hand up to her face and beams. "So pretty!"

My heart is overflowing. When we're done, Katie walks with her nails fanned out as she struts down the street. When we meet my mother and Toby at the café, Katie runs up to the counter and shows Sven, Fiona, and Candice, who all *ooh* and *aah* over her hands.

"She's her mother's daughter." Candice winks.

I grin. Six months ago, if Kevin had said that to me, I wonder if I would've taken it as a compliment.

Things are good. Really, really good.

Then Mac walks through the door with a box of pottery, and my heart nearly bursts out of my chest. His eyes zero in on me, sweeping from head to toe. I immediately combust.

Hmm.

Maybe things could be better.

"Mr. Blair!" Katie sprints toward him. "Look at my nails!"

Mac puts the box down on a table and crouches down, inspecting Katie's hands and nodding appreciatively. "Wow. Did you do that yourself? It's very good. I love the snowflakes."

Katie rolls her eyes. "No, of course not." She flicks her hair over her shoulder. "Mommy and I went to the nail salon." She wiggles her fingers, then prances back to her table.

I bite back a smile as Mac glances at me, laughter dancing in his eyes.

Fiona comes around the counter and shakes his hand, and they both peer into the box.

"That's everything you've ordered," Mac says. "I've included the final invoice in the box. If there's anything you're not happy with, just let me know."

"It looks lovely," Fiona says, unwrapping a large plate. It's the same peach-and-gold of the rest of the order, and as I drift closer, I can't help the tightening of my chest. Fiona hums. "We've gotten so many compliments on our mugs, Mac. You



should leave some business cards, or even put a few pieces on display here. We'd love to help you sell them."

Mac's gaze is on me, those honey-colored eyes hungry as they roam over my face. "Sounds good," he tells Fiona without looking at her. Then, with a shake of his head, he says a few quick goodbyes and walks out of the café.

I feel like I just ran a marathon.

Candice catches my eyes, arching a brow. "Still sure about that decision of yours?"

She's being vague because my little sponges are sitting at a table beside me. She means my decision to push Mac away, to focus on myself.

I let out a breath and nod. "Yeah," I say, "I'm still sure."

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SAYING goodbye to the kids is awful. They're greeted by flight staff and given badges that say "Unaccompanied Minor" before being led off toward the gate. My chest feels so tight it hurts, and all I can think about is how I'd love for Mac to be beside me, for his arms to be wrapped around me, for his lips to be near my ear while he whispers comforting words to me.

I want to feel the way I felt when I heard his voice after my car broke down. Safe, secure, and absolutely sure that everything will be okay.

But I made the decision to do this alone, and I have to trust in that.

I mostly spend the holidays at Candice's house. I cook a lot, eat even more, and exchange presents with my family. I video call Toby and Katie as much as they'll tolerate. I laugh and I do have fun, but I still miss my kids something fierce. It's not the same without them.

You know who I end up buying the most presents for? Mr. Fuzzles. I fill that void in my chest with toys and catnip, and

I'm pretty sure even the cat knows I'm trying to bribe him for affection.

So, when it comes time for Toby and Katie to fly back a week later, I get to the airport well early of their arrival, and as the two of them walk out toward me, I take my first full breath in a long time. I hug them both and kiss them all over until Toby scrunches his face and pulls away.

“Gross, Mom, stop!”

I laugh, then take them both by the hand and lead them to the exit. When I look down, Katie's nails are bare.

I frown. “What happened to your manicure, honey?”

Katie blushes and looks down at her feet. She tugs her hand away from mine and curls her hands into fists. “Daddy said I was too young to have my nails painted. He took it off.”

Heat spears through my chest as anger explodes inside me. It takes every single ounce of self-control to keep my features under control. “He did what?”

Katie bites her lip. “It's okay. I didn't even like my nails painted.” A blatant lie. Katie was preening for days. She looks up at me, brows high, and shrugs. “It's just something stupid girls do, anyway.”

I'm going to kill him. Kevin must have a death wish, because he really went and put those thoughts in my sweet, brilliant daughter's head. I'm going to fly up to Seattle and throttle him right now. Sucking a breath in through my nose, I count to ten and try to get my rioting emotions under control. My vision is blanketed in red, and I feel about ready to explode.

Some last, barbed hook buried deep under my breastbone works itself loose. For the first time in a decade and a half, I can see clearly.

Kevin will not get one minute outside his court-ordered time with the kids. He will not ever step into my house again. He won't fill my kids' heads with garbage, and he sure as hell won't make Katie feel small. He can show up a day early and watch me close the door on his face. He can come to soccer

games, he can try to blot my bloody nose, he can sweet-talk me as much as he likes, but it won't change a thing.

We are *done*. My boundaries will be cast in stone. My tone will be frigid. From this moment on, I will not *ever* let him cross a line I set. So long as my kids are with me, I'll keep them safe from his toxic, insidious, *bullshit* opinions.

I'll make damn sure Katie paints her nails whenever and however she wants.

But before I can find the words to tell Katie that her father is a piece of shit, Toby puts his arm around his sister. "I don't think nail polish is stupid," he announces.

Katie frowns at her brother. "You don't?"

Toby shakes his head. "No. I want to paint *my* nails. I think it's cool."

Her brow wrinkles. "But you're a boy."

"So?" Toby holds his sister's gaze until a hint of a smile tugs at her lips.

"What color do you want?" she asks in a small voice.

"What color should I get?" Toby looks at his hands.

"Something glittery because it's going to be New Year's soon," Katie says with a nod. Then she looks at me. "Can we paint our nails when we get home?"

Tears well in my eyes. I nod. "Yeah. We'll do it together."

Katie slips her hand back into mine, and my anger vanishes. Toby, instead of moving to my other side, takes his sister's free hand. I meet his gaze over her head and quickly brush a tear from my eye. Toby just gives me a cheeky little smile, and we head out to the car.

An hour later, we all have glittery nails.

**W**hen I get to work the first Monday of the new year, the first thing I see is Fiona's face. She's standing behind the counter at Four Cups, and she looks stricken.

There's a piece of paper in her hands.

When she lifts her gaze to meet mine, her brows draw together.

"What?" I frown. "What is it?"

She clears her throat, staring at the paper again. "Fallon just put in his notice. His last day is in two weeks."

"His—" I stop, frowning. My heart thumps. "Fallon quit?"

Fiona lets out a long sigh. "He said he had another talented chef lined up to take his place. A young guy who worked with him before who's not happy at his current job. He said he could stay on for an extra week to show him the ropes if we needed him."

I don't give a shit about the new chef, but I don't say that. I just feel my throat constrict as I glance toward the kitchen. "Fallon quit his job?" I repeat.

"Oh, Jen, I'm so sorry." Fiona puts the paper down and comes around the counter, and I endure a hug from her for a few moments before pulling away.

"I should get to work," I say. "Amanda will be here soon. She has the proof copy of my book to show me."

I'd hoped to show Fallon the fruits of all my hard work. I wanted his feedback. I wanted him to be happy for me.

But when I walk into the kitchen and see his broad back standing at the prep station, all I feel is dread.

“You’re quitting?” I say, my voice coming out strangely.

Fallon pauses as he chops chives, putting his knife down on the board. He turns slowly, his dark, dark eyes lifting inch by inch to meet mine. He gives me a slow nod. “It’s time for me to move on.”

“But...” I trail off. “But, why? I thought you loved it here.”

“I did,” he answers quietly, and I don’t miss the fact that he used the past tense. He lets out a long sigh. “There’s nothing for me here, Jen. I’m stagnant. My life is in a holding pattern, and I need to move on.”

There’s a sharp, pulsing pain in my chest.

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of my mind, I thought he’d always be here. I thought I could push him away, but I’d still get to see him. I thought, maybe, in time, we could pick up where we left off.

I’m so, so stupid.

“Hello-oo!” a singsong voice calls out. Amanda steps into the kitchen, brandishing a bag. “I’ve got a late Christmas present for you.” Her smile fades when she sees my face. “What’s wrong? What happened?” Her eyes flick to the other side of the kitchen, and her face does that softening gaga thing it does whenever Fallon’s around. “Hey, Fallon.”

“Amanda.” He nods, then turns back to his prep work.

Amanda slides up to me and reaches into the bag. She pulls out a gorgeous, glossy book featuring a perfect, beautiful picture of my salted caramel brownies. My name is right there on the front. Jennifer Newbank.

“You don’t look happy.”

I glance up to see Amanda frowning at me, so I try to force my lips to curl up. “I am,” I lie. I flip the book open as I set it down on the counter, running my fingers over all my best recipes, finally in print. “I can’t believe it’s done.”

Amanda puts a hand on my forearm, and I look up to see a soft, kind smile on her face. “You worked hard, Jen. You deserve it. It’s normal to be overwhelmed.”

I nod, throat tight. “Yeah. I’ll have a look through this tonight and let you know if I see anything that needs to be changed.”

“There’s already buzz around this book, Jen. It’s going to be huge.” She puts her hands out. “Huge.”

That does put a real smile on my face. I nod, run my hands over the book I poured my heart and soul into, and try to ignore the fact that soon, everything will change.

Fallon appears on my other side, his arm brushing mine as he reaches to flip the book over to look at the front. His fingers slide over my name, and I finally gather the courage to look at him. His eyes are impossible to read. Guarded.

“Congrats, Jen,” he says in that deep, rumbling voice. “I’m happy for you.”

I just nod, sadness sinking deep into my gut. He’s leaving. He’ll be gone soon. “Thanks.”

Suddenly I can’t take it anymore. I have to say it out loud. “Fallon quit,” I tell Amanda, jabbing my thumb toward his chest. Then I clamp my mouth shut and turn to look at him.

“You quit?” Amanda says, her voice quiet, subdued. “Do you have another job lined up?”

Fallon looks at her over my head, and I just want to shrink down to nothing. He sweeps a broad palm over his jaw and releases a sigh. “I’ve got things I need to do.”

Amanda frowns. “Things?”

Fallon looks at me, then looks at Amanda, and nods to the back door. “Can I talk to you?”

They’re gone for a few long minutes. Amanda comes back first, her face drawn. She grabs her bag from the counter beside me and gives me a curt nod. “Let me know what you think. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Is everything okay?”

She pinches her lips, then drops her shoulders. “I broke up with Fallon five years ago, and I thought it was the right decision. Then I came here, and it felt like a mistake. I missed him. Who wouldn’t?” She huffs and glances at the back door before sliding her eyes back to mine. “It was stupid of me to hold on to the past. I know it never would have worked between us. We’re too different.” She slaps a hand on her forehead and squeezes her eyes shut. “I think I just need to get laid. Badly.”

I stand completely, utterly still. I’m not sure if I’m uncomfortable or happy or upset.

Her eyes open and land on me. “Anyway, it’s over now. Really over.”

Happy. I’m happy. Does that make me an awful person?

“And...how do you feel about it being over between the two of you?”

Amanda releases a sigh and gives me a tight smile. “I’ll live.” She hooks her bag over her shoulder and looks at me strangely. “How do *you* feel about Fallon leaving?”

“Terrible,” I tell her honestly.

She snorts. “I like you, Jen. I’ll call you later about your comments on the book.” Then she’s turning around and walking out to the front of house, her heels clicking on the floors with every step.

A gust of air tells me Fallon is back. Our eyes meet for a moment, and I’m the first to look away.

*Trina*

“I’m not going to go,” I tell Candice.

She whirls to face me, mascara wand in hand. “Excuse me?” She’s got one eye done as she shoves the wand back in its tube and points it at me. “What did you just say?”

I snap my blush shut. “I’m not going to the gallery. Why would I? Kevin’s only showing pieces in Heart’s Cove because he wants to get to me. He wants to weasel his way back into my life. If I don’t go, he can’t do that. He won’t win.” I glance at the door, intending to walk downstairs to tell Allie I don’t need her to babysit the kids after all.

“No, if you don’t go, he *will* win.” Fiona steps out of the en-suite bathroom, a curling iron in hand. “If you go, look at his stupid paintings, and show him that you don’t care what he does, he’ll know that this is *your* town. If you stay away, you’re telling him he can stomp all over your turf.”

“Plus, Mac is showing some pieces too.” Simone walks in with a fresh bottle of wine.

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” I answer.

Everyone rolls their eyes. Even Jen, who’s the designated driver and therefore not full of wine like the rest of us.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Fiona says, thrusting her glass out for a refill.

“Guys, I already told Mac I didn’t want anything with him. He said he missed me and I told him I wasn’t interested. It’s done. As in, finished.”



“So?” Simone gives me the sassiest eyebrow arch I’ve ever seen.

“This is stupid,” I say, but I flip my blush compact back open. “Going there tonight is a bad idea.”

“Going there tonight is a *great* idea,” Candice says. “You’ll look like a bombshell, you’ll fangirl over Mac’s pottery while totally ignoring Kevin’s dumb, pretentious paintings, and then you’ll catwalk out of there without even giving that asshole the time of day.”

I have to admit, when my sister says it like that, it does sound pretty good. So that’s how, an hour later, I end up in front of a previously vacant store which has been transformed into a bright gallery with all-white walls. When we pile out of Jen’s car and stand outside, the door bursts open.

My mother stumbles out. “It’s terrible in there. Not worth it.” She points to the car. “We should go.”

I frown. “What?”

Candice’s eyes are narrowed as she meets my mother’s wide-eyed gaze. “What are you talking about, Mom?”

“Terrible exhibit. Terrible art. Waste of time.” She turns me around and pushes me toward the car.

“Mom, stop.” I shake her off. “What’s gotten into you? If it’s terrible, won’t it be more entertaining?”

“No. Awful. Waste of time.” She spins me around again and I sidestep her, only to see Dorothy and Margaret in the doorway.

They both shake their heads. “It’s a bust, ladies. Let’s go to the Cedar Grove for a drink.”

I exchange a glance with the girls and plant my hands on my hips. “What the hell is going on here?”

My mother wrings her hands. Let me repeat that: my mother, Lottie Viceroy, the woman who has never been unsure of anything in her life, *wrings her hands*. “I really think it’s best if you don’t go in there, honey,” she tells me. “It’s...it’s Kevin’s stuff. It’s bad.”

“Bad, how?” I ask, a pit opening up in my stomach.

“Just...*bad*.” She jerks her head to the car. “Please, sweetheart?”

I stare at my mother, and finally shake my head. “Nothing he can do is that bad, Mom. I just spent two hours getting ready while I let these girls convince me this was a good idea. I’m going in there.”

Dorothy sucks in a breath and looks at Margaret, and they finally step aside for me to walk into the gallery.

The first thing I see is Mac’s work. Three vases are displayed on their own white, knee-high pedestals, each of them more gorgeous than the last. They’re huge—almost as tall as me—all sweeping curves and fluted openings. The first reminds me of the vase I broke, but it’s about three times the size. It’s painted in deep purple and navy blues, with splatters of a starry night sky. There’s some sort of metallic glaze in the starry splatter, making the whole thing twinkle like a true night sky. The middle vase is all bright yellow and orange and vibrant green, like a midsummer’s day. It has two big, gracefully curved handles. The third vase is breathtaking. It’s tall and thin with a rolled top, glazed to look like a sunrise—or maybe a sunset.

I stop short, breathless.

I had no idea he was capable of this. The pieces he made for Four Cups are simplistic compared to these three vases. There’s no other way to describe them but pure, soul-shattering beauty—made by his own strong hands.

“Wow,” Simone says beside me.

“I know,” I whisper.

“Oh, that *ass*,” Candice mumbles from the other side, and, frowning, I follow her gaze to the far wall.

And my stomach bottoms out.

Four massive canvases are displayed on the back wall of the gallery, and I know Kevin’s work the moment I see it. Oil paint, all vibrant colors and hyper-realism.

He painted me.

The first canvas is me in bed, wearing my favorite pajamas, a silky, olive-green cami-and-short set that used to cling to my body in a way I liked. He's painted me lying on my side, all soft curves, my clothes hiked up high over my hips and my breasts nearly spilling out of my top. It's...vulgar. My nipples are poking through the fabric, the straps falling off my shoulders. My hair is spread over the pillow in a wild halo. I stare at it, heart thumping, feeling oddly, horribly violated. He took a moment of vulnerability—when I was literally asleep in his bed—and presented it to the world. He put me on display.

The second canvas is me, crying with slashes of red and black behind me. Mascara is streaked down my face, red lipstick smudged. I look like a fucking mess.

The third painting is a depiction of me walking away, Katie held over my hip as Toby walks beside me with his hand in mine. There are suitcases beside us, and I'm looking over my shoulder, through the canvas, the picture of an angry, venomous woman.

And the fourth canvas is a self-portrait of Kevin, head in hand, tears spilling down his cheeks, hair disheveled. Pathetic and sad and in need of sympathy.

Together, they tell a story, and the story is: She was perfect when she was meek, quiet, *asleep*, until she blew up and took my kids away, leaving me on my own.

“He's literally painted himself as the victim,” I say, stunned. My voice is muted, far away. Somehow, my feet have carried me closer to the canvases, and I laugh when I see the price tags. “He wants twenty-five hundred dollars for each of these.” I turn to Candice, who's standing beside me with her hand over her mouth.

My sister meets my gaze, horrified. And that's when I realize the room has gone silent. Dozens of pairs of eyes are on me as I turn my back to the paintings and watch each and every person in the room make the connection.

My heart thumps. I want the ground to swallow me up, because this is the most humiliating moment of my life. My ex-husband, the decorated, genius artist, has painted a story that in no way reflects reality. The people staring at me whisper behind raised hands, and I can hear what they're saying.

*That's her. That's the woman who took his kids and left him.*

I want to scream. Where's the painting that shows him cheating on me? Where's the painting that shows me raising our kids? Where's the painting of me giving him thirteen years of my life? Where's the painting of every snide comment he made to cut me down?

I'm shaking. I can barely stand. I grip my sister's arm so hard she winces, but I can't let go or I'll fall. I can't... I don't...

*What the fuck?*

Kevin appears in my line of vision, a smug smile on his lips. He spreads his arms. "What do you think, Katrina? Some of my best work, no?"

"No," I answer.

Kevin chuckles and joins me, looking up at his paintings. "I think I captured the essence of the past year quite well, actually."

"You had no right to paint me," I hiss.

"The muse strikes at the oddest times," he replies, eyes on the painting of me in bed.

I feel sick. I need a shower. I need to scrub my body raw just to get rid of this slimy feeling on my skin.

I want to rip it up. I want to take a knife and tear through that canvas until it's reduced to ribbons. I want to burn it from my memory, from everyone else's mind. I want to erase this from existence, *forever*.

A woman in all black hurries toward us. She leans toward Kevin, her face pulled tight with excitement. "Mr. Paulson,

we've just had an offer on all four pieces."

Kevin's eyes dart to me, triumph written in his gaze. "All four of them to the same buyer?"

I'm going to puke.

"There's just one condition," the woman says quietly. "They ask to take possession of the paintings immediately."

Kevin's eyes leave mine as he frowns, looking at the gallery manager. "Immediately? So they wouldn't be displayed beyond tonight?" He glances around the room. "There aren't even fifty people in the room, and they're all from around here." His voice goes up. "No one has seen these yet! No one important, anyway."

The woman spreads her palms. "It's your choice, of course, but it's a very generous offer." She drops her voice. "The buyer said that he would double the purchase price to take possession immediately. He was quite taken with them."

"Double—" Kevin chokes on the word, then he can't agree fast enough. "Yeah, of course. Sure. He's got great taste." He smiles, eyes flicking back to me. "The buyer was quite *taken* with these, Trina, so I guess I have you to thank."

The woman produces a paper from a black folder held under her arm, and with a few quick strokes of his pen, Kevin makes the deal in front of me.

Twenty thousand dollars. Someone paid twenty grand to buy these four paintings right now because they loved my pain so much. What kind of sick fuck would—

Mac walks out from a side room and nods to the gallery manager, then strides to the first painting—the one of me in bed. He tears it off the wall and tosses it facedown on the floor. It lands with a loud slap on the hardwood. Everyone jumps.

I look at the wooden frame, the canvas stapled around the edges, then back at Mac.

He's already got the second canvas in hand and is tossing it down on top of the first. It clatters down, then slides off the

first one, landing at an angle.

The crowd gasps. I look up to see my mother on the other side of the room, both hands held to her mouth.

The third canvas lands on top of the other two, and I finally snap out of my stupor.

I look at Mac—really *look* at him—for the first time. He’s dressed in black jeans and a perfectly fitted white tee, his leather jacket unzipped and hanging open. His hair is mussed, face covered in scruff and jaw set in a tight line.

He reaches for the last painting, the self-portrait of Kevin crying, then pauses. Ignoring Kevin, he turns to me. “I think this one should stay up. What about you?”

“I...” I gulp. “Mac, what are you... I’m... I don’t...”

“I’ll give you a moment to decide.” He walks to the paintings tossed on the floor and picks them up under an arm. They’re so big they brush the ground as he carries them toward the back door.

I follow him, mute, as someone opens the door for him to step through.

In the back alley, a big green dumpster looms. Mac slings the three canvases over the lip and brushes imaginary dust off his hands, then turns to me. “That fourth one. You want it in here with the others, or you want everyone to see an accurate representation of the kind of man your ex really is?”

*Oh. My. God.*

I gulp, trying to find my voice. “Leave it up,” I finally croak.

Mac nods, his face remaining grim. Determined. He pats the pockets of his jeans, front and back, then his jacket, and finally reaches into his breast pocket to pull out a silver Zippo lighter. He flicks it open and lights it. It flickers in the gentle breeze, and his eyes return to mine. “Your choice, babe. Say the word, and those pieces of trash are going up in flames.”

“Trash!” Kevin splutters behind me. “You can’t do this. You can’t ruin them. That’s *my* art! I haven’t even had time to

have these recorded and photographed for my *catalogue raisonné*. If you burn them, it's like they don't even exist. That's my best work!"

The gallery owner clears her throat. "Mr. Paulson, you signed the papers, which means—"

"He *can't* do this!" Kevin marches out, red-faced, hurrying to the side of the dumpster.

Mac's eyes are still on me, and I feel something beautiful and warm spread through my body. This is the feeling I had when he showed up to take me home when my car broke down after Fiona's wedding. This is what I was missing at the airport, when I had to say goodbye to my kids.

It's someone in my corner. Someone who stands up for me. Someone who isn't afraid to fight for me.

I know I'm able to stand on my own. I know I can navigate this world without anyone by my side...but do I have to? Do I have to make my own way when there's someone who could be my strength when I feel weak? There's power in being alone, but being with someone else doesn't mean I have to give that up. I can be in a relationship without abandoning my sense of self.

I know myself now, probably better than ever. And I know that Mac is nothing like Kevin. He's willing to burn fifteen thousand dollars' worth of art—for me. He's willing to erase these pieces from existence—for me.

Tears welling in my eyes, I give Mac a watery smile, and I nod. "Burn them."

He tosses the lighter, and Kevin shrieks. "There's still time—they're flame-resistant! We can still get them out."

The fire whooshes, and the smell of burning garbage fills the alley.

Mac closes the distance between us and hooks an arm around my waist. He tugs me close, his eyes never leaving mine. When he speaks, his voice is a low growl. "I'm in love with you, Trina. If you want to wait until Katie's out of my

class, I'll wait, but I just need you to know that as soon as that last bell rings, I'll be heading straight for you."

Tears are flowing freely now, and I barely even hear Kevin's pathetic wails. All I see is Mac, the firelight from the burning dumpster flickering over his face, the soft leather of his jacket stretched over his broad shoulders, his tousled hair, and the expression on his face that tells me he's telling the absolute truth.

He'll wait for me. He loves me. He's *in* love with me.

"I don't want to wait," I tell him.

Then Mac Blair, master potter and motorcycle enthusiast—teacher, lover, protector—kisses me like his life depends on it. I lose myself to him, in him, and I finally let myself fall.

"*You*," Kevin says, marching close to us. "You're the soccer coach. You're the biker. *You're Katie's teacher*." He rears back, staring at me. "You fucking whore." He whirls on Mac. "I'll have you fired. I'll place a complaint."

"I don't give a fuck," Mac tells him, then slides his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. "Now if you'll excuse me, my woman and I have somewhere to be."

"*No!*" Kevin screeches again. "I'm calling the police! This is assault."

"Let's go, babe," Mac says, his lips close to my ear, and my lips twitch.

When I glance at the crowd spilling out of the gallery's back door, it only takes me a moment to find my new girl gang, my mother, the ladies from the hotel, and my face splits into a smile.

All of them throw their hands up and scream in delight, which causes Kevin to wail louder.

I laugh, hook my arm around Mac's waist, and let him walk me down the alley and onto the street. His motorcycle is parked near the curb, and I arch my brows. "I thought you put this thing away for the winter."



“Weather’s been nice, and I needed to ride tonight, especially since I knew there was a chance I’d see you. I was planning on the fact that I’d need to clear my head.”

My eyes flick up to his, and I find myself reaching up to brush my fingers over his cheek. “I’m sorry I pushed you away.”

He turns his head and kisses my palm, then speaks against it. “I’m glad you did,” he says, turning back to face me while I run my palm over his jaw. “It made me realize how much I care about you. If you hadn’t pushed me away, I probably would have sabotaged what we had and hated myself for it. I think I needed the time apart to reflect.”

I blink back tears. “Me too,” I whisper.

Mac smiles, then produces a brand-new, robin’s-egg-blue helmet from one of the bike’s saddle bags.

I let out a happy little squeal. “I love this color. I have pants exactly this shade.”

“I know,” Mac says, slinging his leg over the seat and lifting the kickstand. “You wore them the first day of school.”

I meet his gaze, heart thumping. “You remember what I wore that day?”

“You looked beautiful. The moment I saw you in my doorway, deep down, I knew I loved you.” He says it matter-of-factly, as if telling me he loves me for the second time ever isn’t completely earth-shattering.

Then I glance down at the helmet. “You must have been awful sure that I’d come back to you when you bought this.”

Mac gives me a half grin, eyes glimmering. “A man can dream, can’t he?” When I plant my hands on my hips, helmet still in hand, Mac jerks his head. “Woman, strap your helmet on, get behind me, and wrap those arms around my waist. I’m taking you home.”

So, lips twitching, I strap my helmet on, get behind him, wrap my arms around his waist, and I let him take me home.

## *Epilogue*

TRINA

**T**hat evening, Mac and I make up for lost time. We're barely through the door and clawing at each other, frantic. We have sex right there on the living room floor. Then again in his bed. Then a third time in the shower.

I'm going to be sore tomorrow.

When I'm sprawled on top of Mac's chest, my mind flits back to those gorgeous vases. After I ask Mac about his inspiration, he hums, fingers sifting through my hair. "Originally, I was only going to do the night sky."

"Like the one I broke," I cut in.

Mac chuckles. "Like the one you broke." His fingers keep moving through my hair as he inhales. "But the evening after I dropped you off at your place when you needed a tow, I started thinking about our time together. The sunset we watched when we had ice cream. The daylight streaming through the windows when we—you know."

"Hooked up?"

"Yeah." I can hear the smile in his voice.

"You were inspired by...me?" The question comes out small.

Mac's arms tighten around me. He curls a finger under my chin to tilt my head up, his eyes soft. "Every damn day, Trina."

I didn't think I had it in me, but we end up going for round four.

As much as I want to stay the night, when I get out of the shower and wrap a towel around myself, I let out a long sigh. “I need to go home to my kids. My mother is there, but I have to be there when they wake up.”

I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, and Mac sits next to me. He places a kiss on my neck. “I’ll get dressed; we can take the truck.”

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WE DECIDE to take things slow for the next six months. He’s still Katie’s teacher, and we still need to be discreet. I need to make sure my kids won’t freak out about me dating anyone, and the last thing I want to do is have men in and out of their lives.

But when we pull up outside the house and Mac gives me a sweet, lingering kiss, I know in my heart he’s here to stay.

“We’ll have one weekend a month to ourselves,” I tell him. “Is that enough?”

“Every single night with you wouldn’t be enough, Trina, but I’ll take what I can get.”

I put a hand to my chest, because my heart just exploded. Then we kiss some more, until I tear myself away and sneak back into my own house, a big smile painted across my face.

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KEVIN DOES, in fact, complain to the school, but since there’s no rules against Mac and me dating, and we agree to keep things discreet until the end of the year, there’s nothing that can be done. I have a feeling that if it came down to it, Mac would quit before breaking up with me, and that is truly an amazing feeling.

Not that I’d want him to lose his job, but just knowing that he’d actually put me first. He’d value our relationship more than anything else.

So, we spend a few torturous months stealing moments together, spending weekends alone when Kevin has the kids, and trying to do our best to keep our hands off each other when we need to. It's hard, but it also feels a bit scandalous and hot.

I focus on my business, and by the time a few more months have passed, I'm making a pretty steady income. Not much, but enough to make ends meet. The business is growing, though, and I pour my heart into it. I love being my own boss. I love helping other women feel better about themselves. And most of all, I love that *I* did this.

From January till June, I feel like I'm going to burst—but the time is welcome, and it lets me broach the subject of me and Mac with the kids. It gives me time to make sure they're okay with me dating, they're adjusting well, and they won't freak out when Mac does start showing up at home.

On the last day of school, Toby and Katie come home high on life, happy to be done with another year, and I ask them if they'd be okay with a friend of mine coming to dinner.

We're in the living room as Katie greets Mr. Fuzzles. Toby flops down on the sofa and frowns. "What kind of friend?"

I take a deep breath. "A special friend."

"Your boyfriend?" Katie asks, eyes wide. Mr. Fuzzles hops onto her lap, curling into a ball on top of her.

My heart thumps. I've spent months getting ready for this conversation, but it still feels so, so difficult. I nod at my daughter. "Yeah. My boyfriend."

She exchanges a glance with her brother, then looks at me. "What's his name?"

"Well, that's the thing." I bite my lip and let out a little awkward laugh. "It's Mr. Blair. Mac."

Katie's brows draw close together, that wrinkle in her nose on full display. "Your boyfriend is my teacher?" She glances at her brother, then bursts out laughing. She picks up Mr. Fuzzles and lifts him up so the cat's face is in line with hers. "Did you hear that, kitty? Mommy and Mr. Blair are dating."

Mr. Fuzzles flicks his tail, and Katie glances at me. “He says it’s okay with him.”

Toby snorts and rolls his eyes.

I sit next to him. “If you don’t want him to come over for dinner, it’s okay, honey. He doesn’t have to.” The words are hard to say, because all I want is for my kids to spend time with Mac. After all these months, I want him to be part of my life—part of *all* of it. Not just weekends alone, or a few hours when Mom is watching the kids. I want him to be welcome here, and hopefully, eventually, sleep over.

Toby just pushes himself up and gives me a little grin. “It’s fine, Mom. Just don’t like, kiss him or anything gross like that.”

I let out a little laugh. “I’ll try not to.”

“I like Mr. Blair. I’m glad he’s coming over,” Katie announces, putting the cat down and standing up. She looks at me. “I’m hungry.”

Heart brimming, I stand up. “Let’s get you some food then.”

A few hours later, after coaxing my mother to spend the evening with her girlfriends, the doorbell rings. Toby changed into a button-down shirt and combed his hair. Katie put a dress on. Neither of them was asked to do this, and seeing them peer down the hallway toward the door makes my lips curl into a smile.

I open the door to see Mac on the doorstep, all jeans, motorcycle boots, and leather, and everything inside me softens.

“Hey,” he says, a question in his eyes.

“Hi,” I answer, then open the door wider so he can step through. “Come in.”

His shoulders drop, and a smile tilts his lips. “The kids were okay with me coming over, then?”

“Hi Mr. Blair!” Katie screams from down the hall. She comes tearing around the corner. “Mommy and I made cookies

for you just now. They're in the oven."

"Is that your motorcycle?" Toby says, eyes wide. "Can I ride it?"

"Absolutely not," I answer, while Mac says, "Sure, as long as your legs can reach the foot pegs."

I glare at him, and Mac laughs. He looks at Toby. "We might have to work on your mom for a bit before she says yes."

"Work on me, huh," I say, closing the door behind him. Suddenly this dinner doesn't seem like such a great idea.

Mac grins as he kicks off his motorcycle boots, and my heart seizes at the sight of them next to all our shoes. They belong there, I realize. Just like he belongs here. With me—with us.

"I can think of a few ways to change your mind," Mac says, slinging an arm over my shoulder and pulling me close. "If it's safe enough for Dorothy and Margaret to ride with me, it's safe enough for a ten-year-old boy."

"I'm not following that particular line of logic," I grumble, but my lips betray me with a twitch.

Toby sees it, and his eyes sparkle. He glances at Mac. "It's working."

Mac just grins, and I roll my eyes.

But the truth?

Yeah, it's working. And by the time we sit down at the table for dinner together and I see my kids settle into comfortable conversation with Mac, I know I'll do anything to make sure this is how we stay for the rest of time.

Together. Happy.

A family.

*Jen*

**T**his was a terrible idea.

I lock my apartment door and let out a sigh.

I should not be doing this.

Tossing a duffel bag into the back of my car, I lean against the back door and look up at the clear blue sky. In a few short minutes, I'll be driving across town to the set of the hottest new televised baking competition. I'll compete against five other teams for the chance at winning a hundred thousand dollars, some free publicity, and a bigger "profile" that Amanda insists I need.

I still don't know how she convinced me to sign up for this. She said she had a young apprentice pastry chef lined up to be my partner, and laid out some pretty logical arguments about promotion, social media, and book sales. Not to mention a hundred grand to start my own bakery if I win.

But actually signing up for this crazy thing? I blame Fallon leaving. I was reeling, shocked, and I ended up hitting "submit" on the application for the TV show before I could talk myself out of it. Then I had six months to agonize over the decision to compete while I missed Fallon day after day after day.

He left a hole in the kitchen at Four Cups, and it's my own fault for pushing him away.

The drive is short, so I delay by taking the long way through town. When I turn onto Cove Boulevard, I frown at

the sight of a familiar Jeep parked in front of the Four Cups Café.

That looks a lot like Fallon's car. It's black, just like his, and has that dent in the front bumper he never got fixed. I wish I remembered his license plate so I could check.

Is he back? After six months of radio silence, he's at Four Cups right now?

Frowning, I slow as I look in the café windows, trying to spot a familiar hulking shape of the man who left half a year ago. Then, seeing no one, I shake my head and turn my face forward.

There are thousands of Jeeps around. Lots of people have dented bumpers.

Fallon left, and he never looked back. He told me he needed to do something bigger and better with his life, and can I really blame him? I'm here doing the same thing.

I check the rearview mirror and glance at that Jeep again. I could have sworn...

My turn comes up, so I take it, and the black Jeep disappears from view. It's not him. Fallon left. He told me he wasn't coming back. He had that tortured, sad look on his face, and he said the words, "There's nothing left for me here."

That includes me.

I wasn't enough to hold him here. He wasn't enough to risk the book.

Fair's fair.

We kissed once over a year ago. Why do I even care?

Fallon's gone, and I'm about to be on television with a co-competitor I've never even met.

It's going to be a total shitshow.

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# *Dirty Little Midlife Debacle*

A DELICIOUSLY FUNNY ROMANTIC COMEDY

I like to win.

Mostly, when I put my mind to it, I do.

But this particular challenge...I'm not sure I can pull it off.

A big farmhouse looms in front of me, imposing with its white siding, black shutters, and gently pitched roof. It would be idyllic, if not for the army of TV-production ants carrying various pieces of equipment and thick rolls of cable currently rushing in and out of every door. To my left a huge barn yawns open, and I can see neat rows of kitchen islands lined up to face in one direction. Scattered around the vast surrounding land, nestled in copses of trees and patches of grass, are a number of guest cabins.

The Heart's Cove Manor Retreat has been repurposed for a televised baking competition—and I let my publisher persuade me to participate.

I may have insinuated I thought I would win.

So, you know. No pressure.

“You must be Jen!” A man in his late twenties wearing a headset with the wire dangling down to a device clipped to his belt comes hurrying toward me. He's thin, with dark navy jeans and a slim-fitting black tee. With a mess of blond curls on his head and a broad, disarming smile, the man spreads his arms. “Welcome, welcome. I'm Gus.”

“Hi, Gus,” I answer, shaking the hand he shoves toward me.

“I’ll be helping you get settled. If you need anything, let me know.” He flashes his wide smile at me again, but it doesn’t unknot any of the tension worming around my belly.

I have the sneaking suspicion I may have bitten off more than I can chew.

My eyes drift back to the barn. I wonder if Gus will let me back out of the competition, get in my car, and drive far, far away. Maybe he’d let me jump in a time machine and go back to the day I agreed to this stupid idea.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Gus beams, following my eyes to the barn. “We’ve been working for weeks to get the set prepared. I can’t *wait* for you to find out what the judges have planned for you. This show is going to be huge. *Huge.*” He spreads his arms wide as if to say, *this big*, then swings his gaze back to me with a decisive nod. “You’ll love it.”

“What happens to the barn once filming is over?”

“Well, that was serendipity. The managers at the manor have been wanting to offer cooking classes, and we at the show were happy to renovate the space—in exchange for a lower rate for the rooms, of course. We’ll leave the amenities when we leave.”

“Huh.”

“Enough of that, though. Follow me!”

Before I can react, Gus is halfway across the lawn, striding to the farmhouse’s front door. I grab my bag from the back seat of my car, which is parked in a gravel area at the front of the house, and hurry behind Gus.

When we reach the entrance, he glances over his shoulder. “I went to Four Cups this morning and tried one of your croissants. Divine.” He kisses his fingers. “The crew have a betting pool going, and you’re my pick to win this thing.”

“Oh, great.” I give him a weak smile. Pressure squeezes a little tighter around my chest.

Four Cups is the café that I part-own with my three closest friends. I’m in charge of all things related to baked goods and

have made a bit of a name for myself in Heart's Cove, our little Northern California town of artists and eccentrics.

I wish I was in the Four Cups kitchen right now. Being neck-deep in experimental recipes and baking chemistry would be much, *much* preferable, but then I wouldn't get the chance to win the hundred-thousand-dollar prize. My brand-new recipe book wouldn't get beamed to a whole new audience, and I'd stay stuck in the same comfort zone I've been in for years.

So even though all I want to do is bolt, the logical part of me tells me to stay. Staying means opportunity, and opportunity means career advancement. Haven't I already sacrificed a lot to get here? Why stop now?

Plus...I *do* really like to win.

Still, I can't quite shake the feeling that this is a mistake.

I don't do television or public appearances, and if I'm honest, I mostly avoid social interaction—unless I'm already comfortable with whoever it is I'm supposed to be interacting with. I might as well have INTROVERT tattooed in big, black letters across my forehead.

But hey—a baking show sounds perfect. Stick me in front of a bunch of cameras, ask me to do near-impossible baking tasks that my perfectionist brain will no doubt short-circuit trying to achieve, and watch the fireworks.

This is either genius, or—more likely—a disaster in the making.

Amanda, my publisher, pitched it to me as the perfect way to launch my new recipe book. The book was released three months ago and already shortlisted for half a dozen awards. All those hours I spent in a baking frenzy late at night—and early in the morning—have already paid off. I'm simultaneously elated that my dream is becoming a reality, and worried that everyone will realize I'm a fraud.

It doesn't help that I'm allergic to social interaction. I have the charisma of a bridge troll.

When the book came out, my first interview was over email. The publisher of *Bon Appetit* magazine sent me a list of questions to answer, and it took me three whole weeks to type out a few sentences. My hands shook too much to write out the answers until I got myself tipsy and coerced my girlfriends to type while I dictated.

My second interview was for a local news station. The anchor asked me a grand total of four questions outside the Four Cups Café on a sunny spring morning in Heart's Cove. I puked afterward and refused to watch the news for two weeks.

Look, I said I was a high achiever and a winner. I never claimed to enjoy the spotlight.

Yet here I am, following a spry young man named Gus who has money on me winning the whole competition. Bold of him to assume I won't faint when the cameras start recording.

You know what would be a better bet to take? Maybe one where I run away screaming as soon as someone calls, "Action!"

*Deep breaths.*

I'm a grown woman. I'm successful. I restarted my career in my thirties, and I can do a silly little televised competition. Piece of cake. Literally.

We walk into a large foyer and past a comfortably furnished living area. Six or seven people are talking animatedly as they sip sparkling drinks, and they all turn to stare at me as I walk past.

I give a little wave.

Gus stops. "A few of your fellow competitors." He sweeps his hand toward the living room.

Two big, burly men stand up to shake my hand.

"Reg," one of them says.

"Call me Tex," the other one growls, his meaty paw nearly crushing my fingers when he squeezes my hand. "Texas born and bred, here to show y'all how things are done." He keeps

his hand wrapped around mine as he stares in my eyes. “You’re Jen Newbank. I bought your book when it came out.”

“Oh.” I arch my brows. “Thanks.”

They get shoved aside when an old woman butts in. She speaks to me in rapid-fire Spanish and I just stare at her, wide-eyed.

A younger version of her—daughter, probably—hustles up. “Mamá, she doesn’t speak Spanish.” She flicks her long dark ponytail over her shoulder and sticks her hand out toward me. “I’m Emma. This is my mom, Carla. Big Tex says we’re the wildcards.” She gives the big man a smile, and her mother just rolls her eyes.

“Wildcards,” she huffs, then clicks her tongue before saying something in Spanish that has Emma’s cheeks going red as her lips fight to keep a smile down. I’d put money on Carla having a dirty mouth and a love of creative insults.

“Mamá, please. You can’t say that kind of thing when the cameras are rolling.” Emma gives her mother a loaded stare.

Carla’s gaze cuts to me. She winks.

The last two people in the room are a husband-and-wife team from Idaho who introduce themselves as Tori and Hank. They own a cake-decorating shop, and when the woman wraps her arms around me, her whole body is soft and smells like sugar. She gives *amazing* hugs, and I immediately feel better when she pulls away—and that’s saying a lot, because I’m not a hugger.

“Okay, okay people!” Gus cuts in. “You can get to know each other once Jen is set up in her room.” Gus starts marching down the hallway, and by the time I grab my bag from the floor he’s nearly out of sight. “Follow me! Chop-chop—*ha*, get it?” He grins, then ducks around a corner.

I hurry to catch up. We walk past two bathrooms and a huge kitchen teeming with a crew of caterers. A hallway juts out to the back of the house and Gus tells me there are six bedrooms there. “For the crew,” he says. “I hope you don’t mind, the other competitors have their own guesthouses, but

since you don't know your partner very well and the only guesthouse remaining was a one-bedroom unit, well, we thought it would be better to give you your own space."

"Yes." I let out a sigh. "Much better."

I follow him up the creaky, carpet-covered stairs and hike my bag higher on my shoulder. "How many people are competing in this thing, again?" I know Amanda told me about the competition, but I was simultaneously freaked out about being on TV and fantasizing about what I'd do with my winnings, and therefore unable to listen.

"Eight teams of two. We'll film five elimination challenges—one on Week One, two on Week Two, and two on Week Three—until there are three teams left for the finale during Week Four. Production will last one month. You'll get every Sunday off." Gus pauses at the top of the stairs. He turns on the landing and grips the bannister, looming above me on the stairway. "I was really sorry to hear about your partner, by the way."

I frown up at him. "My partner? What happened?" Amanda organized a baking apprentice to work alongside me months ago. A young woman named Mary-Ann, who is apparently very good with chocolate.

Gus tilts his head. "You didn't hear about your own partner pulling out of the competition?"

Uh-oh. "I never even met her."

Gus lets out a long sigh and stares at the ceiling. "That would have been *great* television. Oh well." He turns around and takes a step before I stop him.

"Wait. What happened?"

"Broke her legs in a water-skiing accident, poor girl," Gus says with a wave of his hand. "Got the call this morning right after I finished one of your amazing croissants at the café, which was fortunate, all things considered."

Frowning, I watch him turn around and stride down the hallway. "Why were my croissants fortunate?" None of this

makes any sense. I hustle to catch up to him. “Will I be competing alone?”

I’m shuffling behind him, readjusting my bag on my shoulder for the thousandth time and trying to remember what the hell I packed that was so damn heavy.

“No, of course not. We got a replacement. Like I said, fortunate.” He stops at a door. “Your room, madam,” Gus says with a bow and a flourish, gesturing to the closed room.

The knob turns freely and I push the door open, stepping onto the threshold to get a look at where I’ll be staying.

The first thing I hear is a strange ruffling sound, but nothing looks out of place. To my relief, the room is nice and well-appointed, with a neat double bed and sturdy timber furniture. When Amanda pitched this show to me, I was imagining zero privacy, but she assured me the only filmed portions of the show would be the actual baking competition. *It’s not a reality show*, she assured me. *Very classy. Very professional.*

At least the production costs cover private rooms. I drop my bag just inside the door.

There are no bunk beds in sight, which alleviates my biggest fear of being on a television competition bunking with a bunch of strangers. Even better, everyone will be out in the guesthouses so hopefully I won’t need to interact with them much more than necessary.

Look. I know that sounds bad, but it’s the truth. I’m an introvert and a homebody. Simone, Fiona, and Candice—my co-owners at Four Cups—can be the town’s social butterflies. I’m happiest when I’m surrounded by baked goods and houseplants.

Another ruffling sound ripples through the room, followed by a snap, like a tea towel being flicked. Frowning, I glance around the tidy space for the source of the noise, then look down at myself and my bag. No stray straps, nothing that would sound like a snap.

What in the world?



The snapping sound rings out again, twice in quick succession. I glance back at Gus, who looks horrified by something inside the room. His eyes are angled toward the ceiling.

I take a single step inside, look up at the exposed roof rafters, and freeze.

Dozens of crows are perched on the beams. As soon as I cross the threshold, the cawing starts. The nearest crow cries and I just stare at it, then look forward at the wide-open window.

“Oh, dear,” Gus whispers behind me.

Then the swooping starts.

The crow nearest to me dive-bombs, swooping near my head as I double over.

I scream, throwing my hands up to protect my face. Without my hand holding onto the doorknob, the door swings open wider and more crows start their attack.

The noise is deafening. The swoops are never-ending. Crow after crow after crow attacks my head, with their talons and beaks pecking at my hair, my neck, my shoulders. I fall to my knees with a yelp, then flop forward onto my front.

Gus screams for help. I’m breathless as I try to protect my face from the swooping crows. They’re vicious as they attempt to rip apart my face—or at least that’s how it feels. Most of them just swoop close but don’t touch, but the noise of the wings and the intensity of the swoops has me screaming. My hands are clutched over the back of my head as I lie on my stomach on the floor, the insistent cawing of a murder of crows resonating from all corners of the room.

This is an omen. I don’t believe in omens, obviously, but a literal murder of crows attacking me as soon as I step foot in my room? Come on.

I quit. I’m going home. I’m locking myself in the Four Cups kitchen and baking for the next seventy-two hours straight just to wipe the memory of this from my mind.

Screw winning. I don't care about the hundred grand. This isn't worth it.

But first, I need to get the hell out of here. Gus is still screaming, and I hear the sound of his retreating footsteps as he runs away. Wonderful. I'm on my own.

I take a moment to peek over my shoulder, only to see a huge crow diving for me. I scream, shielding my head just in time to protect it from a sharp peck. Pain lashes across the back of my hand.

*Get out get out get out I need to GET OUT.*

Army-crawling backward, I feel the threshold under my toes. Good. Only a few more steps and I can close the door on this nightmare—

*Where the hell is the door?*

I glance up and scream as six crows swoop me at once. I need to close this room *now*. Another crow dive-bombs my face, cawing loudly in my ear. They're angry. There are a dozen angry crows attacking my head and I need to *close this damn door*.

Is this why the collective noun for crows is a murder? Because homicidal crows enjoy killing hapless TV-baking-show contestants? I knew this stupid show was a mistake. I knew it would be a capital-D Debacle.

I didn't think it would end with me getting my eyes pecked out.

Wings flap all around me as I try to protect my head, crawling around the floor to grab at the door. A bird lands on my back and something hard whacks down on my spine. I grunt, falling flat on my face.

“Sorry!” Gus shouts. Then he screams like banshee. “Away! Get away! *Ahhyiiiiii!*” Something whooshes above me as he swings—yep, he's swinging a broom—in the doorway as the crows flap angrily just out of reach.

My hand finally finds the doorknob and I start shuffling back, still on my knees as I use my other hand to protect my

face.

“Hurry!” Gus swings the broom again. “I’m dropping back. Close the door. Jen, what the hell are you doing, *close the door!*”

“I’m trying, damn it!” I shout into the arm shielding my face, moving back one knee-length at a time as I try to get this stupid door closed on these stupid territorial crows.

The biggest crow—the one by the door that first warned me when I entered—uses Gus’s retreat to make one last desperate attempt to kill me. It swoops at my head, its beak pecking at my skull as I screech, diving backward and pulling the door closed with me. My back slams onto the hard timber floor as I fall down and smack the back of my head, groaning as the world whirls around me.

I blink, staring at the ceiling. My heart is a drum beating inside my chest, my breaths short and sharp.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

I lift my head and see Gus leaning against the wall, panting, the broom clutched in his hands like a lifeline. He lets out a hard breath and shakes his head. “I hate birds.” He closes his eyes and rests the back of his head against the wall.

The noise of cawing and flapping wings is only slightly muffled by the door. I wonder if I should lock it, then shake my head to dispel the thought. Crows are smart, but they can’t open doors.

...Can they?

Huffing, I lift myself up to my elbows and survey the damage. My hands are full of red scratch marks, with blood beading along two particularly deep gouges. Twin black feathers cling to my pants, and when I reach up to touch the matted mess of hair on my head, I groan.

Blood smears on my fingertips tell me the final attack on my scalp did some damage.

Pounding footsteps on the stairs make me turn my head to see two paramedics—one man and one woman—rushing up

with all their gear. They kneel next to me and start asking me questions and inspecting my injuries.

“I’m fine.” I groan as I sit up. “But you’d better call the local Audubon society to take care of those crows.”

“The what society?” Gus pulls a nearby chair over and sinks into it.

“Bird people,” I answer with a sigh as the female paramedic starts cleaning the wound on my head.

Gus just shudders.

“Crows get a bad rap, but they’re supposedly really intelligent,” I say.

Gus stares at me. “Why are you defending them? They just tried to kill you.” Gus gives me the oddest look, like he might be regretting his choice to bet on me.

I close my eyes as the paramedic cleans the cut on my hand. “True.”

Once I’m tidied up and the paramedics are sure I’m not going to keel over and die, I push myself to my feet and stare at the door, then swing my eyes to Gus. “What now?”

He taps the headset and jerks his thumb to the stairs. “Just got confirmation to move you to a guesthouse. It’s on the other side of the barn. Apologies, Jen, but you’ll have to share. The team is organizing a cot.” He looks at his watch. “We’re supposed to start the pre-competition interviews with all the contestants in ten minutes, but I think we can delay that to allow you time to shower and get yourself settled on account of the crows.” He pauses and shakes his head. “I’ve worked in television for eight years, but that is *not* a sentence I ever thought I’d say.”

I nod, already exhausted. The competition hasn’t even started yet, but I’m already feeling like this was a bad, bad idea.

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GUS IS STILL HOLDING the broom as we walk across the lush green lawn, wielding it like a sword in case of swooping crows. His eyes dart to every roof eave, every treetop, body tensing at every unfamiliar noise.

I glance back at the farmhouse, seeing the open window to my assigned room and wondering how the hell the showrunners are going to get the crows out. My eyes dart to my car, and the urge to drive far away grips me—but I manage to tamp it down. I'm here; I might as well compete. I might as well win.

Even if I have to bunk with someone.

Beside my little white car is a black Jeep. Frowning, I squint to get a better look at it. I could have sworn I saw that Jeep in town when I drove here. It reminds me of—

“This way!” Gus angles down another path and the parking lot moves out of view. We walk past the huge barn and I take another peek at the state-of-the-art kitchen appliances inside, a knot of nerves tightening in my belly.

What if I fail? What if I embarrass myself?

Closing my eyes for a step, I take a deep breath.

Those fears have been my constant companions since I was a little girl. I grew up with a surgeon for a mother and a Fortune 500 CEO for a father. Needless to say, they expected a lot from me. When I told them I wanted to go into computer science, the disappointment radiating from them was palpable. It tasted rotten on my tongue.

Over the course of a decade, when they saw how fast tech was growing as a field and how successful I was, they came around.

Then I quit and became a baker.

Let me tell you, even though I was in my thirties and more than capable of making my own decisions, that was *not* a fun conversation.

Jennifer Newbank was supposed to *be somebody*. She was supposed to do her parents proud. At the very least, she was

supposed to marry somebody who was a somebody. Unfortunately, Jennifer Newbank decided she wanted to make muffins for a living.

Perfectionism doesn't quite cover how I feel about myself. It's somehow too big and too small a word. There's no amount of success that could ever be enough. No wins that make me feel satisfied. I should have been more. Done more. Achieved more.

Anyway, I'm here now, competing on a televised baking competition and being swooped by homicidal crows instead of being a brain surgeon like my mom wanted.

Gus and I find a little dirt path on the side of the barn and he gestures for me to follow. "I have confirmation that there are no crows in this cabin. I promise."

"So why are you still holding that broom like a weapon?"

"Just in case." He grins over his shoulder.

The woods open up to a clearing where a tiny log cabin sits nestled in tall grasses, a beam of bright sunlight shining across the front of the house. Charming—except my eyes are searching the trees for angry black birds.

I'm just as bad as Gus.

"We've done so much shuffling of accommodations in the past few hours. This guesthouse was supposed to be for the host, Carrie, who asked for privacy from the contestants and staff, but she got here and didn't like the isolation. She said it was creepy." He snorts, looking at me with a flat gaze. "You know what's creepy?" He doesn't wait for me to answer. "Crows."

I can't quite help the smile that tugs at my lips.

Gus hurries ahead and knocks on the door to the cabin.

I hear a muffled male voice say, "Just a minute," from the other side, and let out a tired sigh. After all those assurances that I won't be bunking with anyone, here I am.

I can survive a few weeks of sharing my space with someone else...right? Never mind that I'm now officially in

my mid-forties and I haven't lived with anyone else since college.

Maybe they'll let me stay at my own house in light of the whole crow thing. My contract requires that I stay on site, but these are extenuating circumstances...right? I know there was some clause about *force majeure*. If a murder of crows isn't an unforeseen circumstance preventing me from adhering to the contract, I don't know what is.

But Gus is standing on the doorstep, holding that broom like he's Gandalf back from the dead, and the words die on my lips.

I can do this. If I can start my career over in my thirties, publish a successful recipe book, and survive those damn crows, I can sleep in the same room as whoever is inside this cabin.

That is, until the door swings open and I see the man on the other side.

Fallon Richter is standing in the small, one-bedroom cabin, a half-emptied suitcase lying on the bed in the corner. That Jeep in the parking lot? It's his.

My heart squeezes hard at the sight of him, breath leaving my lungs in a whoosh. Words fail me.

Six and a half billion people in the world, and it had to be him.

The one who, a year ago, kissed me like a man starved. Six months ago, he quit his job at Four Cups and left without a word of warning.

My lips tingle at the sight of him, so I pinch them together to chase the feeling away.

Fallon and I didn't just *kiss*. We made out like two horny teens on the floor of the Four Cups kitchen. Then, right after Fallon told me he liked me, his ex-girlfriend showed up in town.

At his invitation.

Her name? Amanda Bailey. The woman who would become my publisher. He wanted her to meet me, which was great, but she was staying at his house—and was obviously angling to get back together with him, which was less great. I could see the lust in her eyes whenever she looked at him, the way she lingered in the kitchen when she was done meeting with me just to get the chance to talk to Fallon.

I often wondered if my recipe book was just an excuse for her to keep visiting Heart's Cove. That thought has niggled at



me for a year—am I really good enough to have my own book, or was this all just piggybacking on some poor woman’s unrequited love?

Her arrival presented me with a horrible, difficult conundrum: if I chose to pursue things with Fallon—and get more of those knee-weakening kisses—I had to get between Amanda and Fallon. It was either romance or my career.

I chose my career. Of course I chose my career. What’s one kiss in the face of a published book? What’s one man compared to my lifelong dream?

I win. It’s what I do. I choose a path and I crush whatever obstacles stand in the way.

But the past year has been torture, and the success of the book feels like ash on my tongue—especially since Fallon quit his job at Four Cups and left without looking back.

Fallon’s eyes move from Gus to me, but unlike me, he doesn’t look surprised. “Hi, Jen.”

Complicated emotions swirl inside me, and I do my best to tamp them down. So what if I kissed this man over a year ago? So what if I haven’t kissed anyone since? So what if pushing him away felt like my own chest was being shredded to pieces?

I feel confused, excited, nervous. Terrified.

*Happy.* I’m happy to see him again, even though he left without warning. Without ever giving me the chance to mend things between us.

But he’s here, in this cabin, and he’s...competing against me?

I stare. “What are you doing here?”

Gus glances from Fallon to me and back to Fallon again. “Oh, right. We were talking about this before the crows. Fallon is your replacement partner.”

My mouth goes dry. “My partner?”

Wait—Fallon is competing *with* me? I'll be spending the next four weeks cooped up in a little guesthouse, working side by side with the man who hasn't been able to look me in the eyes since I told him I didn't want to date him? The man who quit his job because I rejected him?

Fallon rubs the back of his neck, eyes flicking to me. "Um...surprise?"

"No." I drop my bag and cross my arms. "No way."

A crow caws in the distance, and Gus flinches. He looks up at the sky, then back at us. "I'll just...leave you two to get comfortable." Gus turns, surveying the trees suspiciously, still gripping the broomstick with both hands, then marches off and leaves me on the doorstep.

Fallon faces me fully, and the world suddenly feels smaller. He reaches for me and takes my bag from the ground, dropping it inside the door. "Come in, Jen. I'll explain everything."

"Explain...everything?" My feet betray me by taking a step inside, and Fallon closes the door behind me. His presence is a warm wall beside me, and I close my eyes as I catch a hint of a woodsy male scent. He's always smelled divine. I remember the way it felt to be wrapped up in his arms

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*No.* That was over a year ago. I need to get a grip.

I need to focus on winning this competition, getting a hundred grand, and starting my own bakery. *That* is what's going to happen here—nothing else.

But getting a grip is hard when a man like Fallon is involved, because another thing I haven't mentioned about Fallon is that he's drop-dead gorgeous. Not in a male model kind of way, but in a big-burly-man-who-could-throw-you-over-his-shoulder-if-he-wanted-to kind of way. Pin-you-against-the-wall kind of way.

Screw-you-till-you-forget-your-own-name kind of way.

Not that I've imagined it, or anything.

He's got thick black hair, full lips, and a neatly trimmed beard. Brown skin, brown eyes, drool-worthy body. His biceps are the size of melons, but he moves like a dancer, especially in the kitchen. Watching him cook is one of the sexiest things I've ever seen. He's totally in control. Masterful.

He makes amazing chai tea, courtesy of his mother's Indian heritage. I discovered this when he made me a thermos full of the deliciously spiced drink, unprompted, simply because he noticed that I liked drinking chai more than coffee.

So, not only is he beautiful, burly, and unimaginably sexy, he's also thoughtful, his kiss made my knees weak, and at one point, he thought it was hot that I'm a nerd who likes to bake.

Me, the nearly celibate ex-computer scientist who has an unhealthy obsession with being a high achiever. He thought *I* was sexy.

But he also invited his ex-girlfriend to town, let her stay at his place even though she was clearly pining after him, and called me a coward when I refused to date him. Then he walked away.

So...I'm not sure where that leaves us.

Fallon clears his throat, his eyes on the timber floorboards beneath our feet. "I went to Four Cups this morning."

"Why? You don't work there anymore."

He lets out a huff and lifts his gaze to the ceiling. "Maybe I wanted a coffee, Jen." His eyes drop to mine, brow arching.

I nod, chewing the inside of my lip. "Fair point."

"Maybe I wanted to see you," he grates.

My head jerks. "Did you?"

"Would that be so surprising?"

"Um..." I tilt my head. "Yes?"

The aggression in his stance softens, and Fallon does something I don't expect. He *smiles*. His eyes gleam, and it looks like he's about to say something. Maybe tease me the

way he used to before the kiss. Before Amanda. Before the whole mess between us.

But instead, he just clears his throat and the glimmer fades from his eyes. “Anyway, Gus was in line behind me. I overheard him saying your partner broke both her legs.” Fallon is staring at me, eyes serious, chest just a few inches from me. “I volunteered to take her place.”

“You...volunteered?” I’m just repeating his words, but I can’t manage much more than that. A murder of crows just tried to kill me. I’m about to embarrass myself on television. Fallon is standing in a shaft of sunlight and he looks like a god. Give me a break, okay? I can’t quite seem to focus on a single thought, especially when Fallon reaches over and takes my hand. His palm is broad, warm, and it feels like magic against my skin.

Then he pauses. “What the hell happened to your hands?” He grips my chin and tilts my head to the side. “And your head?”

“Crows.”

“Crows?”

I close my eyes. “Yes. A murderous murder of crows. It was an omen.” My head throbs as if in response to my words.

“You don’t believe in omens.” His voice slides over my skin like silk, thumb making slow sweeps across the back of my hand.

It takes me a few moments to find my voice. “Now I do. I’m going to leave. I’m going to quit this thing. It was stupid of me to agree to this competition anyway.”

“Jen,” Fallon says, and my knees wobble at the sound of my name. “Look at me.”

I open my eyes.

“You’re not going to quit. You’re going to win, you’ll expand your bakery, and you’ll fulfill every dream that ever entered that thick-skulled, rational, logic-oriented head of yours.”

A spasm grips my heart. No one—and I mean *no one*—has ever given me that kind of blind, unwavering support. Then I tilt my head, frowning. “That last part kind of sounded like an insult.”

Fallon huffs a laugh and squeezes my hand. “Jen.” His eyes warm, and my stupid, unreliable knees start wobbling again.

When he says my name like that, it makes me want to tear my clothes off, spread my arms, and scream, *TAKE ME NOW!*

Nope, nope, nope. We’re not having another kissing incident. I’m not opening myself up to feelings for him, only for another ex-girlfriend to show up, or for Fallon to decide he’s had enough of me and leave again. The past year was torture enough for me, thank you very much.

Fallon is one thing and one thing only: a distraction.

I pull my hand away. “You don’t even like me anymore. I rejected your advances and chose the book instead of you. You quit because you couldn’t stand to work next to me. You haven’t spoken a word to me in six months. Why are you here?”

A pained sort of expression crosses Fallon’s eyes. “That’s not why I quit, Jen.”

I open my mouth to ask for an explanation, but there’s a banging on the door. “Yo!” Gus calls through the door. “You’re needed on set.”

Fallon’s eyes are still on mine, and he gives me a serious look. “This conversation isn’t over.”

Why did my stomach just tighten at the way he said that?

Never mind. Doesn’t matter. Right now, I need to stay focused on winning this competition, if only to avoid thinking about all the feelings swirling inside me that don’t make any sense.

I pull open the door to find Gus leaning against his trusty broomstick.

He straightens up, glances behind me at Fallon, and nods. “Good. You’re ready. Follow me!”

---

THERE’S a camera pointed at my face. I shuffle in my hard plastic seat, which causes my arm to brush against Fallon’s. In response, he shifts to drape his arm across the back of my chair. A flush creeps up my cheeks as my heart flutters.

It’s just the cameras. That’s why I’m nervous. Not the weight of Fallon’s arm or the fact that I can smell his cologne.

“We’re here to win,” Fallon says. “Jen is the most talented baker I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and I intend to support her all the way to the finale.” He glances down at me, those lush lips tugging into a smile.

The interviewer, the show’s host named Carrie, crosses her legs as she shifts her gaze. “And you, Jen? How do you feel about being here?”

“I’m terrified,” I tell her.

Interest sparks in her eyes. “Go on.”

“Well, I’m not sure how else to put it. I’m here to win, obviously, but this whole experience is terrifying. Baking is usually something I do alone, often late at night or early in the morning, when the whole world is quiet. But now I have to somehow shift that to a high-pressure situation in front of cameras—”

“Not to mention the live audience.”

“—and...” I snap my mouth shut as Carrie’s words sink in. “The what, now?”

Fallon shifts in his seat, his fingers brushing my arm in what I assume is supposed to be a comforting movement. Except all I feel is ice water jetting through my veins.

Carrie tilts her head, blinking those long, false lashes at me. “You know that for each elimination challenge, the final hour of baking will be filmed in front of an audience, right?”

I'm frozen. My muscles must all be malfunctioning, because I can't move from my spot on the chair. I stare at Carrie, at her long blond hair pulled into a high ponytail with the ends curled, at her perfectly flicked eyeliner, at the heavy makeup that supposedly looks normal on camera. She tilts her head and blinks again. I wonder if those lashes are too heavy to hold up for long periods of time.

*Focus, Jen.*

Fallon's arm moves closer again, his fingers curling around my shoulder. "Did you not know the audience would be live, Jen?"

I part my lips as I glance at Fallon, then close them again. My throat is too dry to speak. "I'll be baking in front of people?" My voice squeaks. Then I turn, but I can't bear to look at Carrie's beautiful, showbiz face, so I look at the only other thing that happens to be directly in front of me. The camera. "I'm so screwed."

Carrie waits a beat, then exhales and claps her hands. "Oh, *you* are going to be a fan favorite. I can already tell!" She glances over her shoulder. "Gus?"

"Amazing. Breaking the fourth wall there at the end—genius. You're a natural, Jen."

"A natural?" I repeat, an edge of panic creeping into my voice. "Can we go back to the part where you revealed the audience will be live?"

Instead of answering, Gus taps his watch. "You're done. We need to get Tori and Hank in here. Next!"

Fallon helps me stand and keeps his arm around me as he leads me out of the room. It's a comforting weight across my shoulders, and when he pulls me closer, the twist in my stomach unknots. Damn my body for reacting to him without my permission.

His breath is warm near my ear. "Did you really not know about the live audience? Simone was telling me about her plans to come to every live shooting. She said she discussed it with you."

I squeeze my eyes shut as he leads me to a door. We're inside the farmhouse, in one of the ground-floor rooms repurposed for filming one-on-one interviews. I take a deep breath. "You know the adults in *Charlie Brown*?"

Fallon hums. "Yeah. What about them?"

"Well, any time someone mentioned this competition, that's all I heard. Just '*wah wa wa wah wahh wa wa.*'"

Fallon stops, his arm tightening around my shoulders as he pulls me close and ducks his face into my neck to muffle his laugh. His other arm comes to wrap around me as his chin lifts, eyes twinkling as he meets my gaze. "The worst part is, I know you're telling the truth."

I frown. "Why is that a bad thing?"

"It's not." His eyes are warm, and the corners crinkle as he smiles. "You only ever speak the truth. No white lies, no pleasantries, no polite conversation just for the sake of small talk."

"Small talk is pointless and a waste of time."

His smile widens. "I rest my case."

As I open my mouth to answer, Fallon just tugs me toward a door, and we end up in a large lounge room filled with comfortable chairs. All the contestants I met earlier are chatting excitedly, including a few new faces. Fourteen people that will all expect me to interact like a normal human being.

Would they look at me weird if I ran away screaming?

Two women, both dressed in what I can only describe as matching Daisy Duke outfits—complete with big hair, cowboy boots, cutoff jeans, and shirts tied off at the waist—jump up from their chairs and come rushing toward me. "How was it?" one of them asks, then sticks her hand out toward me. "I'm Nikki."

"Jen," I answer. "It was fine."

"More than fine," Fallon cuts in. "They said Jen was a natural."



Does he sound...*proud*?

Daisy Duke number two tilts her head. “Do you do television often?”

*Ha!* I cover a self-deprecating laugh with an awkward clearing of my throat. “Uh...no.”

“Oh.” She titters, then introduces herself as Sonia. “I’m so nervous I could puke.”

“Just don’t do it on camera,” I say, and everyone laughs, as if they think I’m joking.

Fallon’s arm tightens around my shoulders, and when I glance at him, I can tell he’s fighting a smile.

He does that a lot around me.

Fallon leads me to a seat and asks me if I want any food from the buffet tables, but I just shake my head. I can’t eat right now. Not until we get the first event out of the way.

But Fallon still comes to sit next to me with a plate piled high with all kinds of food that he holds in one hand, shifting it over to me every few minutes until I pick off a few carrot sticks, a piece of pita with hummus, and a few other bites of what’s offered. Before I know it, the showrunners are calling for us to move to the barn, and I’ve somehow eaten enough to settle my stomach and my nerves. Fallon just winks at me, then puts the empty plate in a bin of dishes.

Sneaky bugger. He fed me without me even realizing.

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THE BARN HAS BEEN KITTED out with eight baking stations, all facing the front of the room. When we enter, I notice the mezzanine level, which surrounds the entire baking space and has been filled with long wooden benches. There’s enough space for a hundred or more people to watch. I gulp, following the directions to stand behind one of the stations.

Fallon’s hand brushes the small of my back. “You okay?”

“I still can’t believe I agreed to do this,” I tell him.

He grins. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad your partner broke her legs.”

“That’s an awful thing to say.”

“At least it’s not small talk,” Fallon says quietly, his hand warm against my spine.

“True,” I mumble. “Small talk *is* horrible.”

His deep chuckle resonates in my chest. It sends something warm unfurling in the pit of my stomach. There’s something about Fallon that’s just irresistible. Always has been. He’s like a rock, a quiet, strong presence—until his hand starts sweeping up and down my spine, and heat gushes through my body.

His touch scrambles my brain, so instead of trying to talk, I turn to the front of the room.

Carrie and the two judges stop on their marks, and someone else calls for silence.

My stomach twists. “That’s Bernard Franco,” I whisper, seeing the brown-haired judge on the left. The man is a world-famous pastry chef who lives in Paris, and he happens to be my hero. “Oh my God. No. I can’t do this.”

I start turning away, and Fallon’s strong arms wrap around my waist. He pulls me tight to his body, my front mashed against his side. Despite myself, my hand flies up to rest on his chest.

His very hard, very warm chest.

Have I mentioned that Fallon is sex on legs?

“You *can* do this.” Fallon’s breath is warm on my neck, and a shiver travels down my body. “You can do anything, Jen.” When he says the words, it actually sounds like he means them. His hand brushes the small of my back once more before he allows me to pull away. I do, but mostly out of habit. My body screams for me to get close to him again. To have those comforting arms wrapped around me. To press myself against his broad body.

I feel the whisper of his touch in the pit of my stomach and lower, between my thighs. I don't understand how Fallon can have this effect on me. He *shouldn't* have this effect on me. I should be focused on what's going to happen next.

The second judge is a woman younger than me with warm blond hair pulled back in a single, thick braid. She has a lilting Irish accent when she speaks, and my eyes widen when I hear her name. Heather Brennan. The Pastry Prodigy.

I'm going to vomit. Truly. I start scanning for a bucket, then calculate the distance between me and the sink. Three steps. Maybe four.

Fallon's hand makes slow sweeps up and down my spine, moving up to squeeze my shoulder. His strong, warm fingers start kneading my neck, and despite myself, I soften. A rumble sounds in the back of his throat, as if he's enjoying touching me, too. His hand does something magical to the stiffness in my muscles. The nausea in my stomach subsides the tiniest bit.

The heat between my thighs, on the other hand, does not.

For the briefest moment, I wonder what else Fallon's hands could do. How would they feel against my bare skin? Would he be rough with me, or gentle? Would he take control?

Then I squeeze my eyes shut, because now is *not* the time.

"Welcome to *Boss Baker*," Carrie says to the camera with a sweep of her hands. One of the staff members gets her to say it again, and then they set up a teleprompter so she can run through a few lines.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, nervous energy bubbling through me.

Fallon's hand slides from my back to my hip, his fingers taking a strong grip. "Relax, Jen."

"Oh, right. Easy. Just relax," I hiss without rancor. "No problem. I'll get right on that."

His lips tilt, eyes glimmering. Damn it, I love that look on him. He's the only person besides my girlfriends that doesn't

look at me like I'm a total weirdo.

“Quiet, please!” one of the crew members calls out, and I zip my lips shut.

Fallon's hand squeezes my hip once more, then drops away. I miss his touch as soon as it leaves. My body feels bereft, untethered without his hand on me.

Sucking in a breath, I try to regain control over my own body, ignoring the imprint of Fallon's fingers branded on my flesh.

The host and judges film another version of the introduction, then have to do it again, then someone comes over and powders Carrie's face, and they do the introduction a third time, and finally our attention is directed to a box on the edge of each team's station.

We're filming online segments now, or “bite-sized” baking challenges, which will be offered to subscribers on the show's online portal. I heave a big sigh of relief when I hear no one will be eliminated.

“This is your chance to make a strong first impression,” Bernard intones, his eyes landing on each and every one of us in turn. When they land on me, they seem to linger. Or is that all in my head? His gaze moves to Fallon. “Make it count.”

“The first challenge is a mystery box,” Heather Brennan announces, her eyes scanning the room. They land on Fallon. Something like heat sparks in her eyes. Feminine interest.

The urge to vault over my counter and punch her in the throat rises within me.

Um.

It's the nerves...right?

She stares at him for a moment longer, then shifts her gaze away. “You have one hour to create one sweet and one savory muffin from the available ingredients.”

Carrie, with her straight, white teeth and her perfect television face, smiles wide for the camera. “Your time starts...*now*.”

*Fallon*

There's nothing sexier than a woman who knows what she's doing. Watching Jen work is the most unexpectedly erotic thing I've ever seen. She flicks the white sheet off the mystery box and immediately starts cataloguing ingredients. A camera is pointed at us, and Jen either ignores it or is in such a deep zone that she doesn't notice.

"Start chopping this bacon. We'll make..." Her eyes roam over the ingredients she lines up on the counter. "Bacon and chive for savory."

A pack of bacon slides across the counter toward me. "Yes, Chef."

Jen glances at me, and I wink. Her cheeks flush pink, and I immediately wonder if the rest of her skin would react the same way. Maybe her chest would warm if I ran my lips over her neck? Her collarbone? Her breast?

How many times have I imagined her body reacting to me over the past couple of years, knowing I had no right to find out? I've wondered if she'd ever let me kiss her again, if she'd ever melt into me the way she did last year. I've wondered if her nipples would pucker if I ran my tongue over them. If the honey between her legs tastes as good as I imagine.

Tearing my eyes away from her, I try to pull myself together.

*Now is not the time, Fallon.*

Jen turns back to the ingredients. “They haven’t given us any oil or butter. *Hmm.*” She leans her palms against the counter, staring at the ingredients. Then she glances at me. “Save the bacon fat. We’ll either have to make fat-free sweet muffins or use bacon fat for both recipes.” She taps her chin and glances at me. “What do you think?”

“I think you already know what you want to do, and you shouldn’t waste time asking me my opinion.”

Then, for the first time since before I left Heart’s Cove, I see Jen’s face crack into a smile. She nods. “Bacon fat it is. I’ll play around with a filling if I have time—maybe something like my apple pie muffins. Bacon and apple sound kind of weird together, but if we get the balance right it could taste amazing. We can do a candied bacon topping, maybe?” She bites her lip and looks at the countdown timer on the wall. “No time to hesitate. Let’s just go for it.” She glances at me, that smile still lingering on her lips.

God, she looks good right now. The barn doors are thrown open, the summer sun framing her in a golden glow. Her blond hair is pulled back in a low bun and she’s wearing a white chef’s jacket with her name embroidered on the breast. High cheekbones, sharp eyes, and lips that are thinner than average with an over-defined cupid’s bow. Slight crinkles around her eyes that I find unbearably sexy for some reason. That concentrated frown that makes me want to kiss her brow until she relaxes.

I don’t know what it is about the angular nature of Jen’s face, but it’s always attracted me. It matches her personality. Sharp, to the point, efficient. Like there’s nothing extra added to her features beyond what’s strictly necessary to make her beautiful.

Then the host and judges appear beside us, and they ask Jen what she’s making.

Jen tells them in her usual no-nonsense voice, all while sifting dry ingredients without looking. She looks like a rock star, and she doesn’t even know it.

“You seem very confident,” Bernard says, piercing blue eyes intent on Jen.

I don’t like the way he’s looking at her. My body stiffens as his gaze roams around her face and down her body.

“I am,” Jen tells him. “I’ve made a lot of muffins in my life.”

I was telling the truth this morning when I said I was in Four Cups to see her. After staying away for six months—all those months spent facing the skeletons in my past—I needed a glimpse of her to feel something good, for once.

And when I overheard Gus on the phone? I volunteered for this job before I could stop myself. How could I resist? I signed the contract at once, with only one small change to the clause regarding the prize money.

“And you think you can complete all that work in only one hour?” Heather asks. Her thick braid falls over her shoulder as she leans over to watch what I’m doing.

“Yes,” Jen answers simply.

My lips twitch. That’s so perfectly Jen. No explanation; no excess words. Yes, she can do all this work in an hour, and yes, it’s going to be amazing.

“Well, good luck,” Bernard says, his bright blue eyes intent on Jen. “I like your confidence.”

That flush returns to Jen’s cheeks, and an unholy hatred for Bernard fucking Franco rises up inside me. So he’s a famous chef and Jen admires him? He has no right to make her blush the same way I do.

Reeling myself back in from the edge, I focus on my work. *I* have no right to be with Jen—I sure as hell have no right to dictate who she talks to.

But Jen just gives him a curt nod, and the judges and Carrie move on to the station behind us. She lets out a long sigh and glances over at what I’m doing before giving a satisfied dip of her chin. We’ve always worked well together

at Four Cups, and in the months that I've been gone, I've missed her.

I mean, obviously. Last year, when she told me she didn't want to pursue anything with me because of Amanda and her book, it was a hard rejection to take. But can I really blame her? I'm a forty-six-year-old chef who's never going to amount to anything. With my history, working in kitchens is all I have to offer. I'll never be on her level.

Jen, on the other hand, is a brilliant computer whiz who was, by all accounts, amazing at her job until she decided to quit to pursue her pastry baking dream. She's all class and education and brilliance, and I'm just the piece of shit who chops her bacon.

When she told me she had been working at a Michelin-starred restaurant under Guillaume Boucher, one of the most famous French chefs in the world, but quit to become a co-owner of the Four Cups Café, I thought she was crazy.

She's got guts. She acts like her decisions are the most natural thing in the world, and I don't know if she realizes that most people would never have the courage to quit a good job to pursue a dream with so few guarantees as becoming a pastry chef. Then, quit a great job at a renowned restaurant to strike out on her own.

She's *brave*.

When we started working together, her talent was obvious. The fact that her new book is shortlisted for so many awards hasn't surprised me.

And yes, I googled her after I left Heart's Cove. How could I not?

It's hard not to feel inadequate around someone like that. Someone who can create things that are so incredibly perfect, who's intelligent and educated and driven. Talented beyond measure.

Is it any wonder she didn't want to date me? What can I possibly offer a woman like Jen?



I chop half the bacon into small pieces and start rendering the fat before moving to make candied bacon with the rest of the meat. To be completely honest, apple-bacon muffins sound a bit weird to me, but judging by the fact that I've tasted all of Jen's recipes and not one of them has been bad, she has my complete confidence.

As she should. We end up winning the first bite-sized competition, with the judges calling her sweet muffin "inspired." Jen smiles again, and the sight of it makes me need to adjust the waistband of my pants. There's just something about this woman that turns me on. She has no idea how hot she is. Or maybe she knows, but she doesn't care.

There are more interviews and promo sequences to shoot, and by the end of the day we're both wrung out and exhausted. Jen and I return to our room without speaking. It's silent in the woods as we enter the cabin.

The cabin consists of one big room with a queen-sized bed, a dresser, and a closet in the corner. Opposite the bed, there's a couch, an armchair, and—as of this morning—a single cot shoved in the corner by the big bay windows overlooking the lawn. Finally, along the wall shared with the bathroom is a small kitchenette. The bathroom is spacious. It's probably designed for couples or honeymooners vacationing in Heart's Cove.

Jen runs her fingers through her hair and casts a glance toward her bag.

"You nervous about filming in Heart's Cove tomorrow?" I ask. We were informed by Gus that in the morning, we'd be shooting the last of the *get-to-know-you* sequences featuring Jen in the Four Cups Café. All the other competitors were visited in their hometown over the past few weeks.

Jen's eyes lift to mine. She's got a streak of dried batter in her hair and her eyes are hazy, and she's never looked better.

"No," she answers simply.

"No?"

She flops down onto the armchair by the window, looking up at the darkening sky. “Four Cups is where I feel most comfortable. It’ll be nice to be back there, even just for an hour or two.”

“I get that,” I answer quietly, moving to my half-unpacked suitcase on the bed and picking up where I left off this morning. “It was nice to go back there today. Felt like coming home.”

“So why did you leave?” Her eyes are still directed out the window, but her question feels pointed. Heavy.

And I can’t tell her the truth.

I can just imagine how that would go. How would I word it?

*—I was in Nevada.*

*—What were you doing?*

*—Oh, I was going to prison every day to teach cooking classes.*

*—Huh, that’s weird. Why would you quit your job to do that?*

*—I wanted the men on the inside to learn some skills they could use to start over when they’re released. It’s a cause near and dear to my heart, because well, here’s the thing: I’m a convicted felon.*

Yeah. That would go over well.

Instead of answering, I just change the subject. “You did well today, Jen. It was great to be cooking with you again.”

She blinks over to me, looking like she wants to say something. Finally, she just nods. “Thanks. You want to shower first while I unpack?”

I just fucked up. I can tell by the shuttering of her gaze, the way she angles her shoulders away from me. I had a chance to open up to her, to make her understand who I am, why I left, and how I feel about her...and I wasted it.

Big fucking surprise. Screwing up is what I do best.

I hold her gaze for a moment, conflict roiling inside me. If I told her the truth about my past, my family, my troubles... would she judge me like everyone else does? Would she look at me differently? Would she reject me the same way she did when Amanda showed up?

Probably.

Finally, I nod. "Sure."

I watch her thin, angular body unfold itself from the armchair and stand, her clothes clinging to every slight curve. I still remember how it felt to have my arms around her, my hands buried in her hair. She tasted sweet as honey, so fucking delicious I never wanted to stop kissing her. I didn't think it would be the only chance I'd get. I watch her walk to her bag and lift it onto the bed, then I turn around and head for the bathroom.

As soon as the door closes behind me, I release the breath I'd been holding. I've been on edge all day. When I opened the door to see Jen on the stoop, all I wanted to do was drag her inside and crush my lips to hers. I wanted to push her up against the wall and claim her, make her see exactly what she does to me.

Stripping my shirt off, I look in the mirror. I turn to stare at the huge tattoo that spans the width of my back, the tails of two snakes coiling over the sides of my ribs. My biggest mistake inked into my skin forever. The pledge I made to a brotherhood when I was too young to understand the consequences.

And that's why I can't tell Jen where I was, or who I used to be. Because she knows me as the happy chef who worked at Four Cups—not the ex-con who ended up in prison when he was too young to know any better. The guy who's relegated to kitchens and construction laboring jobs forever, because he'll never amount to anything more.

Tearing myself away from the mirror, I turn the shower on and tilt my head into the stream. My skin feels too sensitive, and when I hear Jen humming to herself on the other side of the door, blood starts flowing between my legs. Did I really

commit to four whole weeks of this? Four weeks of being close to Jen and not being able to touch her? Four weeks of feeling my cock twitch every time Jen gives me one of those rare smiles?

Turning the shower to cold, I do my best to chill my heated blood. I wash quickly, ignoring the insistent throbbing between my legs, and exit the bathroom to find Jen tucking her empty duffel bag away in the closet. She's got the shelves color-coded and organized, with honeycomb-shaped organizers for all her socks and underwear. Of course she does.

I fight a smile at the sight of it, then point over my shoulder. "Bathroom's all yours. Go for it."

She nods, grabs a towel, and shuffles past me. The bathroom door snicks shut, and I find myself sinking down onto the edge of the bed.

It's amazing how natural it feels to share a space with Jen. It was like this when we started working together too. We just fell into a rhythm without much effort—well, I *did* bribe her with masala chai tea to get her to stop coming in at the crack of dawn to avoid me. And I did stop playing my music whenever she was around because I learned she likes silence. And I might have kept her multitude of kitchen scales stocked with fresh batteries to stay in her good graces.

But after that? Working with Jen was a dream.

I missed her. I didn't want to leave—but I had to.

Being back here—seeing her little sock organizers and her perfectly folded clothes—it reminds me of all the reasons we can't be together. We come from different worlds.

Women like Amanda Bailey like me because I have sharp edges. I'm just trouble enough to feel dangerous for a night, but not so much that they get hurt. Amanda didn't want to get back together with me—she just wanted me to fuck her.

I wasn't interested, because there's only one woman I've wanted for the past three years, and she's currently showering in the next room.

Night has fallen. It's dark in the room, so I stare out the window as the sounds of the shower fill the space, Jen gently humming a song to herself.

Then, something moves outside the window. It's barely a shadow in the woods, but I freeze, squinting. I stand up and move to the side of the window, peeking outside, trying to tell shadows from branches.

More movement. My blood freezes as the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. There's someone out there. Another shape darts in the trees, and my blood starts pumping.

They fucking followed me. I should never have gone back to Nevada, back to prison. The guys that got me arrested just couldn't let it be, and now they're here, outside a cabin while Jen is singing in the shower. Adrenaline dumps in my veins as my aggression roars to the forefront, my mind screaming *protect her!*

It only takes me three steps to get to the front door. I throw it open and call out, "Hey!"

Stillness answers back. I scan the woods where I saw the shape and I wonder if I'm going crazy. The paranoia is getting to me. The past six months have ridden me hard. I thought going back to face the worst years of my life would allow me to move on—but it feels like it's only dragged me into the quagmire of my past.

"Who's there?" I yell out in the night, and the breeze ruffles the trees. Standing on the stoop for a few more moments, I shake my head.

There's no one there. I'm losing my mind. Scraping my nails over my scalp, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to calm my racing heart.

When I re-enter the room, Jen has her hair wrapped in a towel and is wearing loose pajama pants and a hoodie. As soon as I see her, my latent aggression turns to lust. Her nipples poke through the fabric like two little beacons begging to be sucked.

I'm so fucking screwed. A month? I signed up for a month of this torture?

She frowns at me. "What's going on?"

I shake my head, tearing my eyes away from her chest. "Nothing. Thought I saw someone out there, but it must have been the wind."

Jen nods, then glances at the two beds. "I'll take the cot."

*Oh, hell no.*

"Uh-uh." I walk up beside her and cross my arms. "You're the whole reason we're doing this competition. You need your sleep. You take the bed."

Jen arches a brow. "Fallon, you're huge."

I can't help the tugging of my lips. "I get that a lot."

She rolls her eyes, which makes me want to kiss the sass right out of her, and points to the tiny single bed that looks like it'll collapse under my weight. "That thing is too small for you. I'll sleep in it."

"No."

Jen huffs. "Fallon."

"Jen."

"I'm not letting you sleep on the cot."

As if she could stop me. "I'll sleep on the floor." A smile twitches at my lips. I love when she argues, when those lines appear on her brow and her jaw sets in a hard line. My eyes drop to her chest again, to those small breasts that would fit perfectly in the palm of my hand.

Her cheeks are red. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

"Because I'm right."

"I didn't know 'right' was a synonym for 'overbearing.'" Jen moves to the bathroom door and starts unwinding the towel from her hair. She hangs the towel up on a hook without looking at me.

Overbearing, huh.

I lean a shoulder against the bathroom doorframe. “I’m not budging on this.”

“Fallon, be logical.” She grabs a wide-toothed comb and starts untangling her hair, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

When she glances away, my eyes drop the length of her body. Even in sweats, I can’t resist the sight of her. “I am logical. You deserve the bed.”

She frowns. “Deserve? I don’t deserve the bed any more than you do.”

Oh, but she does. She’s a college-educated genius from a good family. I’m lucky I’m not still in prison.

I point to the bed. “You’re sleeping on the bed.”

“No, *you’re* sleeping on the bed. I’m taking the cot.” She puts the comb down and turns to face me. It takes all my self-control not to stare at those taunting nipples.

I push off the doorframe. “Absolutely not. You need to rest for the competition.” I walk into the main room, heading for the cot.

“Fallon, stop.” She gives me a glare, fists clenched at her sides, then grabs a pillow and shoves it on the end of the tiny, nearly child-sized cot. “Try it. Lie down and see how comfortable you are.”

“Fine.” I plonk myself down on the cot and drape my legs over the end, my feet sticking out in midair from mid-calf down. I rest my head against the pillow and spread my hands. “See? Perfect.”

Sort of. My legs hang off the end, and my feet will probably go numb if I stay like this, but there’s not really enough room to roll onto my side. There’s nowhere comfortable to put my arms, but still. It’s only temporary. Jen should have the bed. Worst case, like I said, I’ll sleep on the floor.

“You’ll give yourself back problems.” She arches a brow. “Take the bed.”

“This discussion is over.” I close my eyes and cross my arms.

“You look ridiculous. It looks like you’re on a toy bed, Fallon.”

“I’m comfy,” I lie. My eyes are still closed. “Sleepy.”

“You know what? Fine. I’ll take the bed.” She stomps over to the other side of the room and slips under the covers. I hear her huff as she turns off the bedside lamp.

When I crack an eyelid to peek, Jen has an eye mask on with her own blankets pulled up to her neck. I smile at the sight of it, and my heart does another one of those spasms.

My smile fades.

This is as close as I’ll get to her.

The truth is, Jen is much better off without me. What can a guy like me offer a woman like her? A woman whose life has been one straight, consistent upward trajectory?

I spread a blanket over the cot and punch the pillow, glancing one last time out the window. When I see no movement beyond the leaves rustling on the trees, I lie down and close my eyes. Sleep doesn’t come easy.



*Jen*

I wake up to a loud bang and a groan. Pushing my sleep mask to my forehead, I sit up and see Fallon on the floor beside the cot. He rubs his shoulder and glances at me. “Fell off. Had a dream I was skydiving without a parachute. Shit.” He rubs the heels of his hands in his eyes.

Sighing, I flick the blankets on the other side of the bed. “Get in, Fallon.”

To my surprise, Fallon only hesitates for a moment. There’s a rasp of fabric as he gets to his feet and grabs his pillow. I put my eye mask back on before feeling the bed dip beside me.

My heart thunders. The last time I shared a bed was a couple of decades ago, with the one and only boyfriend I’ve had after college. The heat of Fallon’s body soaks into my side and I turn my back to him, grateful for the dark, the eye mask, and the blankets pulled up to my chin.

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WHEN MY ALARM STARTS BLARING, the first thing I notice is a hot, heavy weight draped over my body. Fallon’s leg is thrown over both of mine, and it must weigh a hundred pounds. His arm is pinning me to the bed. I groan, wiggling away from him to smack the button on my phone to stop my alarm. I hit it with the tips of my fingers, then pause.

This feels...nice. For a few glorious moments, I find myself snuggling into Fallon’s warmth. His hand tugs me into

his chest while his leg curls over both of mine, as if he wants to drag me as close to his warm, hard body as possible.

I close my eyes for a few seconds. Fallon's breath ruffles my neck, his body curled protectively around me. His scent is everywhere, his body pressed up against the length of mine. I'm being lulled back to sleep with every breath. Nuzzling into my pillow, I curl my arm around his and hold it against me.

He's sleeping anyway. He won't know. It's just one little snuggle. It can't hurt anyone.

When my alarm goes off again, I jerk fully awake, then use all my strength to heave Fallon's arm off me. He tumbles to his back, with his lower body twisted so it's still covering mine.

With a grunt, I pull my leg free and stumble out from under him to stand up next to the bed. Panting, I put my hands on my hips and stare at the man starfished across the sheets.

Maybe him taking the cot *was* a good idea.

"Fallon."

No answer. The man doesn't even move.

I poke his arm. "Fallon."

A snort—but zero movement.

This is ridiculous. I shove his shoulder which, predictably, barely even budes. Fallon turns his head and mumbles something into the pillow.

"*Fallon.*" This time, I use both hands to shake him awake.

Nothing.

Something skitters in my peripheral vision, and I look down to see a palm-sized spider inches from my foot. Screeching, I hop onto the bed and land on all fours. I don't know if it's my scream or the weight of me on the bed, but Fallon jerks awake.

He sits up so fast I don't have time to move out of the way, and his forehead connects with my temple. Pain explodes as I flop onto my side, sprawled on the bed over his legs.

“Shit, Jen, shit!” He drags me by the armpits and holds me to his chest, broad palms spread over my face. “You okay? What the hell happened?”

“Spider,” I groan, clutching my head.

Fallon freezes, his head tilting. “You’re...scared of spiders?”

My eyes cut sideways to glare at him. “It’s a natural evolutionary mechanism, thank you very much. People have grown afraid of spiders out of fear of venomous bites.”

“Uh-huh.” His hand is still splayed over my cheek as he uses his other hand to move my hair out of the way. He inspects my temple, then, to my surprise, brushes his lips over my skin. Heat blooms low in my stomach as my heart thumps. Fallon must not notice, because he just says, “All better.”

“I’m not a child who needs to be kissed better, Fallon,” I say, wriggling off his lap. “I’m a grown woman.” Fallon goes very, very still as I do, but I don’t have time to decipher his reaction because I’m already gripping the edge of the bed and peering over on all fours. I click my tongue. “Damn it. Spider disappeared. Now we have to burn down the whole cabin.”

“What were you saying about being a grown woman?”

I glance over my shoulder to see him grinning, then sit back down and cross my arms. “Well, if you’re such a macho man, why don’t you get out of bed and kill it!”

“I’m not going to kill a spider,” Fallon says, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. “But I’ll catch and release it if it makes you feel better.”

Still sitting on the bed, I pull my knees up to my chest. “It would, actually.”

“Your wish is my command.” He jerks his head to my eye mask. “Didn’t take you for a Beverly Hills housewife.”

I pull off my silk mask and frown. “Sleeping in total darkness is important. This place doesn’t have blackout blinds. The only logical solution is a mask.”

Fallon's lips curl. "Of course it is." He gets on his hands and knees to check under the bed, then makes a noise at the back of his throat. Then, he's grabbing a broom and dustpan from the cupboard and heading back to the corner of the bed. With gentle movements, I watch Fallon coax the spider onto the dustpan as he covers it with the broom.

Jerking his head to the door, he asks me to open it up for him. When I do, Fallon gently releases the spider onto the grass before standing up and brushing his hands off. "There," he says. "Better?"

I rub my temple, already knowing it'll bruise. "Yeah."

When we get inside, Fallon checks his phone for the time and arches his brow. "We have to get to set. Call time is in half an hour."

Obviously. "That's why I was trying to wake you up, but I didn't know I'd be putting myself at risk of death by head-butting."

Brown eyes glitter. "And I didn't know I'd be seeing the first illogical facet of your personality."

"Fear of spiders is not illogical." I cross my arms with a huff.

When Fallon laughs, I tilt my head. He seems to do that a lot—laugh when I'm around.

People have been laughing at me since I was a kid. I was the punchline of a lot of jokes. But with Fallon, it feels different. He's not laughing *at* me. He actually thinks I'm *funny*.

Ducking away to hide the redness of my cheeks, I do my thing in the bathroom, then get dressed while Fallon is in the bathroom. It gives me time to inspect the guesthouse for more eight-legged intruders, then take a few deep breaths to calm myself down.

A few minutes later, we meet Gus in front of the barn. The other contestants will be filming interviews and miscellaneous promotional shots while a cameraman accompanies Fallon and me into Heart's Cove.

I'm glad I didn't give this too much thought last night, because I might have lost my nerve. When we enter the café, Fiona is behind the till while Clancy, her stepdaughter, busses tables. Through the opening to the kitchen, I can see our new chef, Kyle, who was hired to fill Fallon's very large shoes.

Fiona brightens, and when she sees the camera she immediately reaches for her phone. I bite back a groan. No doubt everyone in town will know there's a camera crew with me here.

"We want shots of you two baking in the kitchen," Gus says, consulting his tablet. "We also need to stop by your house and do a quick interview there."

I freeze. "In my house?"

Gus looks up and frowns. "Is that a problem?"

"No," I answer, then let my eyes dart to Fallon. He'll be in my house. *In my space*. Where I've fantasized about him for the past year. In the same building as my vibrator, which I've also used while thinking of him. Often.

I *knew* being partnered up with him was a bad idea. How am I supposed to win when I have a big, six-foot-something attractive beast of a man beside me all the time! Fallon is the mother of all distractions, but having him in my space might be a step too far.

My palms sweat as I nod to Fiona and head to the kitchen. The cameraman follows, hiking his camera onto his shoulder while Gus asks Fallon and me to position ourselves.

"We'd like to get a shot of you baking together," he says, waving his hands for us to move closer together. "Just like you used to. You worked together, yeah?"

I shuffle toward Fallon, then shake my head. "We didn't bake together. Fallon was usually standing over there with his back to me." I point to the grill, where Kyle is flipping a few strips of bacon.

"Well, you're baking together today," Gus announces. He sweeps a hand in an arc. "Showbiz, Jen."

“Should I check the space for creepy-crawlies before we begin?” Fallon asks near my ear.

I glare at him, which only makes his lips twitch.

Gus and the cameraman position themselves, then look at me expectantly.

I blink. “Well, what do you want us to make?”

“Anything, Jen! Literally anything. You can stir flour around in a bowl for all I care.” Gus waves me forward with an encouraging smile.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I mumble, reaching under the stainless-steel countertop to grab a few mixing bowls. I point to the pantry area. “Get me some bananas. We’ll make banana bread.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Fallon says with a salute, and I know he’s only doing it to annoy me when he glances over his shoulder to check my reaction. When he sees me with my hands on my hips and thunder on my brow, he starts laughing.

“This is great,” Gus says. “Keep doing this.”

“You’re filming already?” I screech.

“Relax, Jen. You’re a professional, remember?”

“Am I?” I ask under my breath, then reach for the dry ingredients and start mixing. My shoulders immediately drop. Banana bread is really a one-person job, but Fallon mashes the bananas and gathers the wet ingredients. We have it mixed and in the oven in record time, and I only realize after a few minutes that Gus has been asking me questions about myself the whole time.

“So you quit your successful tech job to pursue your dream to be a pastry chef?” Gus tilts his head.

I close the oven door and brush my hands on my apron, suddenly self-conscious. “Um, yeah.”

“Jen is a rock star,” Fallon cuts in.

I frown. “My bedtime is eight-thirty.”

Fallon's lips twitch as he glances down at me, as if I just made a hilarious joke. I don't understand this man at all. My bedtime is *literally* eight-thirty.

He turns back to Gus while hooking an arm around my shoulders. He's getting real comfortable tugging me close to his body, and I'm still telling myself I hate being manhandled by him. I glower at him while he speaks, even though my hand *does* rest on top of his very solid stomach.

Fallon gives me a squeeze. "She's the best baker I've ever met. Working with her was a privilege, and I have no doubt we'll go far in the competition."

As soon as Gus wraps up the unending questions, I pull away from Fallon. "I'm not a cuddler."

"Could have fooled me." Fallon's voice is low, his eyes twinkling as he looks down at me. I know he's talking about this morning.

"I thought you were asleep," I hiss from the corner of my mouth, moving to the sink to wash the few dishes we made.

"I was. Mostly."

My cheeks heat, and I scour the bowls I used with more violence than necessary. Once everything's done, with Kyle on duty to remove the bread from the oven, I follow Gus out to the front of the café.

And freeze.

Nearly every single resident of Heart's Cove is crammed in the small space. Every chair is full. Every wall is lined with people. The chatter is a loud hum as we walk out, and it immediately cuts off when I walk into the space.

"There she is!" Candice says, climbing up to stand on top of a table. "Our very own Jennifer Newbank."

Applause erupts and all eyes turn to me. Including the camera, which is back on and pointed at my face.

Deer. In. Headlights.

This is literally my worst nightmare. I force a smile, heart beating a million miles an hour in my chest. Everyone is here. They're all looking. Waiting.

"We know you'll win," Dorothy says. The elderly, animal-print-loving woman owns the Heart's Cove Hotel along with her twin sister Margaret. She slings an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into yet another hug. "You're the town's pride and joy, Jen."

"I can't believe you'll be on TV!" Allie, Candice's daughter, screams in my ear.

"Go, Jen! Go, Jen! Go, Jen!" Simone, the fiery redhead who co-owns the café with Fiona, Candice, and me, starts chanting.

To my abject horror, everyone joins in. The dozens and dozens of people in the café are all looking at me, cheering for me, chanting my name, expecting...*something*. I don't know what they want! I don't know what to do.

So, like the lump I am, I just freeze. I stand in the middle of this big crowd, feeling the temperature of my body ratchet higher and higher, while panic starts swirling around and around and around in my head.

Too many people. Not enough air. Too much attention, expectation. They want me to do something, but all I can do is stand here. What do I do? What do I say? How do I—

My body is hauled up with two big, broad hands clamped around my waist. I vaguely register that those hands belong to Fallon as I'm flung over his shoulder, his strong arm banding over my thighs.

"Coming through!" he bellows. "Move over, people!"

Breathless, panic still sizzling inside me, I glance over my shoulder to see a thin slice of space forming between us and the door. Fallon shoulders his way through the crush, not stopping until the door opens and sweet, sweet fresh air fills my lungs.

I breathe deep, expecting Fallon to put me down.



He doesn't. He keeps going. And going. And going.

We walk all the way down the block and around the corner, where Fallon finally sets me down with steady, careful movements. His head ducks down so his eyes can meet mine, searching my flaming face. "You good?"

"The people," I push out with a breath.

"You looked stressed."

"Too many people," I manage.

"I figured." Fallon moves one hand from my waist, and I immediately miss the comforting warmth and weight of it. He doesn't go far, though, sliding his palm behind my neck and tugging me into his chest.

It's not until a few shuddering breaths make their way in and out of my lungs that I realize I'm clinging to him, hands curled in his shirt, tears wetting the jersey fabric.

"I can't do this," I say, voice muffled in his broad, safe chest. I inhale the clean scent of detergent and that musky cologne that smells like Fallon.

"You can." His hand nestles into my hair while the other slides around my waist and starts making slow, comforting circles over my back.

"There's too much pressure." My voice cracks on the last word.

Fallon's hand freezes, and he pulls away a few inches to look down at my face. "Do you really want to stop? Quit the competition?"

He doesn't say it judgmentally. He's just...*asking*.

The earnestness of his expression hits me hard. I gulp, mind whirling, trying to find the words.

I've always been told that I need to do something with my life. Be someone. Make something of myself. I grew up in the shadow of my parents, who had enough degrees between them to cover an entire wall in our house. They were titans of their fields. Forces of nature.

It was never a question of whether I'd be successful, only a question of what I'd sacrifice along the way.

And I've always done my best. I won scholarships to college and rose like a rocket in my tech career. I finished pastry school with a job offer from none other than Guillaume Boucher. I *am* successful. I'm a winner.

But...I'm *tired*. What if this competition is just too much?

I'll be fifty before I know it. I've basically had two full careers in my life, and I still have more to give—but when will it be enough?

I don't know what I want. I want to win the competition. I want to feel that rush when we made those muffins yesterday, the timer counting down while I entered the flow that only happens when I'm baking.

I want to win a hundred grand and start my own bakery. I want my book to be a success...but I also want to feel Fallon's arms around me and see him laugh when I say something he doesn't expect.

So, when I meet Fallon's gaze and shake my head, it's not because I feel like I need to compete in order to be successful. For the first time in a long time, I'm doing it because I want to.

"No," I tell him, my voice gaining strength. "I don't want to quit. I just...don't like crowds."

His lips quirk. "Then I'll keep you away from them. I'll be your official personal-space-implementer and spider-catcher. I'll take care of you, Jen. All you have to do is win."

For the briefest moment, his eyes drop to my lips, and fire roars to life in my core. I want him to kiss me. Even after the past year, even after he left. Even though he's the biggest distraction ever, and kissing would only mess with my head, I'm still desperate to taste his lips again.

Then Fallon's eyes slide to the end of the alleyway, where Gus is standing with the cameraman. His cheeks are flushed, his blond hair wild around his head.

“We got some great shots in there, guys. *Great* shots. Let’s go to your place for a quick interview, then break for lunch. Amazing. Fan favorite in the making, Jen. I knew I was right to bet on you!”

Fallon drops his hands from my body, but his palm finds mine. He gives it a squeeze, and an injection of strength courses through me.

I glance up at him through my lashes, and let my lips slide into the first real smile I’ve had all day.

Yeah, I can do this—as long as Fallon is by my side.

*Fallon*

I've never seen Jen's house. In the years we worked side by side every day, I never even drove her home. So when we roll up to a small apartment building on the outskirts of the town center, I'm not quite sure what to expect. Militant neatness, perhaps? Spartan decor? Something super organized, minimalist, Pinterest-worthy?

Well, it's not what greets me on the other side of the door.

Jen lives in a damn jungle. There are plants everywhere. Every windowsill. Every flat surface. Every corner. There's an entire bookcase filled with cacti and succulents, and through the windows to the balcony, I see dozens of planters full of herbs. Looking closely, I see little stickers on every single plant, color-coded by section with neat, square numbers handwritten on each of them.

I blink, surprised, then turn my attention to Jen. She's dropping her purse on a little table by the door—which, no doubt, was bought for that exact purpose—and sucking those irresistible lips between her teeth. She lets them fall out with a long breath. “Well, this is it.” She spreads her arms. “I can, I dunno, give you a tour of my house plants?”

Gus frowns, eyes sweeping over the hundreds of bits of greenery in the room. I can almost hear the gears gnashing in his head, calculating how long a tour of this rainforest would take. “Uh, that's...not necessary. Maybe we could see the kitchen?”

“Right, right.” Jen nods and starts walking toward the kitchen, which is visible through a doorway with no door, then

pauses at one of the plants near the closest window. It's got stiff green leaves which are maybe a couple inches across, three feet high. She pokes the dirt and frowns, then rotates the pot a hundred and eighty degrees. On her way past another plant, she prunes a few dead leaves off before finally making it to the kitchen.

I fucking love this woman.

I mean, I've known I liked her for a while, with her weird quirks, big fat brain, and thousand and one moods. But this? This is so exactly Jen that I can't even put it into words. Obsessive, talented, oddly charming. There's literally nothing she's not good at.

Well, maybe public speaking. And small talk.

Still, as I follow everyone into the tight kitchen and lean against the doorway, I can't help but watch the way she moves. She always has efficient, calculated movements. No extra energy to spare, because she's probably analyzing the angle of the sun hitting her plants and how that'll affect their growth. She leans against a counter, finally meeting my gaze.

Her cheeks are that shade of pink I love so much, eyes still a bit wild from the events at the café. Gus directs her to sit in a chair, then pulls one beside hers and tells me to take a seat. Unable to resist, I hook my arm across the back of her seat and lean my body into hers.

She doesn't pull away, which makes warmth flood my chest.

I never should have left. I should have fought for her. Yes, I have a messy history that to this day still follows me like a shadow. But Jen would understand...wouldn't she? She wants me just as much as I want her...unless my leaving was the last straw. I have to wonder—is it too late for us?

“We're just trying to get to know the two of you,” Gus says as the cameraman unfurls a tripod and starts setting up lights. “If you make it far into the competition, we'll be editing some of these clips throughout the show so the audience can see what you're all about.”

White radiates from each of Jen's knuckles as she clenches her hands into tight, tight fists. I use the hand I've got slung across the back of her chair to start drawing shapes on her shoulder with my fingertips until her muscles relax and her palms flatten on her thighs.

A deep breath leaves her lungs, her body melting into mine ever so slightly. Then she nods. "Okay. I'm ready."

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WE MAKE it back to set in time for lunch, then are thrust into another bite-sized baking challenge. We're given sugar cookies and bags of royal icing, and told to decorate the cookies as best we can in fifteen minutes. Jen kills it, obviously. I stumble along beside her, as usual.

We do a few more promo shots for advertisement and social media, then are fed a hearty dinner at the farmhouse, and finally dismissed for the evening. I hold back a growl when smarmy Bernard Franco comes to put his hand on Jen's shoulder to congratulate her on the first couple of challenges. Jen just thanks him with a nod, not giving him any more attention. Her response pleases me more than it should.

Jen is quiet when we make it back to the guesthouse. Her face is drawn, pale. I close the door behind us as Jen pauses in the middle of the room before making a beeline for the kitchenette. She puts some water to boil and hunts through her belongings for a teabag, finally leaning against the counter with her arms crossed.

Gnawing on her nail, Jen stares at a spot on the floor like she's trying to burn a hole in it.

I take a seat on the couch near the window, arm stretched over the back of it, watching her. "You did really well, Jen."

Instead of accepting the compliment, Jen deflects. "I messed up that one cookie. We could have come in first place."

“We came second. First and second place in the first two bite-sized challenges isn’t bad.”

She huffs. “Still.”

“And your interview was great.”

“It was awkward.”

Chuckling, I cross the room to lean against the counter, hands placed on either side of her. She’s like a magnet to me; I can’t resist moving close to her whenever I get the chance. I duck my head, staring into her eyes. “Jen, just try to accept these compliments, okay? You were great today.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. With great effort, she lifts her eyes to mine. “Thank you,” she says with deliberate precision.

I grin. “Was that so hard?”

“Yes.”

Smile widening, I can’t help but lean into her body. I remember the way it felt to have my arms around her, my hands on her curves. I remember how it felt to kiss her like I had a right to.

I want that again. I want it every day until I die.

My eyes linger on her lips, heat lashing across my body. My fingers grip the counter so hard I’m worried it’ll crumble to dust in my hands. The urge to kiss her almost overwhelms me. I could lift her up and notch myself between her spread thighs. I could tear her jeans off and bury my face between her legs. I could make her scream my name as she rides my mouth. I’d want to see her come apart as she let go of that control she wears like armor.

But I’m not going to.

Jennifer Newbank is not the type of woman who sleeps with a man like me. Or she wouldn’t—if she knew the truth about my past.

Finally, stifling a groan, I tear myself away.

That night, I sleep in the cot. I wake up on the floor, achy and sore, but it's better than having Jen wrapped up in my arms when I know I won't be able to keep her.

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TWO MORE DAYS are spent like this—filming small challenges, chatting with the contestants, getting to know the judges. One evening, at dinner, when Bernard pulls out a copy of Jen's book and flips to one of the recipes to compliment her on some special cake technique I've never heard of, I hold back the urge to throttle him. He smiles at Jen, eyes roaming over her face, dipping to her chest, and I can almost taste his interest on my tongue.

My hands clench into fists under the dinner table, breath sawing in and out of my lungs.

The worst part?

Bernard Franco is exactly the type of man Jen should be with. He's successful, charismatic, and famous. Even I can tell he's handsome with his stupid, perfectly styled brown hair and stupid piercing eyes. He looks at Jen and sees talent, so he's obviously not totally clueless.

And he wants her.

But no matter how much I *know* that Bernard would be a better match for Jen, I can't help wanting to punch him in his stupid handsome face.

Because Jen is *mine*. At least for a month.

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THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up with a stiff neck and tingles in my feet. The cot is far, far too small for me, but Jen deserves the bed. I certainly don't—and based on how much I enjoyed waking up next to her that one morning, I already know that's a dangerous path to take.



She walks out of the bathroom holding her toothbrush, watching me rub my eyes as I try to rouse myself. “We only have an hour until the first elimination challenge,” she says, glancing at the time on her phone.

I stifle a yawn. “You nervous?”

She snorts. “Obviously. What’s a bigger word than nervous? Apprehensive? Anxious? Scared shitless?”

I lean back on the cot and fold my arms behind my head, noting with more than a bit of satisfaction that Jen’s eyes linger on my shoulders, my arms, my chest, then drop down to my stomach where my tee has ridden up to show some skin. The blanket is gathered over my hips, and I lift a knee to hide the pulsing erection that grows under her perusal.

Her gaze is hot, and—me being the horny, keyed-up asshole I am—it makes me want to toss her on the bed and ram myself into her. When she tears her eyes away from me and turns back to the bathroom, I press my palm on my crotch and stare at the ceiling, willing my hard shaft to go down.

I should never have volunteered for this. When I saw she wasn’t at Four Cups, I should have left town again.

The truth is, our situation hasn’t changed. I’m still the washed-up chef who hasn’t done anything with his life since his misspent youth. I’m the guy who tried to move on but ended up right back where I started.

She’s still the brilliant baker who’s on a never-ending upward trajectory. Even world-renowned pastry chefs are congratulating her on her brilliance and salivating at the sight of her.

But when Jen exits the bathroom and pours herself a tea, I watch her grab a mug for me and fill it with coffee. She hates coffee, but she must have made a pot before I even woke up. My heart squeezes, because I don’t deserve her. She’s far too good for a guy like me.

Jen perches at the end of my cot, and I sit up and accept the steaming mug. All the reasons we can’t be together seem to fly right out of my head. I ache to tug her close, to feel her

back resting against my chest, to run my fingers through her hair and feel her soften against me. No matter how many times I tell myself I don't deserve her, it doesn't change the fact that I crave her twice as badly.

Movement out the window catches my eye. I squint at the swaying trees, body stiff, trying to see what the hell is out there.

“What's wrong?” Jen shifts closer on the couch, and her knee touches my thigh. I glance down at the contact for a brief moment, loving how easy it is for her to get close to me. When I look back at the window, all I see is greenery.

I shake my head. “Nothing. There must be an active deer population out there. I keep seeing shapes moving in the trees and thinking they're people.”

“Maybe they're birds.” She shudders.

I grin. “Still scarred?”

“What do you mean, ‘still?’” She rears back. “That was traumatizing.”

I grin just as her alarm goes off. “Time to start our first elimination challenge.”

Jen releases a long sigh, and I slide my hand over her thigh to give it a comforting squeeze, loving the feel of her body beneath my palm. Craving more—always more.

If my touch has any effect on Jen, she doesn't show it. Her mind is already on what's ahead. She squares her shoulders, jaw clenched. “Let's do this.”

**W**e make it to set with three minutes to spare, finding a seat next to the Daisy Dukettes. There are sixteen chairs set in a semi-circle facing the front of the barn, with the kitchen stations behind us. Fallon and I are on the far left.

“Hi.” Sonia squeezes my forearm. “Are you excited for today? You two have been doing so well all week! I heard the Texas boys say you two were the couple to beat.”

A bolt strikes my chest at the thought of Fallon and me being a couple. I glance at the opposite end of the semi-circle, where two big, burly Texans are sitting with their arms folded and wide, friendly smiles on their faces.

Reg catches me looking, his face morphing into a scowl. When I jerk back, he winks.

*Okay, then.* Maybe everyone in this competition is insane.

Fallon squeezes my thigh, almost in the same spot he did this morning. “They got nothin’ on us, Jen.” His lips brush the shell of my ear as my eyes flutter closed.

That feels way, way too good.

Heat floods through me, and when Fallon takes his hand away it feels like he’s taking all the warmth in the room with him. The imprint of his palm stays burned into my jeans, and I find myself clenching my hands into fists to stop rubbing the spot he touched. I could trace the outline of his fingers by memory, because it feels branded on my skin.

Over the past three days, I've come to crave Fallon's touch. How he puts his hand on my hip when he's walking by, or the way he slings his arm over the back of every seat I'm in. For someone who's never craved contact with anyone, enjoying his touch is...unexpected.

It's distracting me from my ultimate goal of coming home with a hundred grand and a trophy, but I can't quite bring myself to care.

Then the host and judges walk up, the cameras start rolling, and my nerves explode.

Especially when Carrie says we're doing pastry.

Now, I'm good at pastry, but it's finicky and it can be hard to get right. So when the judges tell us we have to make thirty-six perfect, flaky croissants, twenty-four of which need to be filled with two separate flavorings of our choice, my palms start to sweat.

Gus, who's standing off-camera, meets my gaze and gives me a hidden thumbs-up. He tasted my croissants at Four Cups and was impressed—but doing the same in a competition setting is different.

Since croissants are a multi-step process, we'll start them today, let them proof in the fridge overnight, then do the folding, shaping, final proof, and baking tomorrow—in front of a live audience.

My nerves are writhing snakes in my belly. Pain lances through my fingers as I squeeze my hands together, trying to get a grip on myself. I am *not* built for television. The camera lenses placed all around the room seem like big, black, looming eyes drilling into me, making my heart race so fast I might fall off my seat.

I don't know if I can do this. What if I fail at the first hurdle? This is the first challenge that the TV audience will see—the rest of the bite-sized competition was only for online viewers, and there was no threat of elimination. What if I fall flat on my face when this is supposed to be my specialty?

What if my friends, parents, publisher, and budding fan audience all see how terribly I perform? What if I get knocked out in the first round?

Anything less than perfect just isn't good enough.

But Fallon is a steady presence at my side, and the two of us use our allotted hour to put together the dough, the butter block that's so important for the flakiness of the pastry, and one of the two fillings we've decided to use in our croissants. Fallon encourages me when I suggest a classic almond croissant, and dismisses my fears it'll be too cliché.

"Classic is good, Jen. Trust your instincts. Hell, I trust your instincts better than my own." His roguish grin melts my panties, which isn't helping the whole distraction problem.

By the end of the hour, I look around at the elated faces of the other contestants and let Fallon sling an arm around my shoulders, tugging me into his massive chest.

"You did good, Jen," he says in my ear. His thumb lifts up to brush flour off my cheek, the featherlight touch sending a spear of heat through my middle.

My arms hook around his waist, head tilting to look up at his gorgeous face. "So did you." I glance up to his eyes, which crinkle at the corners, the laugh lines around his mouth growing deeper.

I don't know if it's the magic of being in this weird, intense competition environment, but I find myself thinking I could get used to that look on his face.

---

THAT EVENING, we have dinner with the rest of the contestants. Everyone is on edge. I sit beside Tom and David, two British bakers who met in pastry school. They seem confident, even surprised Fallon and I didn't get both our fillings done. Across from me, a mother-and-son team from New York—Mary and Tony, who run a family bakery—are just as surprised we left our second filling until tomorrow.

“You’ll be cutting it close tomorrow,” Mary tells me.

“It’ll be fine,” Fallon says with complete confidence.

“We only got one done,” Hillary, the woman across from me, says. “If you’re behind schedule, then so are we.” She smiles at her husband, who gives her a chaste kiss. I find out they’re from a small town in Virginia and they own an at-home cake-decorating business.

Looking at all the contestants, my nerves start to build. Everyone is so *competent*. Some of them have been baking three times as long as I have. I only started less than a decade ago!

Before I can panic, Fallon puts his hand on my thigh and gives me a searching look. Then a commotion at the other end of the table draws me out of my own thoughts. I quickly discover that Carla is as sharp-tongued in English as I suspected she was in Spanish. Creative insults are being flung with ferocity as Emma doubles over laughing. Carla has the big Texans cowed within minutes.

Sonia and Nikki have delicate, tinkling laughs, and I find out they’ve been friends since they were three. They’re often confused for twins, even though they’re not related. When I comment that it’s probably because they dress like twins, they just laugh.

Tori and Hank, the cupcake couple from Idaho, are lovely. They have four kids—two girls, two boys—and met in pastry school thirty years ago.

To my absolute shock, after I get over the nerves, I realize I’m...*enjoying* myself. Fallon sits next to me, his leg warm against mine, arm slung across the back of my chair, and I end up laughing with a group of people I barely even know.

It’s completely unheard of.

By the time Fallon and I make it back to the guesthouse, I feel tired, yet happy. Fallon insists on taking the cot again, and when I wake up to him falling out of it, I just flick the covers back without even removing my eye mask. He hasn’t come

back to bed with me since my first night, so for a few seconds, I hold my breath.

When I feel the bed dip beside me, my heart thumps a little bit harder.

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WHEN WE RETURN to the barn to finish the croissant challenge the next morning, all happiness and levity is gone from my mood. It's time to compete. Time to show everyone that I *can* do this.

The judges spring another challenge on us, asking us for six perfect, identical danishes to be made with puff pastry, which means Fallon and I need to split our attention. I make a snap decision when I find out Fallon doesn't know how to make puff pastry without a recipe. He can fold the butter into the croissant dough, finish the fillings, and I'll work on the danishes.

Things start going off the rails pretty quickly—right around the time the live audience shows up.

Somehow, the filling ingredients for our almond croissants end up way, *way* too salty. It needs to be made again. Once that's done, the red timer is counting down, down, down—so I go to check on the folded croissant pastry in the fridge. Beside it, my carefully prepared butter block is still wrapped in plastic.

I pull it out, frowning. “Fallon?”

He's prepping our onion-and-goat-cheese filling for the other croissants we're making—we decided to go savory—and glances over his shoulder as his hands keep chopping. “Yeah?”

“What butter did you use for the croissants?”

He jerks his head at the end of the counter. “The stuff over there.”

My stomach bottoms out. “The room-temperature butter?”

He yelps, then looks down at the fresh line of blood on his finger. “Shit. I cut myself.” Glancing up, he nods. “Yeah, the soft stuff. I spread it over the dough and folded it like you said.”

As a medic rushes over to tend to his finger, I almost start to cry. Croissants need cold butter. You need to have thin sheets of cold butter sandwiched between thin sheets of dough. If Fallon didn’t laminate layers of butter in between the dough, that means the pastry won’t be flaky. We won’t have croissants.

And it’s too late to start over—especially since Fallon needs to make the onion mixture again on account of the blood.

By the time the timer has counted down to the last hour, I know our croissants haven’t proofed long enough. Without the butter laminated properly, they won’t end up flaky. They’re going to turn into a dense, soggy mess, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

My danishes have fared a little better, but the fillings aren’t anywhere near perfect. I cut them crooked, too, and I forgot to egg wash them until they were already in the oven a few minutes, so they’re not as golden-brown as they should be, and the filling has run out and burned around the edges.

It’s a complete and utter unmitigated disaster. Not one single thing has gone well.

I’m close to tears and my hands are shaking so much Fallon has to take over pulling the danishes from the oven. His lips are pinched, jaw set in a grim line.

Glancing up at the bleachers in the mezzanine level, I see my best friend Candice leaning against the railing. She’s shouting and cheering me on while Simone and Fiona are waving signs with my name on them in glittery writing.

Behind them, I meet a man’s eyes for a brief moment before he ducks away. Did he look familiar? I glance again, but I can’t see anyone. My eyes are too blurry to tell, anyway.

Dread twists in my stomach. Everyone will see me fail.



I should be happy they're here, but all I feel is deep, overwhelming embarrassment. I've made thousands of croissants in my life, and none of them have been as bad as this.

When Fallon pulls out the croissants from the oven, I brush a hot tear away from my face. They look like they were made by a child. An amateur. Soggy, with butter melting out the edges, dense, and I can already tell the bottom is doughy.

Fallon sets the tray down and leans against the counter, looking at the little nuggets of unrisen dough in crescent shapes. He glances over at me, looking miserable. "I'm so sorry, Jen. This is on me."

I pick up one of the ruined croissants and turn it over, dropping my chin to my chest. My bottom lip wobbles.

Look, somewhere in my mind, I know it's only a TV show. I know it's some stupid competition, and in the grand scheme of things, it means nothing.

But the thing is...it means a *lot*. This is going to be broadcast to thousands—maybe *millions*—of people. My parents could see it! How will they react when they see me making a fool of myself on national television? How could they possibly be encouraging of my career as a pastry chef when *this* is what I produce?

*Congrats on the new book! I heard you can't even make a croissant.*

"Hey, don't cry," Fallon says, moving closer to shield me from the nearest camera.

I put my palm on his chest and gently push him away. "Stop, Fallon. It's fine."

His face twists. "I'm sorry. It was my fault. I didn't know about the butter."

"I should have paid closer attention," I say, and it's true. How could this be Fallon's fault when *I'm* the supposed pastry chef?

I'm ashamed of myself. It's *pastry*, for crying out loud. But, but... Oh, I'm such a loser, because I *do* care. I wanted this to be perfect. I wanted to do well. I wanted my friends and family—my parents—to be able to watch this show on television and finally, *finally* understand why I quit my “real” job to pursue this dream.

I wanted to *prove* something.

I don't even know why I care what anyone thinks. Logically, I know I'm a grown woman and I know it doesn't matter. But I wanted this very public display to be something I could be proud of. It's so far out of my comfort zone that I almost *need* to be successful just to show myself that I deserve this book deal, I deserve this success.

Amanda didn't just give me this opportunity because she was pining after Fallon. She gave it to me because I'm *good*.

But...am I? How can I claim to deserve my success when I can't even do a stupid TV show?

I open my mouth to apologize, because really, what excuse do I have? I failed the man who dropped everything to be my partner in this competition.

But the buzzer goes off, the crowd in the mezzanine goes wild, and I lift my gaze to my friends. Candice's brows are arched high. She gives me a sad smile as Simone does a thumbs-up, but by the looks on their faces, they can tell the greasy, dense mess on my platter isn't anything to be proud of.

I failed.

Fallon has his palms flat on the counter, his head bowed. I hate that he feels bad for this when I'm the one who should have known better.

Carrie calls for quiet, and the tension in the room grows thick. When the judges start making the rounds, praising Reg and Tex for their flaky, near-perfect croissants, Fallon puts his hand on my lower back.

Instinctively, I pull away.

It's not because I don't want him to touch me—it's because I feel ashamed of this failure. So embarrassed that all my friends saw how badly I performed.

"We're going home," I say to Fallon, my voice flat.

He doesn't deny it. It's stupid to be this upset about a competition, but I grew up under so much pressure to perform that *any* failure feels like an attack on my character. Losing is a heavy, suffocating weight on my shoulders.

I'm a perfectionist. I don't fail. I don't come in last place. I don't *lose*.

Fallon's face screws up, and he combs his fingers through his hair. "This is my fault."

That weight on my shoulders sinks lower, and suddenly I can't bear that Fallon's blaming himself. I can be hard on myself any day of the week, but him? This isn't Fallon's fault. He used the wrong butter because I didn't tell him the right instructions. He's not a baker. He's not a pastry chef. He's an amazing chef and I respect his skills, but the fact that he didn't know how to laminate pastry properly is entirely on me.

Instead of saying anything, I reach down for Fallon's hand and give it a squeeze. He meets my eyes, and something softens in his gaze. The blackness recedes ever so slightly inside me.

I've spent so, so many years being hard on myself. Being exacting. Thinking that success was the only way to be worth something.

But what if there was another way? What if I could be happy without putting so much damn pressure on myself?

"We've entered the sudden death elimination round," Carrie says, a serious expression on her face. "Jen, Fallon"—she looks at the two of us, then shifts her gaze to the two cake decorators from Virginia—"Hillary, Nate. You'll each have to choose one competitor from your teams to go head-to-head. Please make your selection now."

You know, when you watch these shows on TV, they seem kind of silly. All so serious and emotional, and for what? For

some stupid competition?

But let me tell you, in real life, the pressure is *intense*. You could hear a pin drop in this barn. Fallon squeezes my shoulder and gives me a nod. “You got this, Jen.” His full lips curl into a smile, and everything inside me tightens—because he looks like he’s telling the honest truth.

He believes in me. Even after the last disastrous few hours in the kitchen. Even after I pushed him away and chose my book instead of him. Still, after all that, he’s got my back.

I don’t deserve him.

Fallon steps aside, and it’s me against Nate, the big-hearted man who made me laugh at dinner last night. We have to produce a dessert containing three elements, at least one of which has to be baked. We have limited ingredients and only half an hour.

The time starts, and I sink deep into my own meditative zone. My hands work fast as my mind grows calm, my movements sure as I whisk, mix, sift, and fold a new dessert into existence. I make a quick shortbread with strawberry reduction and fresh whipped cream. The skills I learned with Guillaume come into play when I plate the dessert up in a delicate, artistic way that would be worthy of a Michelin-starred restaurant.

When the buzzer sounds, I step back, and even though I can hear the girls cheering me on from the other level, the first person I look at is Fallon.

His eyes are shining, his lips are spread into a wide smile, and before I can even say anything, he strides over to me and wraps me in a big, warm, beautiful bear hug.

And there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

*Fallon*

**T**he rest of the competitors, Jen, and I end up in the main farmhouse after it's announced that Jen and I are safe from elimination. Nate and Hillary are eliminated, but they'll be staying on site until the competition is over. We all had to sign non-disclosure agreements—and everyone in the live audience, too—and we're expected to stay in Heart's Cove for the full month to avoid leaks about winners and losers.

Jen ends up sitting next to me on a couch in one of the big living rooms, her body nestled against mine with my arm draped around her shoulders. It feels right. So, so right. She rests her head against my chest and lets out a quiet sigh, and the thumping of my heart gets louder.

Is it any wonder I came back to see her? Even if I haven't suddenly changed where I come from, who I am? Even if I'm still not worthy of her? How could I resist someone as masterful as she is in the kitchen, who then turns into a soft, sleepy kitten in my arms?

I've longed for this for more than a year. Ever since I tasted her lips, my arms have felt empty without her in them.

As the other competitors drink and celebrate being safe from elimination, Jen looks up at me. "I'm sorry for snapping at you."

My shoulders drop, hand skimming her jaw. "You didn't snap at me."

"I did. What happened today was my mistake. You're not a baker. It wasn't your fault you didn't know about the butter."

I shrug, then crack a smile. “I didn’t exactly learn about French pastry in my house growing up.”

“What was it like growing up at your house?” she asks, head resting on my shoulder. “You said your mom taught you to make chai tea.”

“She did,” I answer noncommittally. A lump forms in my throat at the thought of saying anything else. I could tell her that my father died when I was twelve, and I didn’t know how to deal with the loss. All I had to remember him by was his old hunting knife with the bone handle, the etchings on it worn down from years of use. It’d been passed down to him by his father, and then it went to me.

That fucking knife ruined my life.

Widowed and alone, my mother worked herself to the bone and never accepted help from anyone. She had to work two or three jobs and was never home, leaving my sister and me to fend for ourselves.

I could tell Jen that I fell in with the wrong crowd, that I thought I’d found a brotherhood—but all I found was trouble.

My past is a black hole. My childhood was one trauma after another, and it wasn’t until I was in my mid-twenties that I started cleaning up my act. By that time, I had a reminder inked on my back of all the mistakes I’d made. I had no skills and no education beyond a high school diploma I’d barely managed to earn.

I’ve been working in kitchens ever since.

Lungs squeezing so hard I can barely breathe, I just lean my chin against Jen’s head. “My life was boring up until about a year ago,” I tell her. “I’d rather hear about your childhood.”

Jen snorts. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

She pulls away from me to search my face, eyes narrowing. “You’re being serious right now.”

I nod. “You’re much more fascinating to me than almost anything else.”

“Has anyone told you that you might need to get your head checked?”

The tension gripping my chest eases as my lips curl. “No, but I’m sure you’re about to.”

“‘Fascinating’ is not a word I’d use to describe myself.” Jen sits up and stretches her neck from side to side. I watch the way the light plays on her hair, how her slim neck moves, how her shoulders bunch and relax.

“Agree to disagree,” I say quietly.

“Well, if you must know, I grew up with a surgeon for a mother and a CEO for a father,” she says matter-of-factly. “My brother got a degree in business and ended up in executive management at one of the fastest-growing companies on the eastern seaboard, so of course he’s my parents’ pride and joy. I’m doing this”—she sweeps her arm at the room full of contestants—“so you can imagine how proud they are of me.”

*Prouder than they would be if they knew you were sitting beside me.*

Forcing a smile, I stand up. “Come on. I want to do something.” Mostly I want to get away from this conversation, this constant reminder that I’m not good enough for her. I grab a plate full of food—piling it high with nuts and seeds and a few pieces of fruit—and duck out the front door.

Jen trots after me, frowning. “What are you doing?”

“Making an offering to our overlords.”

“What?” Jen twists her head to frown at me, then follows me around the side of the farmhouse.

When we get under the window she pointed out to me when she told me about the crows that attacked her, I look up to see the window closed, but a big black bird perched on the gutter above.

“Looks like they got the crows out,” I say, then drop the plate on the ground.

“What are you doing?” Jen hisses, eyes darting to the bird as she clings to my arm. “They’ll never leave if you feed

them.”

I put my arm around her—can’t help myself—and tug her against me as I back up.

The bird on the roof looks at us, then down at the plate, and swoops down to inspect. Pretty soon, there are four crows around the plate, pecking at my offering.

“Fallon, that wasn’t a good idea. They’ll stay now and attack everyone until they get fed!”

I grin. “Or they’ll become our friends and apologize for putting those scratches on your hands.”

Jen glances at me and frowns.

I can’t quite hide my smile. I love it when she looks at me like that—like I’m some problem that needs to be solved. Like if she only *thinks* hard enough, she’ll be able to figure me out.

She might be right about feeding the crows. But as soon as Jen glances at the birds and her lips twitch at the corners, I know I’d do it a hundred times over just to see her smile.

Then my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull away from Jen to see my baby sister’s name light up my screen. Swiping to answer, I put the phone to my ear. “Nora?”

“Fallon, I need help.” My sister sniffles, and I freeze.

Jen notices and looks at me, doing that puzzle-solving frown of hers again.

“What’s wrong?” I start walking toward the guesthouse cabin, if only to start moving. I don’t like the sound of my sister’s voice. Not one bit.

“Slim is out of prison. He showed up at my house to ask about you.”

Those words hammer a spike of fear in my chest. Harvey “Slim” Miller was my best friend at seventeen years old. He’s also the guy who ruined my life.

I grip the phone so hard I’m worried I’ll crack the screen. “What do you mean? How did he know where you live?”



“I don’t know. Someone must have followed me.” She snuffles. “You need to talk to him, Fallon. He’s been to my house three times already. I don’t feel safe.”

*Here it is.* My past, rearing its ugly head. That shadow I can’t quite shake.

The man who put that tattoo on my back is harassing my sister. I’m the one who brought that sack of garbage around *my family*. I’m the one who put her in danger. All those shapes I saw in the trees? They were probably Slim’s cronies looking for me.

I’m halfway to the guesthouse now, with Jen hurrying by my side. She hasn’t said a word, but I know she’s listening. Usually I’d be pulling away from everyone around. I’d be lowering my voice so no one can hear. But Jen slides her hand into mine, and I slow my gait so she can walk comfortably.

I want her beside me—but will she be in the same position as Nora? Am I poison to everyone around me?

Taking a deep breath, I turn my attention back to my sister. “I can’t leave right now, Nora. Not for another three weeks. Can you find somewhere else to stay?” We’ve made it to the door and Jen hurries ahead to unlock it. I close my eyes and lean against the wall. “I can send you money, Nora, but I don’t have an apartment of my own anymore. I’ve got nowhere for you to crash. I can book a hotel for you for a few nights? Give us time to figure something out?”

“She can stay at my place,” Jen cuts in. “Whoever Nora is, I can meet her in town and give her the keys. When do you need them?”

The woman has no idea who I’m talking to, and she’s already rifling through her bag to find her keys. She pulls them out and holds them in her cupped hands like an offering.

“One sec,” I tell my sister, then put my hand over the mouthpiece. “Jen, it’s okay. You don’t have to do that. It’s my sister. She’s just... There’s a guy...” I drift off.

Jen lives in a world of surgeons and CEOs. A world where bad croissants are the worst part of her day. This is... The shit

I'm potentially bringing to her doorstep isn't even in the same universe.

*But this is my sister.*

"I'll send Nora some money right away, book her a hotel, and call her when she's calmer."

Jen lets out a little sigh and shakes her head. "Does she need somewhere to crash? Use my place. No one is there. She can water my plants. It would be doing me a favor." She pauses, then frowns. "Actually, don't have her water my plants. They're on a strict watering schedule and Candice is taking care of it. I wrote out the instructions for each plant and she promised she'd follow it to the letter. I'm not sure I trust someone else to do it."

Despite myself, my lips curl into a smile. Of course she has a strict watering schedule for her jungle. Her hand is soft and warm when I reach over and squeeze it.

"Is she in trouble?" Jen asks, those intelligent eyes searching mine.

I give her a sharp nod.

"An ex?"

I shake my head. How do I explain this?

"It doesn't matter. You said she's not safe? So put her up in my place." She thrusts the keys toward me, the look on her face telling me she knows her logic will win.

Shoulders dropping, I give in. "Thank you. It's only temporary." I put the phone back to my ear. "Nora?"

"Yeah?" Her voice is so fucking small and it makes me want to *kill* Slim for doing that to my baby sister. How dare he find out where she lives.

"I'm sending you some money. Can you make it to Heart's Cove?"

"Yeah. I've got a car. If I leave tonight I can be there by tomorrow. I've got enough money, Fallon, I just didn't know what to do. I feel like I'm being watched."

“Okay. Pack everything essential. Assume you’re not going back. I’ll meet you in town and you can crash at my...” What is Jen to me? *Co-worker* isn’t accurate anymore. *Friend* seems wrong. “At Jen’s place.”

After solidifying our plans, my sister and I hang up, and I let out a long sigh, rubbing my thumb and forefinger over my forehead.

Look, I know this sounds so selfish, but it seems like any time I try to do something for myself, some emergency happens and I need to divert all my time and energy away. I was hoping to have one month—just *one, single* month—to spend time with Jen. But I’ll be paying for my teenage mistakes until I’m old and gray.

Well, older and grayer.

With a sigh, I resign myself to this. I love my sister, and it’s *my* fault she’s having to leave her own house. Wrapping my arms around Jen, I inhale the scent of her fruity shampoo and let my nerves settle ever so slightly. I’m not sure if I’m thanking her or if I just need the comfort of her in my arms. “That was really generous of you, Jen. I’ll find somewhere else for my sister to stay once I know what’s going on.”

“It’s fine,” she says, her voice muffled against my chest. She pulls away and looks up at me, the air between us shifting slightly. The panic from my sister’s call ebbs, and my heartbeat takes on a different timbre. I tighten my hold on Jen’s body, loving the way she fits against me. Loving the way her hands slide up my chest.

I could kiss this woman every day of my life and never get sick of it.

Jen’s fingers drift over my beard, tickling the skin where I’ve shaped it along my cheeks. “I think it says a lot that your sister knew she could call you in a crisis, and you’d sort it out without question.”

My gaze slides to the side as my throat grows thick. “I’m her big brother.”

“My big brother hasn’t spoken to me in three years apart from my birthday and Christmas.”

*Your big brother probably didn’t bring a man like Slim Miller into your life.*

I stare into her eyes, wishing I were someone else. Someone worthy of her. “And yet you have enough heart to give up your house to a stranger.”

She cracks a smile, and my hold on her tightens. “Your sister is hardly a stranger,” she says softly. Her eyes drop to my lips, and all my blood rushes south.

But before I can dip my lips to kiss her again, to relieve that ache in my chest that hasn’t gone away since the day my parents got in that accident, Jen pulls away. And I let her.

Because, really, she deserves more than what I can offer.

*Jen*

Fallon and I do the whole *I'll-sleep-in-the-cot-no-you'll-sleep-in-the-bed* thing, until he ends up on the floor and I invite him into the bed in the middle of the night. I wake up to a blanket of Fallon once again. This time, he blinks his eyes open when I move, and I feel something, um...*stiff*... between us. Fallon shifts his hips away from me and rolls off me with a sleepy groan.

And I'm...disappointed?

It's Sunday, which means we have the day off today. I sit up and lean against the headboard, scrubbing my face to wake myself up. I need to forget how it felt to have Fallon's hard shaft against my butt—and how much I liked it.

“My sister should be in town around five or six.” Fallon turns his head on the pillow, and warmth spreads through me.

He looks good like this. He's wearing an old T-shirt that was soft against my skin when he wrapped himself around me. With slitted, sleepy eyes, he looks deliciously undone. His beard has grown out a bit in the last few days, the silvery strands in it stark against the coarse black hair. My eyes slide down to where the sheet has fallen down and his shirt has rucked up, to that dark line of hair below his navel. The sight of it makes my heart thump, and my fingers curl into the sheets to stop myself from reaching over and touching it.

Blinking, I shift my gaze up...to a tattoo? I just spy the edge of a black shape on his rib. “I didn't know you had a tattoo.”

Fallon goes rigid beside me, pulling his shirt down with a hard yank. “Yeah. I’ll use the bathroom first.” He gets up with a swift movement, not looking at me as he crosses the room.

Um...okay.

The silky, hot feeling that had been weighing me down like a blanket is ripped away—and I remember that this is temporary. All of it. The competition, the guesthouse, Fallon’s presence. I shouldn’t get used to it. Once the competition ends, Fallon will leave. Like he did before. Like everyone does. Why wouldn’t they? It’s not like I have much to offer a man besides too many plants and obsessive baking tendencies. I’m not exactly a catch. I’m the woman that gets passed over. The one that is memorable for all the wrong reasons.

What I need to do is stay *focused*. Fallon’s happy trail and secret tattoo need to be relegated to the section of my brain that only gets visited when I’ve had too much wine.

His scruffy, handsome head pokes out of the bathroom, and he speaks around his toothbrush. “Are you sure it’s okay for my sister to stay at your place?”

“Of course,” I answer. My eyes drop down to his torso, hands itching to remove his shirt. Why didn’t he want me to see his ink? Does he think I won’t approve? I’m uptight, but I’m not *that* uptight.

Plus, anything Fallon does is ridiculously sexy.

Blinking, I meet his eyes again. “I mean, as long as Nora doesn’t kill my plants or wreck my house, obviously.”

Fallon chuckles. “I’ll warn her not to poke the dragon.”

I arch a brow, eyes drawn back to his. “The dragon?”

“You’re slow to anger, but once you go off”—he makes an explosion sound—“run for cover.” Eyes glimmering, he returns to the bathroom to finish up.

I huff, insulted. That’s not true...is it?

He reappears, and when he sees my face, Fallon laughs harder. “See? The dragon. I can see it waking up already.” He picks up a pillow from the ground and tosses it on his side of

the bed. “I got a stern talking-to from you last year and I’m still reeling. I distinctly remember you waving a spatula around like you wanted to smack me across the face with it.”

Hmm. I did do that.

He yanks the blankets up to make the bed. “I was afraid for my life.”

The twinkling in his eyes tells me he’s joking, but I still cross my arms with a huff. “You asked me to choose between you and my book. What was I supposed to say?”

The laughter in his eyes fades. He gives me a sad smile. “I don’t blame you, Jen. I was wrong to push you. You had every right to reject me when you did. I didn’t read the signs of what Amanda wanted from me. I thought she was just being her usual flirty self. She’s like that with everyone.”

Everyone, huh. Didn’t know Fallon was delusional.

Fallon’s ex-girlfriend was *very, very* obvious in her intentions any time Fallon was around. I’m not sure if he’s just being dense because he’s a man and he truly didn’t realize she still wanted him—or if he’s trying to downplay what happened.

“My turn in the bathroom,” I announce. At least if I’m busy, I don’t have to think about how good it feels to wake up next to Fallon—or how awful it’ll feel once the competition ends and we go our own ways.

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UNBEKNOWNST TO ME, there’s some sort of party going on at Four Cups when we arrive. Through the big windows at the front of the café, I notice that the tables and chairs are set up facing one wall, where a big screen and a projector are beaming a massive image of my face.

Wonderful.

I cast my eye over the assembled crowd. Of course, Simone, Fiona, and Candice are there with their partners Wes,

Grant, and Blake. Blake has his arm around Candice's shoulders and his mouth near her ear. She's blushing, and something like jealousy pierces my gut. Not that I want *Blake* to do that to me, but I'd like to have someone's arms wrapped around me like that. And by someone I mean Fallon.

Candice's sister, Trina, is off on a romantic two-week vacation with her man, Mac, to enjoy her time off while her kids are with her ex-husband. No doubt when she gets back, she'll be loved-up as well.

I glance at Fallon, who's scanning the space through the window, probably looking for his sister.

In the opposite corner to Candice and Blake, Dorothy and Margaret are huddled around a table with their partners Eli and Hamish. Candice's mother, Lottie, is wearing a T-shirt with my face on it, and she's sitting to Dorothy's left. Beside her are Blake's parents Gina and Merv. There's some kind of highly animated debate going on between the seven of them, until Margaret spots me through the doorway and points, and then they all jump up and cheer.

Candice opens the door and ushers us in, hooking her arm in mine. "We're celebrating! We just watched your interview with the local news station. Trying to figure out a format for viewing parties for when the competition is aired. Your television appearances so far are pure comedy, Jen."

I blink. "They are?"

Simone appears from the kitchen with a tray of snacks. "You should have had a career in TV, Jen. I'm not even joking."

"Uh, no," I answer. A career in television sounds like torture.

Simone just laughs, and Candice grabs me by the elbow to drag me in.

Fallon floats in afterward, and when I glance at his face he looks almost uncomfortable. I pull myself away from Candice and touch his arm. "You okay?"



He shifts his gaze to me, and I note with some satisfaction that his shoulders instantly relax. The smile he gives me is slight, but it makes my heart beat something fierce. “I’m good. It feels weird being back in here with everyone.”

“Good weird or bad weird?”

The smile widens. “Good weird.”

“Damn it!” Lottie tosses a napkin at us, which flutters uselessly to the ground a couple feet in front of her. “Dorothy was right.”

Dorothy plucks a piece of lint from her leopard-print scarf, her lips pursed in a self-satisfied smirk.

I frown. “About what?”

“About this not taking long!” Lottie thrusts her arm toward Fallon and me. “I was sure it would be another few months at least.”

Ice freezes every single muscle in my body. “What, exactly, is not going to take long?”

“You and Fallon, honey,” Margaret says, pouring fresh tea into her mug from a steaming teapot on the table. She arches her brows at Hamish, who—looking completely smitten—gives her a nod and a smile. She fills his cup with precise, graceful movements. When she places the teapot back down, she meets my panicked gaze. “Oh, come on, Jen. Don’t pretend you don’t know you’ll end up together.”

Dorothy cackles. She’s drinking wine instead of tea, and she lifts her glass to me. “Enjoy the ride, Ms. Newbank. And I do mean that literally.”

A suspiciously mirthful cough escapes Fallon’s throat, who covers his mouth with a fist before putting his hand on the small of my back. And damn it, it feels good. “Let them have their fun,” he murmurs in my ear.

“I give them a week,” Dorothy stage-whispers.

I don’t have time to glare at her, because the bell above the café door is ringing, and the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen walks through the door. She’s curvy in all the right

places, with long dark hair and the same brown-black eyes as Fallon. Where Fallon's features are rough-hewn and masculine, she's delicate. Wide-eyed, full-mouthed, and totally gorgeous.

Nora—Fallon's sister.

As soon as she spots her brother, her bottom lip starts wobbling. A thump sounds as she drops her small overnight bag to the ground, and her arms are already around Fallon's waist in a tight hug. He curls his strong arms around her and says soft things I can't hear until Nora starts sobbing in his chest.

My heart squeezes.

Silence settles over the café as we all witness this teary reunion.

It doesn't surprise me that Fallon is close with his sibling, nor does it shock me that she feels like everything will be okay now that she's here. It's the same reason Amanda kept coming back here and fawning over him. It's the same reason I sleep better when he's beside me.

Fallon is a rock. He's a steady, warm presence that anchors everyone around him, and you can't help but feel that if he's here, everything will be okay. His presence is addictive.

"I'm sorry," I hear Nora say, her voice muffled. "I'm embarrassing you."

"You're not," Fallon's warm, rumbly voice says. "You're fine, Snotface."

She snorts, pulls away, and punches her brother in the arm. Hard.

He laughs, and my heart just cracks into a million pieces right there. I haven't heard him laugh like that since before the book. Before Amanda.

Then Nora blinks, and notices the crowd behind her brother.

Fallon steps away and jerks his thumb at his sister. "This is Nora. She's my baby sister. She's going to be staying in town

for a while.”

And that’s all it takes for the dam to break. Fiona, ever the mother hen, is the first one to jump up and hug a shellshocked Nora. She introduces herself and immediately offers coffee, tea, iced coffee, iced tea, juice, water, beer, whiskey, bourbon, until Nora blurts out, “Water,” and Fiona rushes to get a glass with a smile. There’s a veritable procession of hugs and greetings as Nora is indoctrinated into the Four Cups posse.

I meet Fallon’s laughing eyes over the crowd. He scrapes his fingers through his hair and winces. “Maybe meeting here wasn’t such a good idea.”

“You shut your mouth, Fallon Richter,” Simone snaps. “Now, Nora, where are you staying? I have a few extra scented candles upstairs. I’ll grab one for you. You can have a nice bubble bath with a candle and some wine, and whatever made you cry will be okay. Okay?”

“Um...” Nora glances at Fallon, who just grins.

“She’s staying at Jen’s place.”

Silence crashes down, and all eyes turn to me.

Candice blinks. “She’s staying at your place?”

I shrug. “What’s the big deal?”

“You won’t even let *me* stay at your place, Jen,” Candice says slowly, as if I’m dense. “And I’ve known you since we were toddlers.”

“You already have a home.” I frown. Why would she want to stay at my house?

Candice’s lips twitch. “Yeah, but you basically gave me an hour lecture on plant care before you’d even give me your spare key. You sent me a spreadsheet with dates and times with every plant. You numbered your pots for me!”

“Yeah, because I have a lot of delicate plants on a strict watering schedule, and you wouldn’t be able to tell them apart without a system.” I don’t see why that’s so hard to understand.

Candice grins, then shifts her gaze to Nora. “You don’t know Jen, so you don’t know what a big deal this is, but no one—I mean *no one*—gets admitted to her space unless she trusts them.”

Nora’s eyes widen. “Um...”

“Fallon vouched for you,” I cut in. “And Candice is being dramatic. Her movie-star boyfriend must be rubbing off on her.” I stick my tongue out, because I’m a grown woman.

Blake just laughs.

Nora stumbles back. “Is that Blake Harding?” Her voice comes out as a raspy whisper just as Fiona appears at her elbow with a glass of water.

“Just go with it, honey,” Fiona says. “You’ll get used to it.”

*Candice*

Fallon's sister is a darling. She allows herself to be ushered to a table and does her best to answer the bombardment of questions hurled at her from everyone in the café. Then, Dorothy has the brilliant idea of restarting the clip on the screen so we can all watch Jen frown at the reporter's inane questions.

Comedic. Gold.

At one point the reporter asks her, "What's next for you, Ms. Newbank?" and Jen, instead of talking about her career, replies, "Next? Well, I'll have to check, but I think it's lemon-raspberry squares."

As if he'd been talking about her to-do list. Cracks me up every time.

Jen, predictably, doesn't want to watch herself. She shuffles to the kitchen, her happy place, which also happens to be far, far away from the massive screen projecting her face onto the café wall.

Nora accepts another glass of water and a mug of tea as Fallon fusses over her—adjusting her jacket, pushing food toward her, taking her bag—until she gives him a stare that screams *Death by Little Sister*.

I grin when Fallon throws his hands up and backs off.

My mother, Lottie, pulls up a chair. "So, Nora, tell us about yourself. What brought you to Heart's Cove?"

"I, uh, needed time away," she answers flatly.

“From a man?” Dorothy asks, leaning forward with her wine dangling between her thumb and forefinger.

Fallon’s jaw hardens.

Nora tilts her head from side to side. “Something like that.”

“That *ass*.” My mother huffs, then glances at the crew of elderly ladies leaning in to hear every word. “Get the pitchforks ready, ladies.”

Nora’s lips twitch. She flicks her gaze to Fallon, who’s scrubbing his forehead with his broad hand.

“Don’t worry, honey, we’ll sort him out,” Dorothy says. “If all else fails, we can ask Agnes to go speak to him. Lord knows being in *her* presence would scare him straight.” The older woman shudders.

“Who’s Agnes?” Nora asks, her shoulders relaxing ever so slightly. She breaks a piece of cookie off and pops it in her mouth, her eyes widening in surprise and delight.

Yep—Jen’s creations. They have that effect on people.

“Agnes is the town hag,” Dorothy says with a pleasant smile on her face.

When Nora’s brows tug, I glide over to them. “Don’t mind them, Nora. Welcome to Heart’s Cove. Do you know how long you’ll be staying?”

She bites her lip. “That depends on Fallon.”

“No, sweetheart.” My mother pats her hand. “It depends on *you*.”

Something crosses Nora’s eyes—surprise, or maybe revelation. As if she hadn’t considered that she could be in charge of her own future. But before she can respond, the bell above the door rings, and the last person I ever expected to see enters the café.

“Iliana?” My mother straightens in her chair, her head tilting to the side. “Lily, baby?” Her voice breaks on my sister’s nickname.

My youngest sister puts her big travel backpack down beside her, eyes sweeping over the assembled crowd. She's wearing loose, drawstring sweatpants with a cropped patchwork sweatshirt of a thousand colors. Her dark, near-black hair is piled high on her head in a messy bun, face lined with tired lines. Streaks of silver shimmer in her hair, as if she hasn't been to the salon in ages. Damn her, but gray hair looks good when Iliana does it. My sister's bright-green eyes meet mine, and she gives me a half-smile. "Surprise."

I jump when my mother shrieks, then launches herself at Lily. The top of my mom's head only reaches my sister's chin, but she still manages to nearly bowl her over. They crash into the wall as my mother grasps Lily's cheeks and lays a thousand kisses all over her.

"My baby's home!" Mom pulls away, her hands on my sister's upper arms. "You didn't tell us you were coming."

Lily's eyes slide to the side, and warning bells start ringing in my head. Something's up. "It was...unexpected."

"Well, you're here now." My mother turns around and starts jabbing her finger at people. "You remember Dorothy and Margaret? This is Fiona and Simone; I think you met them at Thanksgiving a couple of years ago. They own this café with Candice and Jen. That's Fallon's sister. You remember Fallon from before, yeah?" Her arm is hooked tightly around my sister's as she drags her around to various people, making introductions.

When they reach me, my mother reluctantly pulls away from Lily and allows me to hug my sister. Lily clings to me, hard.

Something's definitely wrong.

But when I pull away and search her face, my sister just paints a smile on her face and glances around. "Where's Trina? Last I heard she moved here to be with all of you."

"She's having a sexy two-week vacation with her new motorcycle-riding hunk of a boyfriend," Simone supplies,

grabbing empty mugs and plates from a nearby table. “Back in a week.”

Lily’s eyes widen. “Katrina has a new boyfriend?” Her gaze lands on me, shock written over every line of her face. “And her boyfriend rides a *motorcycle*?”

“I know.” I grin. “I’d expect that from you, but not from Trina.”

Lily’s face shuts down. “I’m done with men.”

“Oh, that’s what they all say.” Dorothy nudges my sister with her elbow. “Won’t take long for you to find someone of your own.”

Lily grimaces, and I bite back a smile. A year and a half ago, I would have thought the same—then I met Blake. Meeting my man’s eyes, I extend a hand toward him.

He closes the distance between us and slides his arm across my shoulders, extending his other hand toward my sister. “I’m Blake.”

Lily’s eyes widen. “Blake Harding.”

“The one and only.” He gives her his most winning Hollywood smile, and my sister nearly has a heart attack.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t encourage him,” I tell Lily.

Her eyes swing to me. “You’re dating a movie star? Since when?”

“Uh...a year, give or take?”

“Officially one year since our first kiss next Saturday,” Blake provides, squeezing my shoulders. “And I have video evidence.”

I blush, grinning at the man I love. It’s not like I’d forget *that* first kiss.

Lily’s brows lower over her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?” She seems...hurt?

I clear my throat. “Well, Lily, you haven’t had a phone in five years. We get postcards from you once every six months



or so, and I never know what country you've traveled to. You don't even have social media."

"I have an email. I'd like to know when my sister shacks up with a literal Hollywood movie star!"

I flinch. "I'm sorry, okay? You've been jet-setting around the world for over a decade. I didn't think you'd be interested in my boring little life."

The hurt in Lily's eyes disappears when she drops a blank mask over her face. She shakes her head and takes a deep breath. "You're right."

"If only Trina were here, we'd be all together for the first time since your thirtieth birthday." She shakes her head. "That's *ten years*." My mother puts her hand around Lily's waist, as if she can't believe my sister is really here. "Tell me you're staying more than a few days."

Lily bites her lip, eyes darting from me, to my mother, to the rest of the assembled crowd. She lets out a huffed laugh and spreads her arms. "I was kind of planning on staying...for good."

Her smile is wide, but there's something dark in her eyes. My sister is hiding something—and it's big.

But before I can ask her anything, Jen walks out of the kitchen, and my sister moves to greet her. Then Dorothy insists on restarting the video *again*, since we haven't actually gotten through a full viewing without interruption. Jen takes that as her cue to leave, and glances at a wide-eyed, exhausted-looking Nora and her protective older brother hovering nearby.

"We're leaving," Jen proclaims, not leaving any room for discussion.

Nora's face relaxes, and she nods. "Okay."

Fallon glances at me, Lily, then at his own little sister, grabs her bag, and says his goodbyes. The three of them walk out the door and I turn back to Lily, but she's already collapsed on a chair looking close to exhaustion.

Giving her the third degree will have to wait—but I'll find out what she's hiding sooner or later.

Nora lets out a long sigh when we get to my place. It looks like she's only holding on by a thread.

While Fallon busies himself carrying her bags to the spare bedroom, I turn to her. "Do you need to be alone, or do you need us to stay? Either is fine."

She blinks, then lets out a huffing laugh. "I think...alone, if you don't mind. I won't mess with your plants."

I give her a sharp nod, then turn to look at Fallon as he enters the living room.

My mouth waters.

He's just so...*big*. Over six feet tall, with shoulders nearly the width of a standard door. My apartment looks like a hobbit home with him in it. His hair is tousled from the thousand times he's run his fingers through it. A threadbare tee clings to his muscular shoulders, and I wonder what it would feel like to nuzzle into its softness.

Is it wrong that I *want* him to fall out of the cot tonight so he has no choice but to sleep in the bed with me?

He stalks out of the guest bedroom, eyes on his sister for the briefest moment before flicking to me. Fallon must see the hungry expression on my face, because one eyebrow arches ever so slightly.

"We're going," I blurt.

His head tilts. "That so?"

"Yeah. Nora wants to be alone, and we need to get back."

His gaze drops to my lips when I speak, and heat gushes through me.

This is bad. Really, really bad. If we go down that path again, it'll get messy. I have proof! The last year of my life is irrefutable evidence that getting involved with Fallon is a Really Bad Idea.

He's my partner in the competition, nothing more. We kissed once, a year ago. There's no need for me to be obsessively replaying the memory every chance I get.

At the end of it all, he *left*. Didn't even warn me. Didn't even tell me if he'd be back. I know myself, and I know I'm not strong enough to go through that all over again.

What if he kissed me again...but there wasn't an ex-girlfriend who showed up to break us up?

Then, if he left, it would simply be because he didn't want *me*.

No, Fallon is a distraction, and I can't afford to go down that path. I need to focus on this competition. On my goals.

His long legs eat up the space between us, eyes burning with something I don't understand. At the last moment, he turns to his sister. "You don't want us to stay?"

She lets out a long sigh, sounding exactly like her brother. Then she shakes her head. "I just want to shower and go to bed. I haven't had a good night's sleep in months."

A muscle feathers in Fallon's cheek. He cares about his sister—a lot. But he gives Nora a nod, squeezes her shoulder, then we say goodbye.

We don't say a word in the stairwell as we descend, or when we spill out into the cool evening air. I suck in a breath, my skin overheated for reasons I don't want to admit.

"I'll drive," Fallon says, his low voice rumbling through me, his eyes searching mine before dropping to my mouth, my shoulders. I'm so flushed I know my chest is red, and I wonder if he can tell in the darkening night.

It seems to surprise Fallon when I don't protest, choosing instead to hand him my keys without a word. In some corner of my mind it surprises me, too, because I'm not the type of woman who likes to give up control. Any type of control. But with Fallon, it feels easy to let him take the lead. I *like* when he's in charge.

His fingers brush mine as he grabs the keys, a step bringing us nearly chest-to-chest. "Thank you, Jen," he rumbles.

"For what?"

He jerks his head to my apartment building. "What do you think?"

Breath stays caught in my lungs as I watch the moonlight play on his skin, his hair. When I meet his gaze, something smolders there. He gulps, watching me, then jerks his head. "Let's get back."

I nod, throat suddenly tight.

There's tension between us. Some sort of energy that's making my skin feel tight, sensitive. My clothes are rough against my body. When I put my seatbelt on, it presses my bra up against my breasts and I know my nipples are hard.

My body is out of control. Is this perimenopause? Some sort of physiological change in my body making my libido go haywire?

...or is it just the fact that Fallon is the first man I've ever met who makes me fantasize about every dirty thing I've never had the chance to do?

As we start driving, I let out a sigh. Wondering if Fallon feels the tension between us, I glance over at him and see his jaw clenched, his hands tight on the steering wheel.

"You okay?" I ask.

Fallon flicks his eyes to mine, to my lips, and then back to the road before dipping his chin. "Yeah. I'm good."

"Worried about your sister?"

A pause stretches, then Fallon nods again. “That too.” He clears his throat. “Thank you for offering up your place.”

“It’s fine.” I can’t seem to tear my eyes away from him, from the white of his clenched knuckles as he kneads the steering wheel. His hands are so big and strong—so different from my own. Would they feel good sweeping over my curves?

One of those hands moves to adjust the collar of his tee, then rakes over his scalp before returning to the steering wheel.

“You don’t seem fine.” I state the obvious, knowing I’m entering dangerous territory.

Fallon’s warm chuckle makes my insides clench. He concedes a nod. “Fine.” We turn onto the long, winding, wooded road that will eventually open up on the *Boss Baker* compound. “I was having very selfish thoughts that I’m ashamed to say out loud.”

Another thrill stabs me through the middle. Is he thinking about me? Does he feel the electricity in the car? Does he feel the night pressing in on us, shrouding us in this little bubble inside the vehicle?

My voice is scratchy when I finally manage to speak. “You should say them out loud, then.”

Fallon pauses, his body tense. As if he’s holding himself back. When he speaks, his voice is low. “That seems counterintuitive.”

“If you say them out loud, they’re usually not as bad as you think.”

He snorts, shooting me a quick glance. “I can assure you, what’s going on in my head is very, very bad.”

Heat spears through me. I gulp. “Oh.”

The car has slowed, and I wonder if he did it so the drive would last just a bit longer. “Okay, Dr. Jen. You first. What thoughts are you ashamed of?”

“That’s easy,” I answer immediately. “My constant failure. The fact that I can never quite live up to my potential, no matter how much I try. The fact that my perfectionism is like a cancer inside me, and it pretty much guarantees I’ll never be happy with anything I achieve. I’m ashamed of the fact that I’m in my mid-forties and I’ve never had a long-term boyfriend, apart from one guy at college. Which was literally more than twenty years ago.” I stare at the passing trees as my eyes grow unfocused.

“Jen...”

I blink, glancing back at him. “See? Easy.”

“Why haven’t you had a boyfriend?” Did his voice just get deeper? He looks almost...*pleased*?

I snort. “Look at me.”

He looks at me—and doesn’t snort. His eyes flick from my face down my body, and heat flows wherever his gaze lands.

Oh, my.

“I’m not seeing anything wrong,” he growls.

My mouth grows dry, and when Fallon turns back to the road, I try to release the breath I’d been holding without him noticing. Being in his presence is becoming too much. How am I supposed to focus on the competition when all I can think about are his lips, his body, the way his voice skates along my skin like silk?

I force myself to look out the window. There’s so much that I could say. How about the years and years as a child that I tried to be *enough*, only to be torn down by the two people who were supposed to prepare me for the world? How about the fact that in my mid-forties, I still feel inadequate?

This is my life. I’m good at baking. I’m good at taking care of plants. I have a deep need to be the best at what I do. I hate failure. I hate compromise.

Does that sound like nothing is wrong with me? Does that sound like someone a man like Fallon would be interested in?

“I’ll never be the woman you think I am, Fallon.”

The car swerves onto the shoulder and jerks to a stop. Pain snaps across my torso where my seatbelt catches me. In an instant, Fallon is unlatching his seatbelt, then unlatching mine. Hands wrap around my waist, and Fallon is dragging me over to sit across his lap.

I freeze, eyes wide.

I'm sitting across Fallon's lap, my side to his chest. My feet are stretched out across the center console, the gear shift between my knees. And he's so close I can feel him *everywhere*. His hands around my waist. His strong legs beneath my ass. His impossibly broad chest against my shoulder.

Fallon's hand moves from my waist to my cheek. The roughness of his hands sends tiny shivers racing over my skin, down my neck. I gulp, my hands having somehow moved to cling to his shirt. His touch feels so damn good.

"You're already the woman I think you are, Jen," he growls. "And I wouldn't change a damn thing." His eyes are dark, searching mine.

I swallow. "Oh."

"I should never have left," Fallon rasps. His fingers tighten over my cheek, sliding back to tangle into my hair. My own hands curl into his shirt, feeling the tenseness of his shoulders beneath the soft fabric. I'm pinned between him and the steering wheel, and when he slides his other hand up under my shirt, I nearly come apart.

"Why..." I gulp, trying to gather my wits enough to speak. His hand starts sweeping across my bare skin, and it's hard to push out the words. "Why did you leave?"

"I left because I needed..." Fallon inhales sharply, his hand gripping my waist for a moment, as if he doesn't want to let go. "There were things I needed to do. I'm sorry, Jen."

I shake my head. "Don't be. You didn't owe me anything."

The hand on my waist tightens, and heat lances my core. I realize that I like this—being here, in his lap. I like Fallon's hungry eyes roaming around my face, flicking from my gaze



to my lips and back again. For the first time in my life, I *like* being pinned here against him, giving up control.

“You ruined me when you kissed me, Jen,” he rasps. “It was over a year ago and I haven’t been right since.”

“Oh,” I say. “I’m...sorry?”

His lips tilt. “I happen to like being ruined.”

“Well, that makes one of us.”

When a deep chuckle rumbles through his chest, I can’t help the clenching of my core. His eyes are dark, almost black, and they promise dirty, dangerous things.

It’s been a long, long time since I’ve been with a man—and even longer since I’ve felt on edge as I do now. But all it takes is Fallon’s thumb to sweep a few inches over my back, and my whole body wants to melt.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I whisper.

“Do what, Jen?”

“Whatever it is we’re doing.”

“When was the last time you broke the rules?” Fallon leans his head back against the headrest, surveying me through half-lidded eyes.

“Ten minutes ago,” I answer.

His eyebrow arches. “How so?”

“Well, you’re not on my insurance and I let you drive my car.”

His lips twitch. “Does that stress you out?”

“I gave verbal consent for you to drive it, and it’s a relatively short distance back to the farmhouse, so the risk was low enough for me to take it.”

His hand tightens around my waist, smile widening. “What a rebel.”

“I know you’re making fun of me, but I don’t care.” I jut my chin out, challenging.

“I would never.”

I roll my eyes. “You constantly make fun of me, Fallon. For drinking tea. For liking to work in silence. For having four kitchen scales. For baking late into the night. For baking early in the morning. For caring about the correct temperatures for tempering chocolate—which, by the way, is the whole *point* of tempering chocolate.” I huff. “You make fun of me for talking about protein content of various wheat flours and their effect on recipes, which again, is *important*.”

His smile stretches all the way across his face, and I try my best to ignore the hard thumping of my heart. “Fine. Maybe I poke fun at you once in a while.”

“Once in a while? It was honestly a relief when you left. At least I could get a bit of peace.” My hands are still clinging to his shirt, twisted into the soft, black fabric. His shoulders shift beneath my hands, and I can’t help my soft exhale at the feel of his warm, strong body moving against mine.

The leather seat creaks as he shifts his weight forward, pulling me tight to his chest. “I don’t believe you.”

My breasts crush against his chest as he holds me tight, but I do my best to look unaffected. “Well, you should.”

“I think you’ve missed my comments. My making tea for you. My showing up at Four Cups in the middle of the night to pull you back from the brink of baking mania.”

“Nope,” I lie. “Didn’t miss you for a minute.”

His arms tighten, that sinful smile tugging. “You’re lying.”

I gulp, and Fallon sees it. The hand curled around my nape tightens as he exhales slowly, caging me in his strong arms. “You missed me, and you can’t stop thinking about kissing me.”

“Patently untrue.”

“So why are you staring at my lips?”

*Damn it.* I flick my gaze back up to his laughing eyes, but I know I’ve already lost.

How did this happen? How did we get here? I was supposed to keep my distance. I was supposed to treat him like a professional partner in this competition, then move on. Somehow, his sister is staying at my place and I'm wrapped up in his arms on the side of the road.

And I *like* it.

Then the pressure of his hand on my nape increases, and without giving me a moment to process what's happening, Fallon pulls me in for a hard kiss.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to kiss Fallon. To have his firm, unyielding lips on mine. To feel him groan against my mouth as his body grows tense around mine. To be so wrapped up in him that I forget the world exists beyond the confines of his arms.

Once my lips are thoroughly ravished, Fallon pulls away and looks at me through heavy lids, satisfaction curling his lips.

"What was that for?" I ask, breathless.

"Two reasons," he says, his hand cupping my face. "First, as a thank you for everything you did for my sister tonight." A gentle kiss on my lips. "And second"—another brush of his lips, like he can't help himself—"because I've wanted to kiss again for a whole damn year."

We pause, tension stretching between us. I gaze into his brown-black eyes, realizing I'll get lost in them. In him.

And maybe...I want that.

Pulling him closer, it's my turn to kiss Fallon hard—because the truth? The truth is, I've been dreaming of this for a year too.

Fallon crushes his lips against mine, his kiss claiming. Possessive. He nips at my bottom lip, his hand sweeping higher under my shirt to my mid-back. When Fallon kisses me again, his tongue delves into my mouth and another groan is ripped from his throat. I answer with a whimper.

That's when the hand around my waist moves to my front, palming my small breasts with his big, hot hand. I gasp, my nipples going hard in an instant, my body on fire.

This is what kissing Fallon does to me. It cranks me so tight I can't think. Can't breathe. All I can do is shove my hands into his thick, black hair, parting my lips to kiss him harder. His beard feels rough against my skin as he breaks the kiss and nips at my earlobe, my neck. When his tongue slides out to taste my skin, I let out a shaking breath.

His hand kneads my breast, his thumb making delicious, mind-melting circles over the stiff peak. When I shift my body, his steel-hard shaft presses against my hip.

"Missed this," Fallon says, pushing me down so I'm leaning against the door, my legs stretched out toward the passenger seat. He shoves my shirt up to expose my plain white bra. "Wanted you for years."

"Me too," I pant, hands still tangled in his hair.

When Fallon dips his head toward my chest, I close my eyes. The window is cold against my shoulders, my neck, but Fallon's heat is a blaze all around me. My bra is shoved down beneath my breasts in an instant, and his mouth is on my skin.

I moan.

He sucks my breast into his mouth, his tongue laving my nipple until I'm in a frenzy. "Make up...for lost time," he grunts between nips of my breast, his hand cupping my flesh as his mouth drives me wild.

I could come like this—sitting across his lap in the car, my body awkwardly shoved against the door, my shirt shoved up to my neck while he teases my breasts like a man starved.

Hand scrabbling for purchase, I grip the steering wheel and arch into his mouth. He answers with a groan, his hand sliding down to wrap around my rib cage, holding me right where he wants me. Sharp jolts of pleasure pierce me with every flick of his tongue, every squeeze of his broad hand.

Sex has always been awkward for me. Something I'm supposed to do a certain way, with certain men that have been

vetted and approved ahead of time. I had my first one-night stand at the tender age of forty-one, when I signed up for a dating website for a grand total of two weeks. His hands were clammy and I never called him again.

I've only ever had sex in a bed, with the lights off. Until Fallon kissed me last year, I hadn't even realized that it could be anything other than uncomfortable. That pleasure could be so intense it would drive me out of my mind.

My hips grind wantonly, and I feel so intensely, painfully empty.

Fallon lifts his head from my chest, his lips glistening, eyes glazed. His hand moves from my ribs to my breast, as if he can't stop himself from touching me, feeling me.

For the first time in all my life, I feel sexy. Sensual.

Chest heaving, he palms my breast and shakes his head. "Better than I imagined."

Before I can answer, headlights appear behind us. I jump, my elbow hitting the horn. The noise startles me and I yelp, then shove my bra back up and my shirt down, but Fallon's hand tightens around my waist to stop me shuffling back to my seat. We wait in tense silence as the car passes us, slowing as it goes by.

My cheeks flame.

"They won't be able to see anything, Jen. It's dark."

"I'm not the type of woman who makes out with strange men on the side of the road."

That makes him smile. "Am I a strange man?"

"Extremely." Wrenching myself from his grasp, I shuffle across to my own seat and let out a huff. It's awkward and difficult and damn it, when did I get so old and creaky? Climbing across a car seat shouldn't be this hard. Once I make it across, I slap my palm against my forehead and squeeze my eyes shut.

This is bad.

Very, very bad.

The kiss was great. Wonderful. Earth-shattering.

But the consequences?

Devastating.

I already want Fallon more than I can say. It's clouding my mind, pushing all other thoughts to the side. Everything else that has happened over the past week fades to nothing. The competition? What competition? His sister? Iliana's unexpected arrival? My career prospects? My book? My plants?

None of it matters, because my swollen, kiss-bruised lips are throbbing for more. Every heartbeat pulses through me and reminds me of all the places Fallon touched—and places he didn't. Damp fabric clings to the space between my legs as I clench my thighs to ease some of the pressure.

I want him so desperately it aches in every part of me. I'm so far gone already, and it only spells trouble.

Because what happens next time Fallon leaves without warning? Next time he has "things to take care of" out of town and disappears for six months? What happens next time an ex-girlfriend shows up to stay at his place?

What happens when he gets bored of me?

Because if there's one thing I've learned over the four-and-a-bit decades of my life, it's that I cannot keep a man entertained. I'm too neurotic. Too unyielding. Too stuck in my ways.

I have obsessions that my friends call quirks—and men call annoying.

Fallon said he's been waiting years to feel my breasts, to kiss me like that—but what happens once he gets what he wants? The heat spearing my core tells me he'll destroy me. Maybe he already has.

"Hey." Fallon moves my hand from my brow with a gentle, firm touch, then hooks his hand around my neck. His lips are tender when they press against mine. "Whatever's

going on in your head right now, it needs to stop. I can't have the best pastry chef in town panicking on me."

His beard scratches against my jaw as he kisses my cheek, then my nose, then back down to my lips. I shiver, loving his touch far, far too much for my own good.

"We should get home," he says quietly. "Big day tomorrow."

"Yeah," I croak. "Sounds good."

What happens after we get home might sound even better...if I can get out of my own head.

Someone was in our room. The housekeeping staff, for one, but when I step inside the guesthouse, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. All the heat from my car ride with Fallon seeps out of me, replaced with cold dread.

“Does that look like the imprint of someone sitting on the bed to you?” I point to the slightly ruffled sheets near my pillow.

Fallon straightens from where he’d been bent over one of the drawers containing his clothing, his brows tugging together. “Maybe the maid needed a break when she was cleaning.”

I’ve stayed in a few hotels in my life, and I’ve never seen anything like this. Crossing to the closet, I glance at my shelf and freeze.

Has someone been rummaging in my stuff?

I color-code my clothing—have done for years. It’s all Marie-Kondo’ed within an inch of its life, and I made sure to bring shelf organizers for my stay. They’re honeycomb-shaped, with each little hexagonal section available for a perfectly folded item of clothing. Every single pair of socks and underwear should be folded precisely and slotted in its own little section of my shelf. But some of my underwear is *ruffled*.

My heart thumps. I whirl on Fallon. “Were you rifling through my underwear?”

He rears back. “What? No!”



I stare at him for a beat, searching. Did he? *Would* he?

My eyes dart around the room, searching for something—anything. A clue. The window is cracked open, just how we left it earlier, and I cross the room to glance outside. The window is the type that opens two ways: it either swings fully inward, or it can be latched and tilted from the top to let in some air. We tilted it. Outside, I scan the trees, the grass, the underbrush, but I see nothing.

Until I look directly at the ground near our guesthouse. A single black feather rests on the grass just outside our cracked window. A *crow* feather.

Did—how—*what*?

I press the heels of my hands to my eyes and take a deep breath. I'm going crazy. There's no way a crow rifled through my underwear. Literally no way.

Fallon walks on soft feet to approach me, stopping just inches from my back. When he puts his hands on my shoulders, I flinch. "Talk to me," he rumbles.

"The bedsheets are mused."

Something crosses his eyes. Real worry—maybe even fear. But his face is blank in an instant. "Barely."

"My underwear was tampered with."

There's slight pause, as if Fallon is trying to compose himself. When he speaks, his voice sounds calm, casual. "Is it possible you did that when you got dressed this morning?"

I glance at the closet door, biting my lip. I *was* frazzled this morning when I woke up wrapped up in Fallon's arms. Is it *possible* that I messed up a few items of clothing when I got dressed?

Yeah, it's possible.

Is it *probable*?

I'm going with *hell no*.

But what's the alternative? A freaking *crow*?

I'm going insane.

"I need to call the Audubon society. I need to know just how smart crows are, and whether they can squeeze through"—I glance at the window—"two or three inches of space." I straighten my shoulders, but Fallon doesn't drop his hands.

A deep, rumbling chuckle sounds as his hands slide down my arms and wrap around my waist. "Jen." His voice is quiet, his breath ruffling over my neck.

"What?"

"Is it possible you're deflecting from the real issue?"

I frown. "What's the real issue?"

"The fact that we made out like two horny teens in your car a few minutes ago, and now we're back in our private guesthouse with nowhere to be until tomorrow morning?"

I stiffen.

He lets out a long sigh, his arms still wrapped around me—and damn it, I like the feeling of him curled around me like this. The hardness of his muscle. The warmth of his body. The rasp of his beard against my neck, my chin.

"I'm not going to push you to do anything you don't want to do," he says quietly.

Of all the reactions I could have to something so thoughtful, so gentle, I have the worst one. I get *embarrassed*. How humiliating is it that I've been on this earth nearly half a century, and the thought of being intimate with a man still fills me with dread? I still feel like I should be alone. I don't deserve someone as thoughtful and kind as Fallon.

Breath fills my lungs as I spin around in his arms, placing my hands on his chest as I lift my gaze to his. "I want you to sleep in the bed tonight, but I don't want... I'm not ready to do anything." I'm grasping at straws here, wanting to take things slow with him. Ever since the first day of the competition, we've been getting closer and closer.

But I can't afford the distraction. I need to focus on winning.

"Okay," he replies, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"That's it? Okay? Aren't you going to try to convince me to sleep with you?"

His lip quirks. "Is that what you want me to do?"

"No."

"Well, there you go."

"You're too nice. It's weird."

Fallon's eyes grow shadowed. He gives me a sad smile, then jerks his head to the bathroom. "I'm going to get ready for bed."

When we finally climb into the fresh bedsheets together, Fallon doesn't even pretend to stay on his side. He hooks his arm around my waist and tugs me close, shifting his hand up to rest just under my breast. Behind me, his cock throbs, but he makes no move to do anything about it.

I blink, staring out in the darkened room, heart thundering.

There's too much going on. I gave up on Fallon a year ago, when his ex showed up in town and I had to choose. Now he's here, and it looks like he never gave up on me. He kissed me like the world was ending, and now he's holding me like I'm precious.

I've never had this.

My one, singular boyfriend was a biomechanical engineer who had his life planned out in a spreadsheet. I ticked the boxes for the woman he wanted—literally, he had a checklist—but there was none of this heart-racing, body-heating reaction to his touch.

His name was Will, and he never proposed to me. He just...assumed we'd get married. One day he started talking about the tax implications of marriage, and how it made sense for us to head to the courthouse.

I almost agreed, until he started talking about me staying home with the kids. Frowning, I asked him what he meant, because I'd been very clear that I didn't want kids. I wanted to focus on my career in tech.

And he *laughed*. I remember his exact words. He said, "If you won't have my kids, what the hell is the point of all this?"

We broke up the next week, and he was married with a baby on the way a year later.

I know I'm not some incredible catch in the romance department. I'm neurotic and obsessive and hate compromises. My body has never been amazing. I was too skinny as a kid, and I grew into a pretty flat-chested, bony adult. Now, things have started sagging, wrinkling, and graying around the edges, and it's even more obvious that I'm past my prime.

But having someone dismiss me and replace me so easily? That stung.

Fallon's breath deepens, and I know he's asleep. He huffs, his breath flicking a strand of my hair over my neck, then shifts to press his body along the length of mine. His hand slides up to cup my breast and he mumbles something unintelligible in his sleep, tightening his hold on me.

Is it completely pathetic that even that simple touch makes my body feel like a live wire? When I'm with Fallon, I don't feel gray and wrinkly and old. I don't feel like I'm past my prime. He makes me feel beautiful and attractive and wanted.

But how long will that last? How long until he sees me for who I am and decides that I don't tick all *his* boxes?

Fallon's hand gently squeezes my breast, sending a jolt of arousal down between my legs. "Sleep, Jen," he murmurs. "I can hear your thoughts from all the way over here."

"That doesn't even make any sense."

He huffs a laugh, nuzzling his face into my neck. "*Shh.*"

"Did you just shush me?" The nerve!

When Fallon's thumb brushes over my nipple in a slow, torturous sweep, my eyes nearly roll back in my head. His

voice is a growl when he says, “I can think of other ways to stop your mind from running away with you.”

I manage a huff. “You’re unbelievable.”

His teeth rasp against my earlobe, and I feel an unmistakable throb from his crotch. When he rolls me onto my back and props himself on his elbow above me, his eyes are dark, his face shadowed. “Do you want me to sleep on the cot?”

Throat tight, I shake my head.

He stares at me for a long moment, as if he’s trying to read me. Figure out if I’m telling the truth. “You’ll hate yourself if you don’t do well in tomorrow’s elimination challenge because you’re tired.”

I blink. That’s...very true.

His lips are soft when he lays a tender kiss on my mouth, shifting his hand to my jaw as he deepens the kiss. With a low growl, Fallon pulls away. “I’d do anything to have my way with you right now. To taste you. Have all of you.” He rests his forehead against mine. “But I’d never forgive myself if I was the reason we got eliminated tomorrow. You need to shut that big brain of yours off and try to sleep.”

My heart spasms. Gulping, I nod. “Okay.”

Rolling me back over, Fallon shoves his leg between mine and tucks me into his chest, wrapping me up in his warmth and weight. He wants me, but he knows how important doing well in this baking competition is to me.

When was the last time someone gave up what they wanted for me? I can’t think of a single time.

So, blood humming, lips curling as warmth settles over my body, I close my eyes and do my best to sleep.

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OUR NEXT ELIMINATION challenge involves bread. We have to make thirty-six perfect dinner rolls. Fallon and I work fairly

well together, landing somewhere in the middle of the pack. Our bread was well-baked, but the texture was a bit too chewy for the judges' tastes. Reg and Tex win that round, and Carla and Emma end up going head-to-head against Mary and Tony, the mother-son duo from New York. The Latinas come out ahead, and another teary hug-fest ensues. I...don't hate it.

Over the course of the week, Fallon and I spend a lot of time together. We don't kiss again, but the tension is there. Bite-sized challenges go well for us, including focaccia so good Reg asks for the recipe. The days are busy, and by the time evenings come around, we both end up stumbling to shower before falling face-first into our pillows.

I do enjoy waking up wrapped up in Fallon's warm body, though. Mornings are my favorite time of the day.

Before I know it, Saturday morning dawns and it's time to head back to the barn for another full day of cooking. Our third elimination challenge is upon us.

*Fallon*

THIRD ELIMINATION CHALLENGE: CHOUX  
PASTRY

“A croak in what?” I say out of the side of my mouth as Carrie introduces the challenge.

This week was a revelation. It made me regret letting Jen push me away last year. I should have spoken to Amanda and told her about my intentions with Jen. I should have pursued her harder, told her how much she meant to me.

I should never have left—but then I think of my sister being harassed, my criminal past, all the shit I’ve done in my life.

Jen deserves better.

“*Croquembouche*,” Jen whispers. “It’s a tower of *choux*—cream puffs—with threads of caramel wrapped all around it.”

Bernard Franco surveys the assembled crowd, his pale eyes assessing. “We are looking for perfectly uniform *choux*, which need to be filled completely with at least two different fillings. Your caramel should be golden-brown, not burned. We’re looking for structural stability in the tower, so make sure you adhere the *choux* to each other properly with your caramel. They should not, however, be impossible to take apart when it comes time to taste them.” He grins. “A hint—use a candy thermometer, or risk disaster.”

When Jen’s hands clench the side of the counter, I know we’re in trouble. She’s gnawing on her bottom lip, eyes darting over the other competitors as if she needs to check that they’re as nervous as we are.

The only people that look unworried are the judges. Everyone else is freaking out.

Pastry Prodigy Heather spreads her arms. “You have two and a half hours.”

“What?” Jen claps a hand over her mouth as a cameraman shifts to catch her reaction.

Bernard grins. “We’re looking for perfection, folks.”

“Of course they are.” Tex crosses his arms over his barrel chest, glancing back at Jen and me. “You look nervous, Blondie.”

“Shut up, Tex,” Jen grumbles.

The big man grins. “Finally, she looks shaken. You were flying through our bite-sized challenges. I was worried you were a robot.”

“You wouldn’t be the first person to think that.” Jen arches a brow. “My nickname in high school was the tin man.” She glances at me. “No heart.”

“We both know that’s a lie,” I say softly, unable to resist putting my hand on her lower back.

Reg nudges his partner and jerks his head forward.

Carrie flicks her hair over her shoulder and angles her face to the camera. “Your time...starts...*now*.”

Jen snaps into action. She grabs the recipe provided to us, scanning it with a pen shoved in the side of her mouth.

I admit, I take a moment to take a mental snapshot of her like this—elbows leaning on the counter, ass pushed back, legs spread wide—before I sidle up beside her and lean a palm next to her elbow. “What are we doing?”

“This recipe gives measurements but no real instructions. It just says, ‘Make the choux pastry.’”

“I’m hoping you know how to do that,” I say, “because I sure as hell don’t.”

Jen glances at me, brow arched. “What do you think?”



I lean in close to her ear. “I think you know exactly what you’re doing, and it’s hot as hell.”

A flush sweeps over her cheeks, but she brushes the compliment off. “Do you know how to make *crème pâtissière*?”

“Uh...” I cringe.

Jen sucks in a breath and jots down a few things on a paper. “It’s a type of custard. Here, heat this much milk and measure out the flour and sugar. I’m going to get started on the dough. We need to get the choux in the oven and cooled before we can fill and assemble, and the filling needs to be chilled, too.”

I nod. “Yes, Chef.”

She grins at me, and then we get to work.

As I babysit the heating milk, Jen works like a madwoman. I’ll never get over how impressive it is to watch her do her thing. When I first invited Amanda to town with the intention of introducing her to Jen, I hoped it would help Jen’s career. I hoped that I could have a small part in seeing her achieve the success she deserves.

I didn’t know Jen would end up pushing me away as a result, but it’s hard to be bitter about that when I’m standing next to her, watching her hands move like magic.

She throws directions at me for the custard, telling me to split the milk in two so we can flavor one of them with chocolate. “We’re going to make raspberry coulis to add to the chocolate ones, and maybe some lemon curd for the vanilla,” she tells me. “Cut the sweetness a bit.” Her eyes brighten. “We could swirl them together before we pipe the filling into the choux, so you bite into it and you get streaks of color in the center.”

That sounds like genius. But—

“Do we have time for that?” I glance over at whatever she’s doing on the stove—mixing some sort of flour, butter, and egg mixture like her life depends on it.

Jen just shoots me one of her rare, radiant smiles. “Of course we have time. Who do you think I am?”

Grinning, I turn back to my work, and we fall into a groove. I manage not to mess up the pastry cream, and when Jen tastes it she gives me a quick nod. “It’s good, Fallon.”

Those three words mean a lot to me. More than I want to admit. After the disastrous croissants, I’m glad I can actually contribute.

Jen pipes the dough onto a waiting baking tray, and has dozens of little balls of choux in the oven within minutes. She’s incredible.

The two women in the head-to-toe denim outfits are at the station next to ours. Nikki glances over, her hair mussed, flour streaked all over her face. “I’m never eating cream puffs again! Ever!”

Her teammate, Sonia, rushes over from the bank of freezers holding a bowl. She’s got tears in her eyes. “Look, the filling is all separated. It curdled somehow.”

Jen glances over and, thrusting a whisk into my hand with the stern order to not stop agitating whatever’s on the stove, she flies over to the next station. “What have we got?” she asks, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Separated fillings. Flat choux pastry.” Nikki shoves her hand in her hair. “And I don’t even know how to make caramel!”

“Give me a pot,” Jen says, pointing. “And sugar. No, the white sugar. Thanks.”

I steal a glance over to see Jen’s brow drawn in concentration. She starts coaching the Denim Ladies on caramel, giving them her usual no-nonsense instructions. Then she’s back at our station, tasting, mixing, checking.

A screech sounds from Sonia. She pulls out a baking tray from the oven in a puff of black smoke.

“Oh, dear,” Jen mumbles. “I’m not sure they’ll come back from this.”

The two women look shellshocked. Jen rushes over again—even though I’m whisking three different mixtures like my life depends on it—and counsels Sonia and Nikki on what they should do. Prognosis: start again.

The competitor in me wants to tell Jen to get back over here and work on our own croquembouche, but the man in me admires her. Even in the midst of a high-pressure situation, her heart is big enough to help a struggling team. These are the things that first made me notice Jen when we worked together. She notices so much about how other people feel. For Simone’s wedding, she made a hazelnut and chocolate cake at the last minute because she noticed Simone eating Ferrero Rochers all the time. She quit her job at a Michelin-starred restaurant under a world-renowned head chef to step into the unknown with the Four Cups Café—and I suspect a big part of that was wanting to support Candice in her new project.

On the outside, Jen seems like a hard ass. A logical, rational kind of person. But she’s deeply, incomparably empathetic. And I love that about her. I love a lot of things about her—maybe more than I want to admit to myself.

Because in what universe could a woman as incredible as Jen want an ex-con like me?

She makes her way back over to our station under the judges’ watchful eyes.

“Are you sure you’ve left yourself enough time?” Heather asks with an arched brow, eyes flicking to the Denim Ladies. “Assisting other competitors won’t help you win.”

“We’ve all been there,” she says, setting up a pastry bag to be filled with our swirled pastry cream and lemon curd. “Fallon has saved me more than once from a breakdown.” She glances over at me, a smile tugging at her lips.

I saved her from a ruined-cake-induced mental breakdown the first time we kissed. I didn’t mind her chocolate-covered hands being shoved into my hair—still wouldn’t mind if we got that messy again. My cock throbs at the memory, and I’m glad I’m wearing a heavy apron.

Jen glances at the judges, her eyes landing on Carrie's assessing gaze. "I want to be able to look at myself in the mirror by the end of the competition and be proud of myself—and not just because of my baking."

"Well, good luck," Bernard says. He's the only one who seems to approve, and a flare of jealousy lights up inside me. I can't explain it, but I just hate the way he stares at her.

While I start on the raspberry filling, I watch Jen crouch down to check on the oven. She grabs one of the choux, tests the weight, then pulls the tray out.

Jen doesn't stop for a minute. She orders me around, and I'm happy to oblige. When the dough is out and cooling, we check our fillings and assemble the sugar for the caramel. Jen tells me we'll make two batches, since it's quick to make and we don't want it to harden halfway through assembly.

"Whatever you say, boss." I mean the words seriously, but Jen just arches a brow at me, her lips quirking.

"I don't remember you being this docile when we worked together at Four Cups," she notes.

"Docile, huh?" My hands move without me watching as I glance over at Jen, loving the flush in her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes.

This is where she belongs, and I'll be damned if I ever let anything stand in her way. It's almost awe-inspiring to be in the presence of someone so talented, when my whole life has been an exercise in survival, in mediocrity.

In the last hour of baking, the live audience starts filtering in. Jen gives them a quick glance, flashing a smile at her posse. We work down to the wire, our hands sticky, the choux stuffed and caramel'ed and set in an impossibly tall tower.

When Jen starts creating spun sugar, it looks almost like a dance. Her hands sweep and swirl as lines of caramel dangle down from her spoon, encasing our tower of cream puffs in a cage of golden sugar. All I can do is watch and try not to let my heart beat out of my chest, because right now, I can't deny my feelings for her.

I've been in love with Jen Newbank for years.

I love that she sticks her tongue out the side of her mouth when she's focusing. I love that she's militant, precise. That she *cares* about things. I love that she's so damn talented, and I wish she could see just how amazing she really is.

She's so attractive that staring at her is like staring into the sun. Blinding.

As I watch her put the finishing touches on it, my smile is tinged with sadness. I'll never be on Jen's level. I just spent the last six months surrounded by ex-cons. I was volunteering my time and doing something worthwhile, sure, but I'm so ashamed of my past. How could someone like Jen ever want someone like me? She might slum it with me when we're in this environment, but what happens when the competition ends?

When the time counts down to zero, Jen steps back from the bench with her hands covered in caramel and her face flushed with excitement. She turns to me with a broad smile on her face, then launches herself at me. I shake off my sadness just in time to catch her as she wraps her legs around my hips. A laugh falls from my lips for a second, just before Jen silences me with a searing kiss.

Heat rips through my core, my cock stiffening in an instant. This is the first time *she's* kissed *me*, the first time she's made the first move—and damn, but it feels incredible. Her fingers are sticky on my neck and she tastes like sugar and raspberry, and it's the most perfect moment of my whole fucking life.

Then a loud bang sounds from the rafters, followed by a yelp and a scream that I recognize—because it came from my sister.

*Nora*

I'm literally on the edge of my seat watching Jen and Fallon work like they can sense each other's every move.

They work perfectly together. It's entrancing, and my heart grows for my brother—especially when I see the way he's looking at Jen. But just as the sound of the buzzer goes off and Jen throws herself into Fallon's arms, the whole bench collapses out from under me, sending me crashing down to the ground. I scream, flailing my arms as I fall back, landing with a hard thud on the wooden planks of the barn's mezzanine.

Simone lands beside me with a groan.

Stunned, I lie back, staring at the big rafters and the corrugated iron roof above.

*What the hell just happened?*

"Nora!" Fallon yells from below, right before a bunch of faces appear in my field of vision.

Simone props herself up on her elbow and accepts a hand up. She then reaches down for me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "You're okay. Come on, honey, you're good. We both are."

I groan. I'm getting too old for this. I already know I'll be feeling aches and pains from that landing for a week.

"What happened?" Candice frowns, glancing at the bench. We're all sitting on long wooden benches in the mezzanine, and the one I was on was at the very back with Simone. The legs on one end are splayed out to one side, completely snapped off from the seat.

Looking over her shoulder, I see the retreating back of the man who'd been sitting on the end of the wrecked bench. He didn't look at me, didn't speak to me, but when Jen jumped in my brother's arms, he stood up with his fists clenched. He was muttering in what sounded like a foreign language. French, maybe? Italian? I couldn't hear properly. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him kick the bench, heard a thump, but I didn't realize what had happened until I was on the floor.

Whoever he is, he kicked so hard he *broke the legs off*. Why? I'd gotten the impression he was mostly watching my brother and Jen working, but he could have been with the women at the station next to them—the ones all in denim, who seemed to be burning things left, right, and center.

Was he mad that the ladies ruined their croak-whatever-thing? Or was it when Jen took a running jump and landed in Fallon's arms?

Earlier, when he first sat down on the end of the bench, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I dismissed it as paranoia over everything happening with Slim. I see gangbangers everywhere these days.

My brother surges past the man just as the bench-kicker disappears down the steps. Fallon's eyes are wild. He's always been overprotective, as if he's trying to atone for the mistakes he made as a teen. He never forgave himself for being a troublemaker.

"I'm fine, Fallon." I groan, rubbing my tailbone. I'm *mostly* fine, although I seem to be bruising a lot more easily than I did a few years ago.

He grasps my arms, staring into my eyes before looking at the bench, then back at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, apart from the death grip you have on my biceps."

He loosens his hold, then lets out a long breath. "What happened?"

"Some guy kicked the bench when the timer went off. He was mad about something. Looks like he broke one of the legs." I nod to the broken bits of wood.

Fallon's thick brows tug low over his eyes. "Must have kicked it pretty hard."

Should I tell him that the man did it when Jen kissed him? I'm not sure that's what caused the man's outburst. He could have been angry about anything—another team not finishing, or the time running out, or some issue in his personal life. He'd been rocking back and forth on the bench and muttering a bit. He creeped me the hell out, but I know I'm oversensitive about that kind of thing right now.

So, I just shrug. "Yeah. He left right after it collapsed, so I assume he was embarrassed."

A medic appears and insists on sitting me down to check me and Simone out, which I do with an overdramatic sigh. "I don't need any more reminders that I'm getting older, people. A younger woman would just brush this off."

"Time marches on, sweetheart," Dorothy says, patting my shoulder in commiseration. "You're just a young pup anyway."

"I'll be forty in less than a year!" I grimace. "Honestly, when did that even happen? I'm supposed to be married with two point five kids by now."

Fiona gives me a sympathetic grin. "Doesn't always work out that way, does it?"

Fallon combs his fingers through his hair, watching me, then glancing at the Four Cups crowd. "What's Nora doing here, anyway?"

Candice arches a brow at him, cocking her hip to the side. "Well, we were going to leave her locked up in Jen's jungle for the day, but I took pity on her when I went for today's watering cycle." The sass soaked into every word almost makes me burst out laughing.

I like her.

Fallon's always been a bit uptight when things get stressful. He blames himself for everything. And now, he looks like he's about to blow. "You should have called me. I could have driven her here."



“You’re busy with the show, and I’m an adult,” I cut in. “I don’t need you to babysit me. Candice and the girls invited me out, and I said yes. Do you have a problem with that?”

Fallon sucks in a breath and slowly lets it out. “No, of course not. I just worry about you. We haven’t had a chance to talk.”

The last thing I want to do is talk, so I deploy my best weapon: deflection. “How about we talk about all the gray hairs you’ve got growing in your beard.” I flick his chin and—as usual—Fallon isn’t fast enough to dodge it. Ha!

In response, Fallon just leans over me and plucks a hair from the crown of my head. I yelp, slapping a hand over my scalp. My brother, with a self-satisfied smirk, dangles a pure white hair in front of my face. “You were saying?”

“Rude!” I snatch the hair and hold it between my fingers, staring.

“Oh, come on,” Dorothy says, patting her silvery-white head. “It’s not so bad. You young people make a big deal out of the silliest things. I heard gray hair was all the rage these days. Iliana was wearing her grays proudly all week!”

I bunch my lips to the side as the medic straightens in front of me. “She’s all good,” the medic says to a blond-haired man near the stairs.

“Fallon?” The man arches his brows. “You good to continue filming? The staff will take care of your...” He tilts his head, studying my face. “Sister?”

I nod. “Yeah. Sister.”

Fallon gives me a long look. “This isn’t over. You and I need to talk.”

I force a smile. I’m not sure what else there is to say. Slim found out where I lived and asked me to deliver a message to Fallon. I don’t have any other information, but I admit seeing Slim Miller freaked me out. Last night was the first good night’s sleep I’ve had in weeks.

My breath leaves my lungs in a whoosh when Fallon heads back down the stairs. Candice puts an arm around me and Simone grabs my elbow on the other side, the two of them leading me to a fully functional bench.

Fiona cringes at me. “It’s not usually like this, Nora. Heart’s Cove is just a sleepy town, I promise.”

Simone snorts. “Do you promise that, Fiona? Because last I checked, Heart’s Cove is the furthest thing from sleepy.”

Fiona chews her lip. “Okay, so yes, dramatic things happen here. But not usually *injury-inducing* things.”

“What about Wes’s ankle?” Simone asks. “Or Jen’s brush with those killer birds? Or Candice’s house fire?”

“Is this supposed to be helping?” Fiona plants her hands on her hips and stares at the red-haired woman opposite her. “We should be making her feel *good* about being here. Not fearing for her life!”

My lips twitch. “It’s fine. I like it here.”

Candice squeezes my shoulders and sits me down next to her, and I realize it’s the truth. I *do* like it here. I like the way Candice rang the doorbell this morning and treated me like an old friend. I like that when she invited me to come watch my brother bake with Jen, it didn’t seem forced. It felt like she truly wanted me to come along.

For the first time in a long, long time, I almost feel...at home. I hadn’t realized how much I needed this.

It’s too bad Fallon left Heart’s Cove, and from what he told me, he has no plans to move back. Otherwise, we could both make a life here.

*Jen*

“**Y**our caramel was brought to the perfect color,” Bernard says, inspecting one of the choux he plucked from the croquembouche. “The spun caramel is delicate. Perfect.” His eyes flick to mine, and he holds my gaze so long I start to blush, forcing myself not to squirm.

Heather hums in agreement. “The addition of lemon curd was genius. It cuts the sweetness of the *crème pat* absolutely perfectly.” She smacks her lips. “I’d take the whole thing home.”

I can hardly contain my excitement. Today’s challenge felt *good*. Everything went right, and I actually had fun. Even in front of a live audience, with a big, angry timer counting down the time and cameras stuck in my face.

The mezzanine crowd cheers, and I hear Candice whooping loudest of all. Cheeks burning, I can’t quite keep the smile off my face. It took a little while to get everyone settled after the bench collapsed, but now the air in the barn is back to being electric.

Fallon shifts his weight, glancing down at me with sparkling eyes. “That was all Jen.”

“We figured.” Bernard grins. He gives me a wink, and my blush deepens.

“Yeah, all right, all right, no need to rub it in.” Fallon puts his arm around my shoulders and tucks me into his side. His movements feel rough, as if he’s...making a point.

There's no time to decipher it, because my heart is warm, overflowing. When we bring our croquembouche back to our station, I let out a deep breath and glance up at the man beside me. He was amazing today. Focused, on task, and totally willing to go with all my ideas.

I've never felt that kind of support. When I worked in tech, I was always second-guessed. I saw my ideas being passed over, or worse, repeated by my male colleagues and celebrated. When I quit the job, my boss called me by the wrong name, even though we'd worked together for years. Even though I was the best team member by far.

Being good at things is natural to me. It comes with the perfectionism. But to have someone stand by my side and support me? To have Fallon's quiet strength, his encouragement?

It makes everything sweeter.

When we win the choux pastry round, my whole body is warm and light, and it almost feels like I need to hang on to Fallon to keep me down on earth.

Unfortunately, the Daisy Dukettes come last. They face off against the Brits and lose in a tight, sudden-death round, which means Sonia and Nikki won't be competing any longer. I'm surprised at the emotion balled in my throat as Nikki wraps me in a tight hug—and even more surprised that I hug her back. Maybe this competition is getting to me, turning me into someone who laughs and hugs and cries.

“Even the great Jennifer Newbank couldn't save us.” Sonia pouts. “But I'll be cheering for you to win this thing.”

My chest warms. I haven't felt this much support since... well, *ever*. Even Tex uses a meaty hand to slap my back in grudging congratulations. He nearly knocks my teeth out with the smack, but I can tell it comes from a good place.

...I think.

The audience filters out, and I catch Candice's eyes as she winks, promising to talk to me later. Dorothy hangs over the railing and waves. “We knew you could do it!”

“Get down from there,” Agnes, the bookstore owner and Dorothy’s perpetual rival, hisses. “Do you have a death wish? You could fall over the railing.”

Dorothy’s eyes widen, glancing over her shoulder. “Are you... Are you *worried* about me?”

“*Pfft*,” Agnes snorts. “Hardly. I’d push you over myself if I thought I’d get away with it.”

Simone and Fiona start laughing behind them, and I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. Yes, it’s probably not the kind of thing normal people laugh about—but are any of us normal? The way I see it, normal is just code for hiding who you really are. We’re all freaks on the inside.

For the past year, I’ve been so busy with the book, with my feelings about Fallon, with the responsibility of baking everything that goes through Four Cups—I’d forgotten how much I loved those women. How much I love this town.

I used to dream about moving to Paris to work in the most prestigious patisseries in the world...but why? Why would I want to do that when I’m happy in Heart’s Cove? For the first time in my life, I find myself wondering about all my career aspirations and dreams. Did I only set lofty goals for myself because I thought that’s what I *should* be doing? Because living and working in a small town, surrounded by people I love, never seemed like enough?

My lips still feel warm from Fallon’s kiss, and a flush sweeps over my face as I meet his eyes. “I lied in the car yesterday. I missed you when you were gone.”

His eyes crinkle. “I know.”

Before I say anything else, all of us contestants are ushered to the main house for a dinner and wind-down. When we enter our usual lounge room, I let out a long breath. Another challenge survived.

Tex’s voice booms in my ear as he claps me on the back again, rattling my teeth once more. “Not bad for a little girl, Jen. Knew you’d be the one to beat.”

“Little girl?” I squeak in outrage, sounding very much like a little girl.

“So condescending!” Emma throws in, winking at me. Her mother looks Tex up and down and mutters something that sounds like “Texas longhorn idiot,” that makes Emma’s face redden as she holds back a laugh.

“How the hell did you have time to make *four* fillings for those choux? I could barely get the basics done.” Reg flops down onto a plush sofa and kicks his legs onto the coffee table.

“She’s just *that* good.” Fallon hooks his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to his chest. I let him, falling into the crook of his shoulder as my heart warms.

Emma’s eyes flick from me to Fallon and back again. She arches a brow. “I thought Fallon was a fill-in contestant.”

“He is.” I frown. What’s she getting at?

“Looks like you two know each other pretty well, though?” Her eyes flick to Fallon, across his chest. Her cheeks redden, and I recognize the look of a woman admiring a man’s body.

Jealousy is a sharp, red-hot spear in my gut, and it takes all my self-control not to let it affect my face. I nod. “We worked together for a couple of years before Fallon left town at the beginning of the year.”

Emma tucks a leg under her butt and tilts her head. “Why’d you leave? Seems like a great place to live.”

Fallon clears his throat, shifting his body slightly away from me. “Had things to do.”

Those words again. The inch of space between us. Will he never tell me where he was? Do I even want to know? Was it another ex-girlfriend? Something he wants to hide?

My brows lower, but now is not an appropriate time to ask Fallon about his six-month sabbatical. He’s been so cagey about it, it makes every alarm in my head blare in warning.

Would he leave again, even after what happened last night? Even if we did more?

Gus saunters into the room carrying the broom. He makes a big show of glancing up at the ceiling and checking the windows, then lets out a long sigh and wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “Haven’t felt safe in this house all week.”

My lips twitch. “The crows weren’t that bad, were they?”

A hiss sounds as Gus inhales sharply, clutching his hand to his chest. “You were *there*, Jen. You were attacked!”

Fallon picks up my wrist and shows the room the back of my hand. “She’s got the battle scars to prove it.”

Tugging my hand away, I let a laugh fall from my lips. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Woman, you are crazy,” Gus says, glancing out the window again. His knuckles are white around the broomstick, eyes scanning the skies outside.

I surprise myself by laughing.

Tex, who had disappeared for a few moments, opens a side door and walks in with a big bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey in each hand. He lifts them up. “Who else needs a stiff drink after that shitshow? And tomorrow is Sunday, so I’m not going to hear any excuses about resting for the competition.”

Surprisingly, Carla is the first person to jump up. The old Latina woman grabs one of the bottles from his hands and cracks it open, beelining for the catering table full of mugs and glasses. “How many?” she asks, counting the number of people in the room.

Before I can protest, a Jack and Coke is thrust in my hands, and—oh, screw it. I haven’t had a drink in a long time, and today was really hard. Would it be so bad to sit here and enjoy my fellow competitors’ company?

Fallon’s body is warm as he tightens his arm around my shoulders, the couch is plush beneath me, and the alcohol burns pleasantly as it slides down my throat. I find myself

laughing as Tex and Reg tell us about the first time they made choux pastry—and nearly burned their bakery down.

When Carla tries to top up my glass for the third time, I cover it with my palm. “No more, Carla. *No más.*” I already feel tipsy enough that I’ll probably have a headache tomorrow.

“Time for bed,” Fallon says, plucking my glass from my hand and heaving me up from the couch. “This one needs her beauty sleep.”

Carla clicks her tongue, but takes her seat at the impromptu poker table that Tex set up a few minutes ago. They’re using pie weights as chips, and Carla’s pile is already much, much larger than everyone else’s. I watch her win a round handily, and I turn to smile at Fallon to see if he saw her clean up.

He isn’t watching the poker game at all. He’s staring at me, and the way he looks at me makes heat flame in the pit of my stomach.

“Let’s go to bed,” he says quietly, putting a large, warm hand over the small of my back. Saying our goodbyes, we head out the door and toward our guesthouse.

Fallon slips his hand into mine as the cool night air settles over my skin. I inhale the crisp, fresh scent of the outdoors and let a smile slip over my lips. The alcohol left a pleasant buzz in my body, a lightness I haven’t felt in a long time.

“That was fun,” I announce.

Fallon’s hand tightens around mine. “Who are you and what have you done with Jen?”

I whirl toward him and scowl. “I’m not that bad.”

“I’ve never, ever, in all the years I’ve known you, heard you describe social interaction as ‘fun.’”

Biting my lip, I try—and fail—to hide my grin. “You may have a point. Mr. Richter. Maybe I’m finally coming out of my shell. Only took four decades.”

Quick as a flash, Fallon nabs me around the waist and hauls me over his impossibly broad shoulder. I yelp, because



approaching half a century in age means I prefer to have my feet firmly on the ground, thank you very much, but Fallon just bands his arm across my thighs and squeezes.

Breathless, I try to lift my head and catch myself staring at the way his butt really fills out his jeans. “What are you doing?”

“Having my way with you.” He strides down the path toward the guesthouse, and I watch the competition barn pass us on my left.

“Fallon—” He hikes his shoulder and I land with a low *oof*. “Put me down! We’re going to the same place! Carrying me doesn’t even make sense. Logically—”

Fallon angles toward the barn and ducks around the back, hidden from view from the main house.

“Where are you going now?”

Large hands wrap around my waist and haul me back to the ground. Fallon’s body is huge above me, all towering muscle and heated male energy. Hands still on my waist, he slowly walks me backward until my back hits the side of the barn.

“The guesthouse is too far,” he says, placing a palm by my head as he crowds me against the wall.

Normally, I’d hate this. I like space and freedom and independence. But there’s something about the sin promised in Fallon’s gaze, and the heat of his body pressed up against mine, and the sheer masculinity of his movements that makes me melt from the inside out.

“Too far for what?” I ask, voice breathy.

By way of answer, Fallon just ducks his head and kisses me. With one arm still planted next to my head, his other arm moves to band across my back, tugging me tight to his broad chest. I soften against him, melting into the warmth of his arms. When he feels it, he lets out a low groan that travels straight between my legs.

I've never thought of myself as a sexual person. I've craved intimacy, sure, and I've spent many lonely years pursuing my own passions, wondering if I was missing out by not chasing marriage and kids and a white picket fence. But my near celibacy wasn't always a choice. In my twenties, first dates were usually a disaster. My thirties were swamped with work, and then pastry school and all the grueling hours I spent trying to make it in this industry.

I didn't have time for men—or maybe they just didn't have time for me. I was too driven. I was “intimidating.” I balked at the idea of giving up my career, my passions, for the sake of a relationship. Once every few years, I'd go on a date—maybe even sleep with a guy—and always ended up feeling emptier than I did before. They'd use my body, I'd use theirs, and the whole experience would leave me feeling cold.

So I ended up alone, thinking my lack of sexual appetite was innate. I wondered, in the deep recesses of my mind, if something was wrong with me. Maybe I was broken.

But now, I feel starved. My hips rock gently against Fallon, as if some deep instinct has started to awaken. I love the heat of his body, the way he presses me into the wall. I love the way my breasts feel somehow more sensitive, as if I'm craving him to touch them, kiss them. My hands shake as I slide them over his shoulders, tangling my fingers into the thick hair at the nape of his neck.

“Missed this,” he groans. “Dreamed of kissing you for a year, Jen. Dreamed of having your arms around my neck like this.”

He did?

Pulling back, Fallon's dark eyes look almost black when he meets my gaze. “I'm sorry about Amanda. Truly, Jen.”

I shake my head. “It's fine.”

“It's not. I invited her to town because I knew she could be the one to give you your recipe book, but I was too much of a coward to tell her that I cared about you. I thought if I ignored

it, she'd back off. We broke up years ago, and I thought we were friends, you know? Cordial. I thought she'd give up."

"Stop, Fallon. I pushed you away. I chose the book over you and I didn't even try to talk to Amanda and see how she would react. I just turned my back on you. If you were a coward for not speaking to her, I was a double coward for not even entertaining the possibility."

His thumbs sweep over my cheeks. "Why would you? You've worked so hard to get where you are. You didn't owe me anything. You still don't."

"I didn't give you a chance." And it's one of the biggest regrets of my life. Me, who restarted my career in my thirties, who stepped into the unknown and put my entire life savings into Four Cups, who has jumped from one opportunity to the next—I didn't take a chance on Fallon.

Fallon's lids grow heavy as his eyes study my face. "What about now?" His thumb traces my cheekbone again, sending tiny thrills racing across my skin. "Would you give me a chance?"

I like this, I realize. A lot. I like having him near me, his arms around me. I like when he looks at me like I'm special—like he wouldn't change a thing about me.

"Now..." I say, stretching out the word, "I could be convinced to give you a shot."

His lush lips tip up, hand sliding to tangle at the back of my head. "That's all I ask."

Then Fallon kisses me, and it sets my body on fire. I arch into him, pressing my aching breasts into his chest, squeezing my thighs together as my hips roll of their own accord. Everything is tight, aching, in need of release. When Fallon slides his hand down my sides and back to grip my ass, I gasp against his lips. He touches me like he's dreamed of it, wants to memorize my body. Like he's starved for just a taste of me.

And that feeling is heady. Addictive.

For once, I don't feel awkward. I'm not in my head. My body is in the driver's seat. I move my hands to his waist,

clawing his shirt up so I can put my hands on his body, feeling the warm, smooth skin, the writhing slabs of muscle beneath. He groans at my touch, sucking in a breath when I use my nails across his back.

Fallon's kiss turns frenzied. He nips at my bottom lip and the small bite of pain electrifies me. My nails dig into his back, and then Fallon is palming my ass, groaning as his hands sweep over my hips, my waist, up to my breasts. He tears his mouth away from mine to kiss my breast through my top, biting at my nipple like a man crazed.

I'm no better. I'm losing my damn mind.

My hand slides to his front, the coarse line of hair diving down from his navel directing my touch downward. When I palm his hard cock over his jeans, Fallon bucks against me. He's *big*. I trace the outline of his shaft with my fingers, trembling at the thought of all that length inside me.

"Woman," he growls.

"What?" I lean my head against the barn, stroking him, eyes open but unseeing as my lungs heave with fresh night air.

"You're going to make me embarrass myself." He pulls his head back, eyes frenzied, just in time to see my grin. Like an animal, Fallon growls, then hooks his fingers into the waistband of my pants. I'm wearing loose drawstring pants that are comfortable to bake in. It doesn't take much for him to rip them down my narrow hips, and then his hand is cupping between my legs.

When he feels my heat, he drops his head to my shoulder with a pained groan. "Wanted to touch you for so long." His fingers slide over and back along the gusset of my panties, stoking me like a flame.

"Me too," I pant as I palm him, and I realize it's true. No matter how much I've tried to ignore it, deny it, pretend it's not true, the truth is I've wanted Fallon to take me like this for many, many months. I've wanted the tension between us to snap. I've wanted his hands to brand my body, for his teeth to rake across my skin.

So, when the heel of his hand grinds against my swollen bud, I widen my stance as I lean back against the wall. Fallon takes that as an invitation, and before I can react he rips my panties to my ankles. Then he's dropping to his knees in front of me, freeing one leg from my clothes and hooking my knee around his shoulder.

His hands slide over my thighs until his thumbs brush my center and I buck, whimpering. We're standing out in the open, where anyone could see us. I'm half-naked, and I don't even care. All I want is *more*. I want him to touch and stroke and taste. I want anything he'll give me.

"So pretty," he says, almost to himself. "Perfect."

I've never been perfect at anything. I would know—I've tried my whole life. But for the first time, his words fill me with a new feeling. Maybe, with Fallon, I'm *enough*.

His fingers slide over my slick folds and another groan rumbles through him. The cool air kisses between my legs and I tremble, feeling so exposed—and so cherished.

Then Fallon spreads me with his thumbs, and licks.

Fire spears my core as he runs that broad, flat tongue over every inch of my folds. When it hits my bud, I buck against his mouth, my hand falling to the back of his head. With a low, dangerous chuckle, Fallon spends time at the apex of my thighs, sucking that little bundle of nerves until I'm coming apart at the seams.

"Fallon," I pant. "Don't—I'm—"

Sentences fail me. All I can do is grind myself against his face as he groans with abject pleasure, one hand dropping from my thighs to palm at his own crotch. He presses the heel of his palm against his swollen shaft and the sight of his arousal nearly undoes me.

He *likes* this. He's enjoying the taste of me.

Then, as his tongue makes wicked circles around my bud, his finger probes my entrance. My legs tremble, and Fallon moves his hand from his shaft to my hip so he can pin me against the wall. His fingers and thumb span from my hip

bones all the way to the small of my back, and I couldn't move even if I wanted to.

When I bow my back for more, aching to feel that finger inside me, Fallon obliges. For the first time in far, far too long, something other than my own hand penetrates me. And when Fallon groans and sucks my clitoris so hard I see stars, I clench around his finger, wishing it were something bigger.

Head leaning against the wall, back arching, I come like never before. I cry out, clenching my teeth to muffle the sound. My hands fly to his head and my hips grind against him.

“I feel it,” he says, laving my center with his tongue. “You’re clenching my finger so fucking hard, Jen—”

Another wave of orgasm washes over me, burning through my body and leaving me raw, panting. I finally have to shove Fallon’s head away from my thighs when it becomes too much.

Sitting back on his haunches, Fallon looks up at me, lips glistening, with a look of pure male satisfaction. He slips my leg off his shoulder and stands, his hands never once leaving my body as they slide up from my legs to my waist. Then Fallon kisses me. Hard. I taste my orgasm on his lips and my knees go weak.

And that sexual appetite I thought never existed? It comes roaring back as I palm his steel-hard shaft through his pants, and say one word. “More.”

*Fallon*

**T**his feels like a dream. Ever since I started working at Four Cups nearly three years ago, I've wanted Jen. It only took me two failed dates with other women in the first couple of months after we met—well before we ever kissed or even really talked to each other—to realize that none of them were *her*.

No other woman can compare.

And now, after all that time, after thinking I'd lost her forever through my own cowardice and stupidity, she let me eat her till she came, and now she's begging for more.

I'm going to wake up at any minute. I know this, because it's happened before. I'll wake up with my aching cock grinding against the sheets and have to fuck my own fist to release some of the pressure.

But Jen's touch is soft as she slides her hands over my shoulders. Her lips are searching when she kisses me, little sips, tastes, bites.

It's *real*.

"I want you, Fallon."

The guesthouse is near, but even the short distance seems too far. I glance around quickly to make sure we're still alone, then cage her against the wall again. "I want you too, baby, but I didn't exactly imagine our first time together as me fucking you up against a barn."

Her kiss-bruised lips tilt into a new kind of smile. I've never seen this one before. It's wicked and wanting and so

damn hot it makes me ache. My balls are heavy, my cock is swollen, and I feel like I'll die if I don't get inside her.

“What's wrong with a barn?” Jen asks innocently.

My hands clamp around her hips, fingers digging into her flesh as I try to regain some semblance of control. “I've never seen this side of you.”

She lets out a huffing laugh. “Neither have I. Maybe you bring it out in me.”

I groan. I hope so. Would I be so lucky as to be the man who makes her melt? Who makes her burn?

When her teasing hands slide back down to palm my crotch, I groan and let my lids slide shut. With deft fingers, she unbuttons my fly and slides the zipper down. Then her hand dives under my boxer-briefs and we both let out a slow breath as she wraps her fingers around my shaft. She strokes it, and I buck against her.

“Easy, woman,” I growl. “I don't want to come yet.”

Another stroke—another buck of my hips. Her fingers barely reach all the way around my shaft and when her eyes drop down to watch what she's doing, I can hardly contain my growl. Jen whimpers in response, and I realize she *likes* this. Reaching another hand into my pants, Jen cups my balls and all I can do is widen my stance and lean my hands against the wall, caging her in. She strokes, fondles, and brings me to a fever pitch.

“Jen,” I pant, not knowing what to say.

I'm the luckiest fucking man in the world, because the woman of my dreams has her pants around her ankles, I can still taste her pleasure on my tongue, and she's stroking my cock like she wants to milk every drop of my seed from it.

Rolling my hips, I search for more friction. Using my hand, I claw her shirt up and hold it over her breasts, my gaze riveted on the movement of her fist over my shaft. The head of my cock slides against her stomach, the bead of moisture spreading over her skin. I watch it, fascinated, as my breath grows shorter.



A hand job up against the back of a barn is the hottest fucking thing I've ever done in my life.

Jen lets out the sexiest little moan as she strokes me, both hands working me so well I claw at the barn, my other hand twisted into the fabric of her shirt—

And a branch snaps in the forest behind us.

We both freeze. I press myself against Jen's body, wanting to hide her, protect her. My eyes scan the darkness, watching the gathering shadows beneath the trees, looking for... something.

"What was that?" Jen's hand is on my cock, but she isn't moving. It almost feels like she forgot she was holding me.

Just my luck. The best hand job of my life interrupted.

Throat scratchy, I hum. "Maybe an animal?"

Jen gives me a flat stare. "Sounded pretty loud for an animal." Her hand, I'll note, is still wrapped around my dick.

"The wind?" I say, not wanting to move.

She purses her lips, unimpressed. "Do you feel wind right now, Fallon?"

Damn her and her logical mind.

Disengaging her fingers from my cock—and breaking my heart in the process—Jen places her hands on my shoulders and peers at the forest behind me. I reach down and shove myself back in my pants. Then I reach down to pull her clothes up and turn around to shield her. All I can see are bushes, trees, shadows. The moon is a silver crescent in the sky, and the lights from the main house spill on the lawn. Every shadow looks like the shape of a man, like a monster creeping through the trees.

Ever since this competition started, I've felt like there was someone out there. And then there was Jen's rumped underwear...

It's got to be the stress. The competition is already getting to us, and Slim has been looking for me. I'm worried and

stressed out, that's all. Paranoid. I just spent six months visiting prison every week and it brought up old, forgotten memories from the years I spent inside.

"Let's go to the cabin," I say, hooking my hand around Jen's shoulders.

"You think someone's out here?" Tension lines her face as she scans the forest around us, eyes darting to every patch of creeping blackness.

The night seemed so warm and inviting a few minutes ago. Now a chill seeps into my skin.

"No," I say. "But I was serious about the barn thing."

Jen relaxes, nudging me with her shoulder. "But how am I supposed to get rid of all my uptightness if I don't do things like naughty outdoor sex?"

"That's easy," I say, leading her onto the path and into the trees that will take us to our guesthouse. "Just don't get rid of your uptightness."

She gives me a sideways stare, all sass, the sounds and shadows around us forgotten. "That's not a good solution, Fallon."

"Why would you want to change the way you are? You're perfect."

Her lips drop open, then she shakes her head. "No such thing."

"I beg to differ." I hold her close until we get to the guesthouse, then pull away to unlock the door. "I stared at perfection for a couple years before I worked up the courage to tell you how I felt."

Jen bites her lip, staring at me as if she can't decide whether or not I'm telling the truth. When I push open the door for her to step through, she relents and walks inside. Her eyes dart around the room, landing on her perfectly organized shelves.

She's thinking about the other day, when her clothes were mussed. When she thought someone had been in here.

Then Jen shakes her head and turns to me. “I’m getting paranoid. I need to get a grip.” She puts a hand to her head. “Maybe I shouldn’t have had all that whiskey.”

“If you start blaming the whiskey for what we just did, I’m not going to be a very happy camper.”

Her eyes glimmer, a smile tugging at her lips. “Temporary insanity.”

“Well, let’s work on making it permanent.”

She laughs, then jerks her head to the bathroom. “I’m getting ready for bed.”

When she comes out again, Jen crosses to the cot where I’m sitting and slides her hand through my hair. I pull her between my spread knees, wrapping my hands around her thighs.

“Bathroom’s all yours,” she says. “And when you’re done, we can see if I’m still insane.”

Grinning, I close my eyes as she gently massages my scalp. “God, I hope so.”

Chuckling, Jen pulls away and I head to the bathroom. As I brush my teeth, I look at her electric toothbrush and perfectly organized toiletries, and I realize this feels better than anything else I’ve ever experienced. I like the intimacy of bedtime routines. I like that she teases me in that logical, rational way of hers. I like that we can share a space—and a bed.

If she’s insane, then I should be committed, because I wouldn’t change a damn thing about her.

But when I exit the bathroom, Jen is in bed, her eyes closed with her lashes fanned over her cheeks. My body still aches for her touch, but my heart softens at the sight of her steady breathing, her slight body curled up on top of the blankets.

Moving quietly, I check the door to make sure it’s locked, then slide under the blankets, flipping them up on top of her. She turns into me in her sleep, clutching a fist against my chest

as she lets out a little feminine whimper, nuzzling closer to my body.

I stare at the ceiling, fingers sifting through her hair, amazed and grateful for everything that's happened—and wondering when Jen will wake up and realize she's too good for me.

*Jen*

“Jen got screw-ed,” Candice says in a singsong voice when I enter the library above Four Cups the next morning.

Simone glances up from her seat on one of the plush couches, interest sparking in her eyes. “Oh, she *did*. Look at that face!”

“What’s wrong with my face?” I slap a palm to my cheek, frowning. “And no, I didn’t.”

It’s not *totally* a lie. Somehow, I fell asleep last night before Fallon and I could take things any further. This morning, he told me he had to go meet with his sister to talk to her. We drove to town together and I made a beeline for my home away from home—the café.

“How was it? Does Fallon have a huge dong? I bet he’s hung like a horse.” Simone leans her elbows on her knees, rapt eyes glued on me.

“What—no—I don’t know! It’s not—” I splutter, cupping my fingers around my cup of chai. “You guys are perverts. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Candice whistles. “Dorothy is going to *love* this.”

“Dorothy won’t know a damn thing!” I screech.

Simone throws her head back and laughs. “Now I see why everyone was enjoying watching me with Wes. This is a lot more fun when you’re on the other side.”

“Nothing is happening between me and Fallon,” I lie.

“Uh-huh.” Candice arches her brows. ”Keep telling yourself that.”

“Jen, your face is flushed and you have a bounce in your step. You’ve had at least one orgasm in the last twenty-four hours.” Simone leans back and crosses her legs before spreading her palms. “It’s science.”

“What you just said has nothing to do with science,” I deadpan. I let out a huff and shake my head. “We didn’t have sex.”

Candice sits on the arm of the couch nearest me. “But...?”

“Okay, yes! Fine. We fooled around last night.”

Simone squeals. “Let me call Fiona, see if she can come up here. Allie can run the till for a few minutes.”

“That’s not necessary,” I protest.

“Yeah, Fiona?” Simone speaks into her phone. “Jen’s here. She hooked up with Fallon yesterday. Okay, yep. See you in a minute.” She hangs up. “She’s on her way up.”

I groan, slouching down as I throw an arm over my face.

Heavy footsteps stomping up the stairs tell me Fiona’s on her way up. She bursts through the door. “Tell. Me. *Everything!*”

With much coaxing, I give the girls the broad strokes (literally) of what happened last night. They squeal and giggle and even draw a few smiles from me.

“You guys are going to bang,” Simone decrees. “Do it tonight!”

*God, I want that.*

But I suck in a breath and shake my head. “I don’t know.”

Candice reads my face. “How come?”

“Well...” Looking at their faces in turn, I voice my biggest fear. “What if he leaves? What if this is just some infatuation, and once we sleep together he decides he doesn’t actually like me at all?” *What if I’m not enough for him?*

“He likes you,” Fiona says decisively.

I chew my lip.

“Girl, that man is *obsessed* with you.” Simone snorts, shaking her head. “The number of times he came in early and stayed late just to be in the same room as you should be a hint.”

I frown. “Huh?”

“Oh yeah, I noticed that too,” Candice cuts in. “I want all of our employees to be in love with Jen. Free overtime.”

Fiona laughs, nodding, while I freeze in my seat.

“Fallon is not in love with me,” I say.

“Okay, Jen.” Candice pats my knee condescendingly. “Tell yourself whatever you need to get through the day.”

“He’s not!”

Simone arches her brow at me. “Isn’t he? Then why did he come back?”

“He wanted...coffee,” I answer lamely.

“Fallon came back from wherever he was because he wanted *coffee*? As if there isn’t a café on every corner of every city?” Fiona snorts. “Right.”

“Okay. Well.” I chew my lip. “You guys really think he came back for me?”

“The day he got here last week, he marched into Four Cups, looked at the kitchen, and asked where you were.” Candice stares me down. “The only reason he was here was to see you. Not for a damn cup of coffee.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I mumble.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” Simone leans forward, catching my gaze. “You’re going to meet up with him whenever he’s done with his sister. You’re going to strip naked. You’re going to tell him to have his way with you. He’s going to screw you till you can’t think straight, and *definitely*

till you can't walk straight. Then you'll live happily ever after."

Everyone hums in agreement.

She's insane. They all are.

"That is *not* going to happen."

"Sure it will!" Fiona says, clapping her hands. "You just need to break the seal."

"Break...the seal?"

"The tension is killing you both," Candice explains. "Same thing happened with me and Blake. You have to just"—she claps her hands—"get in there and get it done."

"Mm-hmm," Simone says with a nod. "Exactly."

"What if he doesn't even want to have sex with me?"

Simone rolls her eyes. "Girl, he pushed you up against a barn and ate you out. He wants to screw."

Despite myself, excitement curls deep in my stomach. He's not the only one who wants that. I've been on edge since the start of this competition. Each of his casual touches throughout the days has wound me up tight. And ever since we kissed again? I can hardly think of anything else.

But—"It's a distraction. I need to focus on the competition."

"Jen, sex will *help* with the competition," Candice says with a gleam in her eyes. "It'll work off some nerves. Look at what happened this week! You kissed him last Sunday and immediately started performing better."

"Hmm." I bunch my lips to the side. "You're not wrong."

Simone grins. "Appealing to logic. Why didn't I think of that?"

"I bet if you sleep with Fallon, you'll win the whole damn competition," Fiona says. "It'll center you."

"Either that, or it'll distract me even more," I counter.



“You won the croquembouche round, didn’t you?” Candice throws back. “That was after *one* kiss days prior. Imagine how good you’d be after full-on sex!”

Simone nods sagely. “It’s science, Jen.”

“I’m not convinced you actually know what science is.” I try to keep my face stern, but a smile twitches over my lips despite myself.

“But you have to tell us everything,” Candice says. “Or else we’ll disown you.”

I roll my eyes. “No you won’t.”

“Okay, true,” Fiona says. “But we’ll be sad.”

“Very, very sad,” Simone adds. “Devastated.”

“You’re all perverts, you know that?” I say with a huff, bringing my drink to my lips. “Every one of you.”

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WHEN FALLON and Nora get to Four Cups a couple of hours later, the sight of him makes me blush. His face is drawn, but it softens when he meets my gaze.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey, you.”

“How was your talk?” I glance at Nora, who’s ordering a coffee at the counter.

“It was fine,” he says. “Wish she’d never met that asshole, but I’ve only got myself to blame.”

Hmm. What does that mean? “You want to talk about it?”

His eyes search mine, a hand lifting up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Not really.”

“Okay,” I whisper. Glancing over my shoulder, I see the girls standing behind the counter, watching the two of us. I roll my eyes as they all give me surreptitious thumbs-ups and try to wave me out the door.

Subtle. Real subtle.

The door to the café opens, revealing Reg and Tex.

“So, this is it, huh?” Tex says, thumbs hooked into his belt loops, eyes scanning the space. “Blondie’s domain.”

Behind them, Emma and Carla glance around curiously. Tom and David, the Brits, aren’t far behind. Within moments, the Four Cups Café is filled with contestants, and I find myself pushing tables together so we can all sit with each other. Fallon, as usual, slings his arm around the back of my chair.

Nora, Candice, Fiona, and Simone come join us, and pretty soon the coffee shop is abuzz with conversation and laughter. When I lean into Fallon with a smile on my face, I catch him staring down at me.

“What?” I ask.

He keeps staring for a few long moments, as if he’s trying to drink in the sight of me. “Nothing,” he finally answers. “I just like looking at you.”

Warmth snakes through my core, a blush sweeping over my cheeks. His hand moves from the chair to my shoulder, his thumb making slow circles over the nape of my neck. Shivers tumble through my veins at the gentle touch, and I know the girls are right.

It’s time for me to break the seal. If I don’t have sex with Fallon, I think I’m going to die.

*Fallon*

**A**fter a tense morning with Nora—where we discussed her plans, how to keep her safe, and what to do about Slim—being close to Jen is a balm on my soul. She gives me those secret smiles and subtle touches, and it feels like a gift. She’s giving me her attention, and I’m the luckiest man in the world.

So, when she tells me she’s going to head back to the compound for an early dinner and a quiet evening to prepare for our challenge tomorrow, I stand up to follow.

As if there’s anywhere else I’d rather be.

We took separate cars, so I follow Jen back to the competition grounds in my black Jeep, the windows rolled down so I can feel a breeze on my skin. I reflect on my morning.

When I got to Jen’s apartment, Nora greeted me with a smile that looked brighter than it did when she first arrived. She agreed to go for a drive with me, and we ended up winding along a coastal road until we got to a windswept beach. Toes in the sand, Nora told me about Slim’s first visit to her house.

“He showed up at eleven o’clock at night,” she said, “and only left when I threatened to call the police. Slim said all he wanted was a conversation with you.”

We looked out at the crashing waves for a few moments until I broke the silence. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop,” Nora told me. “You can’t keep blaming yourself for what happened twenty-five years ago, Fallon.”

“No? Who should I blame?”

“Come on.” My sister snorted, eyes on the horizon. “It wasn’t even your fault you went to prison. You had nothing to do with the robbery.”

“The prosecutor disagreed.”

“The prosecutor was an asshole who just wanted a conviction. He took advantage of you, made you plead guilty to something you didn’t do.”

I chewed my lip, dropping the subject. “What else did Slim say?”

Nora went over the other two times my ex-best-friend came to her house—and the calls she started getting on her phone—and my anger grew. How dare he show up at my sister’s house? Threaten her? Scare her?

I left that life behind. The past should’ve stayed in the past.

Staring at the crashing waves, all I felt was bitterness. “I haven’t spoken to Slim in years. Why now?”

Nora just sighed. “I don’t know, Fallon.”

Slim and I had been best friends, once upon a time. We met in detention after school, and Slim introduced me to a few of his friends. Older boys who had money and confidence and attitude.

I was sick of watching my mother struggle working three jobs. I was sick of living in poverty, of having holes in all my shoes and a stomach cramping with hunger. Sick of seeing my mother close to tears every time she looked at a photo of my father.

Slim Miller was cool, carefree, and he made me forget how hard things were at home.

By the time I was seventeen, I was hooked on the feeling of independence. I wanted an easy way out of the struggle I

knew. We wanted to form a brotherhood, didn't care about laws or morals, just wanted to make money and be free.

I was young and angry at the hard knocks I'd gotten in life. The lifestyle Slim was offering seemed like my only way out.

My mother wasn't happy. When I barely scraped by to get my high school diploma, she gave me an ultimatum: get a job, or get out from under her roof.

It was an easy decision. I didn't even pack my clothes—they were rags anyway. I just walked out of the house with a chip on my shoulder and anger in my heart. I had a future, and it wasn't going to be working myself to the bone the way my mother had.

The tattoo spanning the width of my back was proof that I'd found a new family. Forever.

I was such a fucking dumb kid.

Nora nudged my shoulder with hers. "Hey. We all make mistakes, Fallon. You've more than made up for yours."

Even thinking about it now, as I lean my elbow on the window opening and feel the cool forest air whip around me, shame threatens to overwhelm me. I've spent two decades trying to distance myself from that life, but somehow, everything always comes full circle.

Nora told me she was thinking of staying in Heart's Cove. She'd bought a new SIM card for her phone, started looking for an apartment. "Reno was good, but I have no ties there anymore. I work from home; why not do it here?"

Why not, indeed.

When the farmhouse comes into view, I slow down and park a little way away from Jen. I watch her exit her car, the afternoon sun gleaming on her blond hair, her face turned up to catch the rays. She inhales deeply, then exhales as she turns to look my way.

Truly, that woman is beautiful.

I open my door and watch her walk with her precise, controlled gait to approach my car. She tilts her head to stare

into my eyes, then nods to a nature trail. “You want to go for a walk with me?”

“Yeah,” I answer, because it’s the truth. There’s nothing else I’d rather do.

Being around Jen makes me forget about my shame. I forget that I’m an ex-con. I forget about the past that has one hand gripped around my ankle, preventing me from walking away. When I’m with Jen, my head is quiet. My heart is full.

We walk on the pine needle-strewn path, wind rustling through the trees as squirrels and birds go about their business.

After a few moments, Jen takes a deep breath. “I think we should have sex.”

My cock is immediately rock hard. Stumbling over my own feet, I choke on a cough, then quickly recover. “What?”

“I said, I think we should have sex.” Her face is pointed straight ahead, her fists clenched.

“Um.” I clear my throat, trying to ignore the tightness in my jeans. “I mean, I’m all for it, but I just—where is this coming from?”

“Well, I thought about it.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and I see the tip of it is bright red. “I... enjoyed...what we did the other night. And it might help us figure out...where we stand. Plus, we did really well in the croquembouche challenge and the bite-sized challenges this week, and that was after just a kiss. Sex might help us win.”

I don’t know whether to laugh or feel insulted. For some reason, my shaft grows harder. “You want to have sex with me because you think it’ll help us perform well in a baking competition?”

“Well, no.” She bites her lip. “I mean—yes. I don’t know.”

“Usually, women have sex with me because they think I’m attractive.”

“What women?” Her head whips toward me.

Surprise makes my brows arch. She seems almost... jealous. And that pleases me. Like the cat getting the cream, I let my lips curl into a satisfied smirk. "Don't worry, Jen. Right now, there's nobody that interests me but you."

"Right now," she repeats. Then, under her breath, she says, "This was a mistake."

*Oh, no it wasn't.*

Catching her hand, I tug on her arm until she whirls around and crashes into my chest. She fits so perfectly it makes my heart sing. I band my arm around her back and palm that beautiful ass of hers, pulling her tight so she can feel the effect she has on me. "'Mistake' is not the word I'd use to describe us."

Her eyes darken. Unable to resist, I duck my head and take her lips between my own. Jen's answering moan is like sustenance to me, and I swallow it down like a man starved. With one hand palming her ass, I use the other to angle her head so I can deepen the kiss. My cock is so hard it hurts, already beading at the tip and moistening my underwear.

At this point, I've craved Jen for so long that if she wants to use me to win this competition, I'll take whatever I can get. If she thinks sex is her ticket to the grand prize, I'm more than happy to oblige.

Especially when she softens in my arms like that, clinging to my shoulders like her legs can no longer support her weight.

"Fallon," Jen whispers, her hands shoved into my hair.

I nip her earlobe, inhaling the scent of her hair. "What?"

With great effort, Jen pulls away from me. She puts a hand to her forehead and lets out a huff. "I haven't done this in a while."

My hand squeezes her ass as I smile down at her. "So far, you're doing great."

Her cheeks are tinged a pretty shade of pink, lips kiss-bruised and shining. Taking my hand from her ass, I move to

rub my thumb over her lower lip. I groan when she opens her mouth and lets her tongue dart out to lick the tip.

I want this woman forever. Even if I don't deserve her. Even if she's in a different league. I want her to be mine until the day I die.

But if she just wants to use me until the end of the competition, that'll have to be enough. Grabbing her around the waist, I lift her up so she wraps her legs around my hips.

"What are you doing?" She clings to me, nails digging into my shoulders.

I grin, loving the little points of pain her fingers give me. "I know a place near here."

She blinks. "I can walk, you know."

"When I'm done with you, woman, I'm not sure you'll be able to."

A sharp intake of breath. A squeeze of her legs around my hips. Then I'm carrying her down the path, angling down an overgrown animal trail. I've lived in Heart's Cove for years, and I know every inch of the surrounding land. When the trees open up to a sun-drenched clearing, Jen sucks in a breath. I let her slide down my front and turn in my arms as she takes in the tall grass, the patches of flowers, the fresh scent of the clean forest air.

Then she arches a brow at me. "You won't do me up against a barn, but you'll do me here?"

"The barn can be round two," I growl, crowding my body into hers.

Jen backs up, lips twitching as her eyes flash. Her hands move to my biceps, and I love the soft, gentle touch of her skin against mine. Then I'm picking her up again and laying her down in the center of the clearing. Draping my body over hers, I look down at her eyes and try to memorize this moment.

Finally, *finally*, I'll get to have Jen—at least until the end of the competition.



*Jen*

Fallon's looking at me in a way that makes my heart thump. Am I making a mistake? I'm listening to my crackpot friends and sleeping with a man who's been the object of my affection for more than a year. He already left once without looking back—what if he does it again?

What if he *is* a distraction, and sleeping with him turns out to be a mistake? I could lose this whole competition.

But when his lips descend on mine, all thoughts flee from my mind. I lift my knee so he's cradled between my hips, loving the weight of him against me. He ducks his head and puts his mouth on my breast over my clothes, and I can't help but arch my back into it. He nips at my stiffening peaks, sucking me through the material until I'm whimpering.

"I love the sounds you make," he says, lips moving over the damp fabric. "Love that you make them for me." His mouth moves to my ear, hot breath sending shivers over my skin. "Want you to be moaning for me, Jen. I want you to scream my name when you come."

When his hand moves down to cup me over my jeans, I whimper. "Fallon."

"Good." He gives me a squeeze, sending a jolt of pleasure through me. I gasp, eyes flying open to find him staring at me with that inscrutable expression. His lips curl. "You're so pretty when you're turned on."

Shifting his weight, he leans on his elbow and keeps his eyes on mine. His other hand works the button of my jeans open, slipping underneath my panties. His hand is big and hot

and it covers me completely. My mouth drops open, drawing Fallon's gaze to my lips.

His fingers start a slow torture, sliding from my bud down to where I'm wettest, pulling a groan from his throat. "Wet for me already," Fallon rasps. He dips his finger inside me and makes another harsh male noise. "Can't wait to have my cock in there."

His words are doing almost as much for me as his hand is. The grass is soft beneath me, the sky blue above. I smell nothing but fresh, clean air, Fallon, and my own arousal. I want him so badly everything aches. My heart thumps when I think of that big, beautiful cock sliding in and out of me—just like his finger is doing right now. He fits another digit inside me, using his thumb to tease my bud.

This is happening too fast. No—too slow. I can't think. Can't process this.

My hips roll toward him of their own volition, causing Fallon to smile. "You are so fucking hot when you start losing control, Jen."

"I'm not losing control." I gasp when he pumps his fingers into me, pleasure arcing between my thighs.

"No?" Fallon grins, eyes still on mine. "I must not be doing my job, then."

His hand slides out from my panties and I feel so unbearably empty without his fingers inside me. Hooking his hands into my waistband, Fallon rips my pants and underwear off my legs in one swift movement. Then he's between my legs, his lips trailing kisses from one hip to the other as I writhe beneath him. Those dextrous fingers tease my folds again, circling my clitoris before diving back inside me—just as Fallon puts his lips on my bud.

When he sucks the bundle of nerves and flicks his tongue over it, his fingers delving deep inside me, an orgasm crashes into me. My back bows as my lips fall open with a cry, Fallon's name on my tongue. My fingers dig into the dirt at my sides, nails embedded in the earth. He growls in satisfaction,

not stopping his ministrations until I push his head away, dazed and limp.

Fallon kneels between my legs, his eyes on my center. He licks his lips, tasting me again with a satisfied groan. “You taste so good I could do that every day and never get sick of it.”

“Sounds good to me,” I say on a sigh.

Fallon’s lips curl, and then he’s reaching into his pocket. From his wallet, he pulls out a condom, eyes flicking to mine as if to ask if I still want this.

A thousand thoughts fill my head—about vulnerability, distractions, winning, succeeding—but I can’t quite catch the threads to think logically. All I know is whips of pleasure are still lashing my body, and Fallon’s eyes are promising more.

So after what he just did to me? *Hell yes*, I still want this.

When I nod, reaching for his belt, Fallon closes his eyes with a groan. Then he’s helping me, pushing his pants down to mid-thigh so his pulsing erection can spring free.

My heart bangs against my ribs when I’m reminded of his size. I suck in a breath, smelling fresh grass and pine and Fallon. Sitting up, I wrap my hand around his shaft and pump, watching with fascination as moisture beads at the tip.

“Jen.” Fallon’s watching me through half-lidded eyes, lips parted and still glistening from my orgasm. He uses one of his broad hands to push my chest back down so I’m nestled in the soft grass. “Spread open for me, kitten.”

Blushing, I let my knees fall open completely. Fallon groans, watching me with such fierce possession that I might come just from him looking at me. Eyes still on me, he rips the condom packet open and rolls the latex over his erection, holding the condom at the base for a moment, as if he’s trying to stop himself from spilling already.

Gaze flicking up to mine, Fallon just shakes his head. “You’re so fucking perfect, Jen.” His hand smooths over my thigh with such gentle reverence that—for what feels like the first time in my life—I actually believe him.

Then he's using those strong hands to tug me forward and position me where he wants me. The head of his cock is nudging against my opening, and my heart is in my throat.

This is happening. After everything, after all the heartache and rejection and hard decisions, Fallon and I somehow ended up together here.

I wonder if it was inevitable. We've circled around each other for so long, gotten to know each other's quirks and moods through work, shared blazing kisses and lots of hurt. But he came back—and it wasn't because he wanted coffee from Four Cups.

When Fallon pushes my shirt up so he can sweep his broad palm over my stomach, memorizing my curves and taking in the sight of my half-clothed body, a single, clear thought clangs through me:

We belong together.

Then, Fallon's eyes dip between my legs, and he enters me with a slow, unyielding thrust. Gasping at the stretch, I arch my back, body locking up until Fallon ducks his head down to my breast, nudging my bra aside so he can lave my nipple with his tongue. His hand dives between us so he can tease my bud, and pleasure starts to mount inside me. My body goes soft, hips rolling of their own accord, hands clawing at his hair, his shoulders, his shirt.

When I try to pull his shirt off, Fallon growls, thrusting inside me hard. I moan, eyes rolling back. Fallon uses my distraction to pin my wrists above my head, his huge body covering mine as he drives inside me to the hilt. I meet him thrust for thrust, breathless.

I've wasted my entire life thinking sex wasn't for me. I've settled for so much less than I could have—and this is proof. Pleasure gushes through my veins, and all I can do is say Fallon's name over and over and over. He growls with pleasure at the sound of it.

"Told you you'd be screaming my name." He thrusts hard as if to underscore the point.

“Arrogant jackass,” I pant, back arching.

Shifting both my wrists to one hand, Fallon uses the other to lift my knee for better access. I’m totally under his control, at his mercy.

And I love it.

The grip I usually keep on myself slips, and my mind is completely, gloriously quiet. There’s no worry that I’m doing anything wrong. No thought about consequences. No analyzing the situation and wondering if I’ll regret it.

All I feel is Fallon’s hard shaft driving inside me, his hands branding me, his beard rasping against my skin when he angles his head to kiss the side of my neck.

“So tight and wet,” he pants. “You feel better than I imagined,” he says, his voice a low growl. “So much fucking better, and I was imagining heaven.”

He imagined what I’d feel like. That thought alone nearly sends me over the edge.

“So do you,” I manage.

His eyes flash, hips slowing to a maddening, teasing rhythm. “You fantasized about me?”

I can’t lie. “Ever since we kissed.”

A triumphant look flashes in his eyes. He releases my wrists, moving his hand to my cheek. When Fallon kisses me this time, I wrap my arms and legs around his hips, needing every part of me to be touching every part of him. Arching my hips up to meet his, I let my head fall back as pleasure mounts.

And when Fallon changes the angle so he’s grinding against my clitoris, I don’t stand a chance. The best orgasm of my life rocks through me, making my back bow. I scream so loud birds flap out of trees around us. Fallon’s answering growl of satisfaction makes another wave of pleasure wash over me.

“You were made for me, Jen,” he says, eyes intent.

Boneless, all I can do is nod.

“You understand?” He thrusts inside me, his shaft getting impossibly bigger, harder.

“Yes,” I pant, because that’s exactly how I feel. I’ve never felt like this before. So connected to someone else. So thoroughly sated.

“You’re my woman,” he growls.

“I’m your woman,” I repeat, and the words sound like a vow.

Fallon’s eyes darken when I speak—then, with a yell, he throws his head back and pulses inside me.

For the first time in my life, I wish there was no barrier between us. I wish I could feel him inside me, skin to skin.

And when he drapes his body over mine, cock still pulsing inside me as his heart thumps against mine, I close my eyes and come back down to earth.

Fallon shifts his weight, keeping himself inside me as he props his head on his elbow. His eyes gleam with humor when he says, “Now, Ms. Newbank. In your opinion, was that good enough to win the competition?”

I grin. “I don’t know. We might have to do it again just to be sure.”

The sun warms my skin as Fallon smiles down at me, and for a perfect, beautiful moment, I feel utterly happy.

*Jen*

**M**y entire butt is covered in grass stains and my shirt is ruined. As I check the shower temperature and discard my clothing, I can't quite bring myself to care. That light, airy feeling in my bones is keeping me floating above the surface of the earth, and my mind is blissfully quiet. I soap myself up and wash the green streaks from my skin. Blades of grass fall from my hair and I smile at the sight of them rushing toward the drain.

That was not at all what I expected, but it was amazing. I've never felt so sexy, so desired. I've never had my mind go so beautifully blank while I had sex. I wasn't worried about how I looked or what noises I was making. I wasn't worried that Fallon wasn't enjoying himself.

It made me realize that all my other sexual experiences were pale imitations of the real thing.

And I get to do it again and again—at least for the next two weeks.

When I exit the bathroom, I find Fallon already in bed. He turns onto his side and grins at me, jerking his head to the space beside him. Already, sleeping with him feels natural. I can hardly remember what it felt like to go to bed alone.

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THE TWO OF US DO, in fact, end up winning the next elimination challenge. It's a chocolate challenge, and the few hours we spend on set are full of laughter and ease. I end up

tempering chocolate and enduring endless teasing from him—but loving every second of it. I haven't had that much fun baking in a long, long time. Not since before I started working on the book.

Fallon's jaw is set with determination as he places a chocolate dome over a delicate caramel confection, and he catches me staring with a twinkle in his eyes. "Can't get enough, can you?"

I purse my lips. "Just making sure you're doing it right."

Fallon leans in close to my ear and says, "Liar."

The rest of the challenge is a blur. All I can think about is making the best chocolate dessert I can, then getting alone with Fallon as soon as possible.

Tori and Hank, the mother-son duo from New York City, get eliminated, and again I feel sad for them. I realize I'm making friends here—and for the first time in my life, it's easy.

When we get back to the cabin that night, Fallon wraps his arms around me and kisses me tenderly. "Maybe there's something to your sex-our-way-to-victory strategy."

"I told you the logic was sound," I inform him.

"We should keep testing the theory." He yanks me by the waistband of my pants, hands already clawing at my clothes. It only takes a few moments for Fallon to get me naked, on my back, and with his tongue between my legs. He wasn't kidding when he said he'd be happy to do that every day. But when I try to grab his shirt, he again pushes my hands away, moving to kneel between my legs.

"I want to feel your skin against mine," I say as he spreads my knees open and fits himself between them.

"My shirt stays on," Fallon says in a voice that brooks no argument. Before I can ask him about it, though, he's inside me and all thought flees from my head.

"Okay," I manage to gasp.



Fallon just gives me that heart-stopping grin and pistons into me again.

*Shirt stays on. Got it.*

From there, we fall into a hectic routine. Sex in the morning when we wake, showers, and full days of filming. If we don't come in first place, we're at least in the middle of the pack. I don't have to do any more sudden-death challenges, thank goodness. Most evenings, Fallon takes my hand and puts out a plate of nuts and seeds "for our crow overlords." I'm pretty sure he just does it to see me roll my eyes and break down laughing, because he always searches my face with a gleam in his eyes until I start giggling.

I'm no longer jumpy around birds. Every time I see a black shape in the sky or on a roof eave, I just smile—then I wonder if that was Fallon's plan all along.

Fallon makes good on his promise to pleasure me with his mouth every single day, always pushing my hands away when I try to undress him, then distracting me with mind-bending orgasms.

The rest of Week Three brings us three bite-sized challenges and one more elimination challenge. We do bite-sized challenges that involve macarons, gingerbread construction, and ice-cream churning. I'm in a daze of baking and happiness, my own little bubble with Fallon. The only time he seems annoyed is when Bernard Franco compliments my skills, which happens after nearly every challenge.

I'd ask him about it, but he usually just shakes his head and clears the annoyance from his expression before I get the chance.

For the elimination challenge, we make a three-tiered wedding cake and are rewarded with first place. I glance up at the rafters to see Simone hanging over the rail, yelling, "Aren't you glad you had all that practice?"

They all laugh triumphantly when I crack a grin. Yes, I had practice baking all their wedding cakes—and they'll never

know how much I enjoyed it, even if I did complain at the time.

Tom and David are eliminated when they underbake their cakes and fail to complete all the decorations they'd planned. With just Fallon and me, Carla and Emma, and Tex and Reg left, the six of us will compete next week for the title—and the hundred-thousand-dollar prize. I can hardly believe it.

Okay, that's a lie. I *can* believe it. I planned for it. Like I said—I like to win.

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ON SATURDAY NIGHT, I find myself in the main farmhouse with all the competitors—those who have already been eliminated as well as those who haven't. It's a big group, and I normally would feel uncomfortable in this type of situation, but I find I'm enjoying myself. We have a few drinks with everyone, then head back to our cabin.

That night, most of the way through the competition—and most of the way through our time together—I end up pushing Fallon to his back and kneeling between his legs. When I have my first taste of him, Fallon looks at me like I'm the most precious being in the world. He cups the back of my head, pushing my hair out of the way so he can watch while I pleasure him.

Kissing him like this, I feel powerful and confident and so damn sexy. It's a heady feeling, one I'm not used to. But he tastes so good, and I'm already lost in him. I could do this daily too, I realize—and not just for another two weeks. I'd be with Fallon forever if he wanted me.

When Fallon throbs against my tongue and calls out my name, I feel so connected to him that I wonder how the hell it took so long for us to get here. Grabbing me by the armpits, Fallon pulls me up and wraps me in trembling arms, holding me tight to his body like he never wants to let me go.

The feeling is mutual.

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THAT SUNDAY, the two of us head to town to meet up with our family and friends. I can't help placing my hand on Fallon's thigh as he drives, my head leaning back on the headrest as a smile tugs at my lips.

"Almost there," Fallon says with a grin. "Next week you get your hundred grand."

"Fifty," I correct. "We get fifty each."

Fallon clears his throat. "Mm," he hums.

I stare at the greenery outside the window, loving this part of the world in the summer. Maybe I should spend more time outside the kitchen when the competition is over. My time with Fallon in the clearing opened up a whole new world of possibilities for outdoor activities...

When we get to the Four Cups Café, I see a motorcycle out front. Trina and her boyfriend, Mac, must be back from their trip along Route 66. We stop out front and Fallon tells me he's going to go find his sister.

Slipping out of the car, I turn to say goodbye to him when a high-pitched scream pierces my eardrums.

"There she is!" Candice squeals from the café doorway. "In the flesh."

Instead of the *Heart's Cove Hotties* T-shirt the staff usually wears, she's got on the same tee her mother had been wearing a few weeks ago—one with a huge image of my face. Above it are the bedazzled words, *Heart's Cove's Hottest Baker*.

Behind Candice, Simone, Fiona, Trina, all the kids—Clancy, Allie, and Trina's two, Toby and Katie—crowd in. They're all wearing shirts with my face on them.

"Um..."

When I glance through the car at Fallon, the tension around his eyes has melted. He's grinning again. "Enjoy, Jen."

“I might call you sooner rather than later.”

He chuckles. “I look forward to it.”

Closing the door, I turn back to the crowd and am surprised to find my own lips tugging. Maybe all my time making friends and baking over the last three weeks has loosened something tight in my chest.

Candice throws herself into my arms for a tight hug. “We’re so proud of you, honey. You’re going to kill it next week. They just released the first bite-sized challenge online! We’ve watched it twice already.”

Simone shoulders her way closer. “Forget the competition. Tell us about Fallon!”

My face goes bright red, and Simone just squeals in excitement.

Glancing at Trina, I jerk my head. “How was your trip?”

“Magical.” Her eyes gleam. “It’s good to be home, though.”

As the girls drag me inside, I have to say I feel the same way. The competition is fun and intense, but being back in the café reminds me why I’m trying to win. Because I love these people, and I love this place, and I’ve worked hard to make something special here.

Now, the only thing that’s missing is Fallon by my side.

*Trina*

**T**he Four Cups Café is pandemonium, as usual. Once I fight my way to Jen and manage to give her a quick squeeze on the elbow—she doesn't like hugs—I make my way back to the table near the back. My kids are happy to be here, busy with their grandmother, and I sink into a chair next to Iliana.

“Didn't think I'd see you here when I rode up this morning.” I smile, sipping my coffee. My eyes drift to the other side of the café, where Mac is leaning against the counter looking good enough to eat. He's smiling at something Fiona's husband, Grant, is saying, the two of them looking far too sexy to be standing in a quirky café.

“And I didn't think I'd see you riding on the back of a motorcycle,” Iliana quips, brow arched. She jerks her head to my man. “He's pretty easy on the eyes.”

A flush rises up my neck. I nod. “Tell me about it.”

“Naughty Trina, hooking up with her daughter's teacher.” Iliana clicks her tongue. “You've certainly changed.”

“Oh, shush.” I hide a laugh behind my mug, then go on the offensive. “What about you? Why are you popping up in this small town after globetrotting for so long?”

Iliana's face grows shuttered as her eyes slide to the side. Then, as if nothing happened, she just squares her shoulders and paints a smile on her face. “It was time to come home.”

She's hiding something, but I'm not sure what. Before I can ask her about it, my daughter, Katie, jumps off her chair.

She sprints to Mac and thrusts a piece of paper in his hands. “I made this for you!”

Mac takes the paper, crouching down next to Katie. I love that he does that. He never speaks to my kids from his full height. Whenever he has to talk to them, he’ll sit or kneel or crouch so they’re eye-to-eye. He looks at the drawing Katie gave him as his eyes crinkle. “It’s beautiful, Katie.”

“That’s you.” Katie points. “You’re on your motorcycle with Mommy. And that’s me and Toby waving with Nana. Can I ride your motorcycle, Mr. Blair—um, I mean, Mac?”

Mac glances at me, a smile tugging his lips. “Not for a few years, kiddo. Your mom might kill me if I did.”

“She wouldn’t do that. She loves you!”

I choke on my coffee. It’s true, but I didn’t think Katie would realize it!

“All the more reason to keep her happy.” Mac smiles, and Katie launches herself into his arms for a hug. I can’t believe I was worried about my kids accepting Mac into the family. They already can’t live without him.

When we were on our two-week vacation together, Mac told me he wanted to move in together. He said he’d wait as long as it took, but he wanted to be a family.

Seeing Katie hugging him makes my heart swell so much I can hardly breathe. Maybe I won’t have to wait so long, after all.

“Trust Trina to land on her feet,” Iliana says, snorting. She pops a brow. “Divorce looks good on you.”

“It isn’t the divorce that looks good on me,” I answer. “It’s Mac.”

“Damn right,” Mac says from behind me, his sinful hands sliding over my shoulders.

Flushing, I tilt my head when Mac bends down to kiss my neck.

Iliana gives me a smile that looks tinged with...sadness.

Before I can ask her about it, the café door opens, and another wave of cheers and hellos rings out. Fallon walks in with a woman that looks a lot like him, eyes immediately searching and landing on Jen.

I watch Jen blush and bite her lip, and my brows inch up.

So they finally decided to give in to temptation. About time.

The woman with him walks over to our table. “Hi, Iliana.” She glances at me. “Hey. I’m Nora, Fallon’s sister.”

I smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Iliana pulls a chair out for her, then points to me and Mac. “That’s Trina and Mac.” She waggles her finger between us. “They’re in love. It’s gross.”

Nora laughs. “Between them and my brother and Jen, I can’t get away from it.”

My mother straightens up from the kids’ table and saunters over to the new arrivals. “Fallon Richter! Get over here and give an old woman a hug.”

Fallon’s lips curl, and he does as my mother says. She squeezes his arms and stares into his face. “You going to stick around this time?”

He rears back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No more leaving without a word. Got it?”

“Mom, give the man a break,” I interject. “He doesn’t need to stay in Heart’s Cove.”

“Why the hell not?” Lottie plants her hands on her hips, leveling me with a stare. “Why would he give up the affection of a woman like Jen—for what? What could possibly be better?”

I know Fallon and Jen have a tangled history, so I just shrug and let my mother natter on.

Fallon cuts in smoothly, putting his arm around her shoulders to quiet her down. “What I want to know,” he says,

“is why Jen is the only one who gets her face on a T-shirt. What am I? Chopped liver?”

“We were worried it would cause too much involuntary female fainting if your face was all over the place,” Lottie says, smooth as anything. “Wearing your face on a shirt would be a public health risk.”

Fallon’s lips twitch. His eyes land on his sister, and Nora just waves him away. Then, like a magnet, I watch him drift toward Jen. He slides his hand over her lower back and leans in to say something in her ear, which makes her blush all the way to the tips of her ears.

“They’re cute together,” Iliana says with a sigh. “Can no one be a miserable spinster with me?”

Nora lifts her palm. “I volunteer as tribute.”

Iliana grins. “Thank goodness. I can’t stand this much lovey-dovey energy.”

Mac squeezes my shoulders while I tilt my head.

“You used to love all things lovey-dovey,” I tell her. “What happened?”

Iliana shrugs. “Life happened.”

A banging starts, and the hum of conversation dies. My sister Candice is holding a pot and a wooden spoon, whacking the two together as she climbs up on top of a table. “Attention, attention!”

“Aunt Candice, why are you standing on a table?” Katie squeals, immediately trying to climb up with her. Mac leaves my side and nabs my daughter around the waist, throwing her over his shoulder as she squeals, delighted.

Candice clears her throat. “Next week, our very own Jen Newbank and Fallon Richter will compete for the title in the *Boss Baker* competition.”

Cheers sound in the café.

Candice continues: “I’d like to announce an official event on the day of the final competition. We’ll start here and head



over to the live filming together. There will be T-shirts and signs to be decorated for the finale. I want every single one of you over there cheering them on!”

I can’t help but grin. Jen probably hates this—but when I glance over at her, she’s just tucked up against Fallon’s side, listening to him saying something else in her ear.

“Home court advantage, huh,” a booming voice from the door calls out. “Y’all are playing dirty.”

A man with a cowboy hat and a huge belt buckle is standing next to another equally large cowboy-looking man.

“You scared, Tex?” Jen calls out, and my jaw nearly drops.

Jen does not banter with people. She doesn’t tease. It takes her about a decade to warm up to new arrivals—yet here she is, laughing at the sight of the two of them.

Tex snorts. “Only thing I’m scared of is how all these people will react when we beat your ass.”

A low hum courses through the café—until Jen juts out her chin. “Bring it, Tex.” Her smile is bright, and Fallon squeezes her shoulders with a grin of his own.

Iliana leans across the table. “Jen seems different. More confident.”

I look at the baker as she moves to greet the two other competitors, and I nod. “She’s finally growing into herself.”

“Took long enough,” Iliana says, and all I can do is hum in agreement.

Took me a while, too, but it feels damn good to be comfortable in my own skin again.

*Lily*

When I leave Four Cups and head back toward the hotel, I let out a sigh. It feels strange to be here. Candice moved here years ago with her husband before he died, and it seems like the whole family has been drawn to the place like magnets.

Even me, perpetually looking forward to my next trip, has been dragged back to this small town.

I have a reason, though. A secret that will come out sooner rather than later—and I'm so not prepared for the consequences.

Veering off course, I cross the street and enter the bookstore. Agnes is a grumpy old lady, but I have a bit of a soft spot for her. I don't think she's actually all that negative. I think she's a realist.

But Agnes isn't behind the counter. Instead, her grandson Rudy is sitting behind the till, head bent over a book. He's sitting on a stool with his knees spread wide, one hand wrapped around the seat in between his legs. A chunk of unruly blond hair falls over his brow.

I don't know if it's the light, or my vulnerable state, or the fact that everyone in this town seems to be in love, but I stop in my tracks and stare.

Rudy looks *good*.

But he's young, isn't he? I'll be forty in six weeks, and I'm sure Rudy is in his early-to-mid thirties. What's that stupid

rule again—half your age plus seven? Does that apply to women?

I shake my head. Why am I even thinking about that? I can't date anyone right now!

Then Rudy lifts his gaze to mine, his blue eyes so piercing they strike me mute. Smiling genially, he slides off his stool. "Hi. Iliana, right? We met at Thanksgiving a few years ago."

"I remember," I mumble. "You were dating my sister."

Candice and Rudy had a flirtation going on. I encouraged her to tap that because, well, look at the guy!

But Rudy just laughs. "I wouldn't go that far. We had one date and one kiss. Schoolyard stuff." He tilts his head as he holds my gaze, his eyes dropping to my lips.

Heat lashes across my middle, and when our eyes meet again his expression has changed. The air between us grows charged.

I clear my throat and turn to one of the stacks of books to hide the flush in my cheeks. "You can call me Lily, by the way. Most people do."

"Lily," he says slowly, and a thrill pierces my stomach. "Cute nickname." Did his voice just get lower? Why does that make my secret place clench?

*Don't think about your secret place.*

"Trina couldn't say Iliana, so she'd call me Lily when she was a toddler. It stuck." Nice and neutral topic—childhood nicknames. Growing up. Totally non-sexual and won't make me want to jump over that counter and throw myself at Rudy.

I glance at him and immediately regret it. Those blue eyes are intent on mine, pinning me to the spot. He moves slowly, leaning against the counter. His shirt drags across his chest, palm moving up to scrub the stubble lining his strong jaw.

I fucking *love* stubble.

We stare at each other for a few long moments until I drag my eyes back to the table full of books in front of me.

“Can I help you find something?”

Well, I came in here to see what kind of smutty romances Agnes had, but maybe I would be better off downloading an eBook. The thought of buying a stack of sex-filled stories—of having Rudy’s broad hands all over the books while he rings them up—is too much for me.

“How about a book that will make me forget about the world around me?” And all the problems I’m dragging around like an overstuffed suitcase.

Rudy’s full lips twitch and he moves from behind the counter. “You don’t work part-time in your grandmother’s bookstore from the time you’re thirteen to thirty-four without a few good recs. Follow me. I’ve got a few books I think you’ll like.”

*He’s thirty-four. That’s only six years younger than me. That isn’t too scandalous...is it?*

As soon as the thought pops into my head, I mentally smack myself across the face.

Repeat after me: Now. Is. Not. The. Time.

Men do not exist for me right now. Not for a long, long time. Maybe ever.

Sleeping with Agnes’s grandson would be an epically bad idea. Even by my standards.

I still end up buying every book he thrusts into my arms, though. And I do promise to come back and tell him what I think of them.

*Fallon*

**W**ith only a few days remaining in the competition, dread knots in my stomach. Once this is over, I'm not sure Jen will want to continue. Didn't she say the whole reason we were sleeping together was to win the title?

What happens after?

She'll realize she's way too good for me, and I'll be left on my own again.

But after a day in town watching Jen bloom around all the people who love her most, I can't help but wrap my arms around her and press my lips to hers. As evening falls all around the guesthouse, we drift toward each other, clothes falling away from our bodies.

Jen doesn't tug at my shirt, but I wonder if I should remove it. She might ask me about the tattoo, though, and I'm not ready to tell her about my greatest shame. I only have a week left in this little bubble. I don't want to ruin it with stories of prison. I'm not ready to see the look on her face when she realizes I'm not the man she thought I was. So, instead, I lay her down on her back and I eat the best dessert of all.

Only when she's done writhing and calling my name do I move between her legs and give in to the pulsing of my cock. Elbows near her shoulders, I cup her head and kiss her as we make love slowly, intensely, as if nothing else exists. She's gorgeous and undone underneath me, and for a few more perfect days, I can pretend that she's mine alone.

When I feel her contracting around me, I can hardly hold back, but I force myself to watch, to memorize every moment of this. It might be one of my last orgasms with her—I want to be able to remember it.

She falls asleep tucked up against me, her hand curled into my shirt. Just before her breath evens out, Jen mumbles, “I always knew we belonged together.”

My chest clenches. I’m not sure she’ll think that when she finds out about my past.

It takes a long time for me to fall asleep and when I do, I dream of her.

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THE FINAL ELIMINATION challenge between our team, Tex and Reg, and Carla and Emma is a pie-baking extraordinaire. We need to make six pies—three fruit pies and three custard pies—and decorate them with as much detail as possible.

Jen has her game face on, and she’s never looked better. Hair pulled back in a tight bun, white chef’s jacket on, and hands clenched behind her back, she looks ready for anything.

I’m so damn proud to be by her side.

In the rafters, all of Heart’s Cove is here—with bells on. I spy my sister with a blinding smile on her face right beside Dorothy, Margaret, Lottie, and Agnes. The Four Cups girls are all there, along with Trina and Iliana—and all their men.

I can’t believe I walked away from this place. The years I spent in Heart’s Cove were the best of my life...but was I just running from my past? I can’t stay here knowing Slim is looking for me—knowing I’m bringing that shit on all these good people’s doorsteps.

My attention turns to Jen. When the judges walk in with Carrie, Jen slips her hand in mine and gives me a squeeze. My heart grows as I hold her hand, feeling more connected than I ever have. I owe this to her. She deserves to win, to prove to everyone—and herself—that she’s the best.

So, when the timer starts, I'm ready.

"Cold butter this time," I say, producing a block from the fridge.

Jen grins. "You're a quick study."

"I've got a good teacher."

We work so well together, I never want this day to end. Jen makes an apple filling and places it near the edge of the barn near a window to cool slightly. Then she moves on to a mixed berry filling while I mix pie dough ingredients.

A flap of wings makes us glance at the window. A large black crow is perched on the edge of the bowl of apple-pie filling, pecking at the spiced fruit. Jen screams, rushing the bird. The bird hops but doesn't fly away. It just stays near the bowl, dragging it closer to the edge of the window with its talons.

When the whole bowl topples out the window, Jen stumbles to a stop and gapes. Then turns to glare at me. "Appeasing our overlords, huh." Her head cants. "Making peace with the birds. Isn't that what you said?"

I cringe, hands still working the butter through the bowl of flour in front of me.

"Getting them on our side." Jen walks up to our station, glancing back at the window. "You said the crows would be our best allies."

Clearing my throat, I pause what I'm doing. "I may have misjudged the consequences of my actions."

*Story of my life.*

Jen surprises me by snorting, then bursting out laughing. She covers her mouth with the back of her hand and shakes her head at me. "I wasted fifteen minutes on that filling." Eyes glimmering, she gives me a cheeky grin. "You're lucky you have other skills."

If I was worried that Jen was the type to hold a grudge, the apple-pie filling proves otherwise. She just gets back to work

peeling and chopping more apples, working at double speed. My shoulders drop, and I allow myself a smile.

The competition means everything to Jen, but still, she's not angry. Just like when she saw me for the first time in the guesthouse—she had every right to be angry at me for leaving Heart's Cove at the start of the year, but she seemed to forget about it as soon as we started working together. She forgave me for the croissants within an hour of saving us from elimination.

Maybe I could tell Jen about my past, and she wouldn't react as badly as I think. Maybe... Maybe there's a chance this could work between us. If I told her about my time in prison, would Jen just shrug and move on the same way she did just now? Would she shoot me a little grin and accept me for who I am, dark past and all?

Or would my hidden secrets be one step too far? Maybe I'm burning through Jen's good graces.

Turning back to the pie dough, I trade out with Jen so she can add the water and start forming the dough to chill it.

Hours tick by, and the two of us work like magic together. I've never felt as good in the kitchen as I do with Jen by my side. She gives clear, direct instructions, but still trusts my skills. I watch her shape and carve pie dough into beautiful leaf shapes to put on top of our pumpkin pie, then she uses scraps to make more sculptural floral arrangements out of pie dough to use for later decoration. The apple pie is covered with a fine, delicate lattice.

As I watch her crimp the sides of a glossy, delicious-looking cherry pie, my heart thunders.

At one point, Jen glances at the clock and gets this impish look on her face. Working quickly, she makes mini pies, which she bakes, unmolds, and uses as decorations on top of larger pies. It's ridiculous, but it looks incredible.

I've been in love with Jen for so long it shouldn't surprise me to feel this way. But as the timer counts down and I watch



her work miracles, completely in her element, I wonder if I ever stood a chance against her.

From the moment I saw her stomping around the Four Cups Café with her kitchen scale tucked under her arm, I should have known I'd fall for her—and fall hard.

I need to go all-in.

Tonight, when we're alone, I'll tell her about my past. I'll tell her I was in prison, that I'm an ex-con, that my own mother kicked me out when I was a teen, and even after all these years, I'm not sure she'd want to reconcile. I'll tell her I got out of prison after three years, at age twenty-one, and started working in kitchens because it was the only job I could get. I'll tell her that this year, I spent six months volunteering to teach incarcerated men how to cook so they might have opportunities when they get out. I did it in the hopes that if I faced my past, I could move on from it once and for all.

It didn't work, but I tried.

I'll lay it all out on the table. I'll show her my tattoo, and I'll tell her why she deserves so much better than me—but that I'm not ready to let her go.

Tonight, I'll tell Jen that I'm desperately, hopelessly in love with her.

*Jen*

**A**s I stand before the judges, a sense of calm descends over me. Fallon's steady presence warms my side, the sound of a knife slicing through crisp, flaky pie dough the only noise disturbing the silence in the room.

For the first time in my life, I feel completely, utterly satisfied. Today was a rush. Fallon and I worked perfectly together, entering a state of flow that I've only ever experienced on my own.

I'm...proud of myself. Truly. To my core.

Never have I ever done something that I've been utterly happy with. I've always nitpicked at my own work. *This pastry is gummy. I slightly overbaked that cake. I could have balanced the sweetness in that recipe better. I shouldn't have said that. Did I act weird when I met that person?*

Why? Why have I done that to myself?

My hand slips into Fallon's, and when he gives it a squeeze I know at some point over the last four weeks, I've changed.

Last year, when Fallon kissed me right before Amanda showed up in town, I felt starved for his lips on mine. I felt elated that he looked at me like a woman, a sexual being. And when it all fell apart, it was devastating. When Fallon left Heart's Cove, it felt like he was leaving *me*. Like there was this void inside me that would never be filled.

Now, I still feel a gnawing need for him, but it's not coming from a place of insecurity. I'm not clinging to him

because he's the first man to pay attention to me in years. I don't feel like I need to choose between him and my career—between him and *me*.

I am enough. He doesn't complete me; he centers me.

Whatever happens in the next hour—whether we win or not—doesn't matter. I'm proud of myself either way.

A barrier collapses in my mind, and for the first time in my life, I allow myself to be happy. I allow myself to look beyond my own imperfections and just *be*.

I don't need to be perfect to have the love of a good man. I don't need to win this competition to be worthy of my own book, my own bakery, my own name.

“The pie dough is absolutely incredible,” Bernard says, his tongue darting out to catch a crumb on his lip. “Flaky and light, yet still holds its shape. Perfection.”

It's not the first time Bernard has complimented me, but it's the first time I've heard his compliment and accepted it. That pie dough *is* incredible, *thankyouverymuch*.

I smile. “Thank you.”

“And these mini pies? I mean, how *cute*.” Heather grins, slicing the palm-sized pie in half and shaking her head at the perfectly defined layers of custard and whipped cream. “Jen, Fallon, you've outdone yourselves.”

Fallon's hand slips out of mine as he moves his arm around my shoulders. I glance up at him, grinning from ear-to-ear, feeling like my heart will beat right out of my chest. “You're amazing, Jen,” he whispers. “I'm so damn proud of you.”

“I'm proud of me too,” I whisper back, loving the way his eyes crinkle, dark eyes twinkling.

I'm high on life, about to float right into the sky from how light I feel—

A door opens, and my parents walk into the barn. Reality brings me crashing right back down.

I pull away from Fallon, wide-eyed.

“Surprise!” Carrie beams. “We thought you could use some extra support today.”

*Support.* Right.

A mask falls over my face as I turn to my parents. My mother is wearing a silk blouse and perfectly tailored pants. Her hair is dyed a dark-chocolate color, twisted neatly at the nape of her neck. My father is in a three-piece suit, his silver hair combed back from his forehead. They walk with the same confident gait I recognize so well, something like haughty pride glimmering in their eyes.

“Jennifer,” my mother says, grasping my arms to give me an air kiss on each cheek.

“Mom.” I force a smile. “Dad. I wasn’t expecting you.”

My mother gives me an assessing look, glances at Fallon for a fraction of a second, then turns back to me. “We were delighted to be invited out for the finale. Your father and I are very keen to see how you rank.”

*How I rank.* Of course. Do they really think that’s the same as being here to support me?

“How wonderful!” Carrie laughs, clapping her hands, and the whole barn follows.

Once the greetings are over, I notice the production crew has also led Nora out to stand beside Fallon. Is she the only family of his they could find?

Fallon and I are led back to our station while our family members are directed to a few chairs on the side of the barn. We watch Tex and Reg bring their pies to the front and receive glowing reviews. More perfect pastry, but slightly simplistic decoration. Their custard pies look better than ours, though. Tex’s and Reg’s wives are led out with their children, and tearful greetings are exchanged. Emma and Carla had a harder time, with two of their pies having soggy bottom crusts, but apparently delicious fillings.

“Your chocolate and Mexican chili pie is incredible,” Heather says. “I’m going to need that recipe.”

Carla preens, and I can't quite hide my smile. Then, the third family reunion happens. Carla's husband is a short mustachioed man with tears in his eyes. He walks out of that same door and practically runs to his wife and daughter. A section of the mezzanine erupts in cheers, and Emma cries out at the sight of what looks like dozens of family members cheering and chanting for Emma and Carla.

*That* is support.

My eyes dart to my parents, and I feel like I'm twelve years old again, getting yelled at for a B+ on a test. My mother is sitting with her back ramrod straight, eyes on the front of the room, a dour expression on her face. My father glances at me, inclining his head in an almost regal way.

It makes me feel small.

My nerves come back with a vengeance. If I don't win, will I need to endure snide comments from them? I'm exhausted at the thought of it. I've lived my life dragging around impossible expectations that colored the way I see everything. I've held myself to an unreachable standard. I've kept myself apart from friends and acquaintances because I didn't feel good enough.

This past month, in the safety of this competition bubble, I've learned that I *can* make friends. A weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I can laugh and engage in small talk. I can *hug* people and not hate it. I can laugh without worry.

...but will it last?

Fallon must sense the stress mounting in me, because he puts his hand on my lower back and gives me a sly wink. My tension eases.

When the judges break to deliberate, I let out a long breath. With a squeal, I hear my girlfriends jump up from their chairs above.

"You got this, Jen!" Candice shouts. "We love you!"

She points to her T-shirt and this time, when I look at the blown-up image of my face, I just laugh. Then my eyes flick

to my mother, who has a brow arched in disdain and her lips pursed.

My smile fades.

I know I shouldn't care. I'm a grown woman. I have a business of my own. By any metric, I'm undeniably successful. Why does it bother me that my mother doesn't approve of my friends?

Seeing that expression on my mother's face is like picking at an old scab that's never quite healed.

Shifting my gaze to Fallon, I realize why.

My parents' love was conditional. When I did well, they showed affection. When I was less than perfect, they'd be cold, removed. They withheld affection when I was anything less than what they expected. That's how I learned my worth as a child—and I carried those wounds for over forty years.

My one and only boyfriend cared about me only when I was ticking his boxes. As soon as I wasn't what *he* wanted, fitting into *his* perfect life, he pulled back. He withdrew his affection, too.

But with Fallon, it's different. When we messed up the croissants, he didn't think less of me. When I tried to nitpick any of our bite-sized challenges, he'd pull me back from the edge. He'd remind me of everything that went well, or kiss me until I forgot what I was talking about. For the whole month, I've felt nothing but unwavering support from him. How we did in challenges never changed how he treated me.

His affection is *unconditional*—and I realize I've never felt that before. From Candice and the girls, sure—but never from a parent. Never from a lover.

Never from *myself*—until that brief moment when we stood in front of the judges.

I've been such an *asshole* to myself!

Emotion clogs my throat, and I find myself turning to Fallon. I need to tell him how I feel—that he's cracked my mind and heart right open. I need to scream this epiphany to

the rafters. By standing beside me throughout this whole experience, he showed me what it means to have someone to lean on.

He showed me love...

*And I love him back.*

I open my mouth to say the words that come rushing to the fore—but the judges appear with Carrie as a hum of excitement rushes through the barn. They're about to announce the winners.

*Fallon*

“It was a very difficult decision, but ultimately there was one team that shone throughout the competition,” Bernard says, his eyes moving to each contestant in turn.

Did they linger on Jen?

My heart thunders. My palms grow damp. I close my eyes as I inhale through my nose, needing to regain control over my rioting body.

I need to win this for Jen. I want to be the man who stood beside her and was able to give her the money to pursue her dreams. She needs to see how incredible she is.

“Congratulations, Fallon and Jen, you are the winners of the *Boss Baker!*” Bernard’s face splits into a smile as he turns to us. Carrie advances with the trophy.

Jen stands frozen, eyes wide, so I move to intercept it.

I turn to Jen and present the trophy to her, loving how reverently she accepts it—but most of all, loving the emotion swirling in her eyes when she meets my gaze.

“We did it, Fallon,” she whispers, hands curling around the trophy.

The emotion in her voice hits me like a hammer to the side of the head. Too many words come flying to the surface, and I’m struck dumb.

—*I love you.*

—*I’ve been in love with you for years.*



—*You're the most incredible woman I've ever met and the past month has been the happiest of my life.*

—*You deserve this.*

—*I never want to leave your side.*

—*I don't deserve you.*

My lungs constrict and my vision goes blurry from the tears in my eyes, and soon we're swarmed by contestants and judges and family members. Jen's parents stand off to the side, noses in the air, as if *they* just won the trophy and deserved every bit of it.

Jen is laughing, tears streaming down her face as she wipes her nose with her sleeve. Her eyes find mine again, hand reaching toward me. She squeezes my fingers, then lifts our joint hands in the air, trophy held aloft in the other. The mezzanine goes nuts.

I laugh—and then I can't resist the temptation of Jen's lips. Tugging her to my chest, I bury my hands in her hair and kiss her so hard it'll probably need to be edited out of the show. Shouts and hollers sound from above, and I recognize Simone's voice shouting, "Get a room! This is a family show."

Jen smiles against my lips, eyes alight. When she pulls away, my chest constricts. She's so damn beautiful I can hardly stand to look.

But we're swept up in the celebrations, interviewed on camera, and finally someone calls, "That's a wrap!"

The audience is allowed down from the mezzanine, and Jen and I are swept up in more hugs and congratulations. I keep close to Jen, ready to throw her over my shoulder in case this becomes too much. I know she hates crowds—I still remember how she looked in Four Cups that day, when she was on the verge of a panic attack from all the people.

Jen is radiant, though. A change has come over her, and for the first time ever, I watch *her* seek out hugs from her friends. She's beaming, surrounded by people, looking totally in her element.

A tap on the shoulder draws my attention to a small, reedy man in a black button-down. His weaselly face is pinched as he lifts his chin up to look down on me. “I suppose you think you deserve the win, *hmm?*” He’s got an accent I can’t place—French, maybe?

Frowning as his words sink in, I turn to face him fully. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve seen the way you bake. You’re no match for Jennifer.” He rolls the *r*, making her name sound like *Genni-feuur*.

Definitely French.

“Do I know you?”

He purses his lips. There’s something about him that makes my skin itch. A gleam in his eyes. The way he’s standing. I want to figure him out, but before I can ask anything else, a hand grips my elbow.

Jen appears at my side. “Fallon, Lottie wants a picture with— Oh! Guillaume!” Her brows jump at the sight of the man beside me. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to congratulate you, of course.” A smarmy smile tugs Guillaume’s lips. “The restaurant hasn’t been the same without you.”

Jen’s face melts into a smile. “No, I suppose it hasn’t—but I’m sure you manage! You should stop by Four Cups some time, see what I’ve been working on.” Jen turns to me, her arm hooking through mine. “Guillaume was my boss before we opened Four Cups. He gave me my start after I completed pastry school.”

“I could tell Jennifer was a raw talent,” Guillaume says, nose stuck in the air. “Ready to be honed.”

A chill skitters up my spine. The way this guy is staring at Jen makes me uneasy—but am I just being overprotective? Am I just worried about what happens once we come down from this high?

“Sorry, Guillaume, I’m going to have to steal Fallon. We need to report for photo duty. I’ll come find you later!”

“I look forward to it.” He gives her that smarmy smile again, and I can’t help putting an arm around Jen’s shoulders. I want her close to me if that guy’s going to stick around.

Jen doesn’t seem to notice. She’s still holding the trophy, talking to our fellow competitors, meeting their families, posing for pictures. When she’s dragged away by an adorable little girl who we learn is Carla’s granddaughter, I slink out the side door for some fresh air.

We won. We *won*.

Jen will be able to start her bakery or expand Four Cups, or do whatever that brilliant head of hers dreams up. I’ll stick around Heart’s Cove, because, really, what was I thinking? I could never stay away.

Tonight, when the party’s over, I’ll tell her about my past. I’ll confess my feelings, and I’ll hope she feels the same way.

Sucking in a long breath, I release it slowly. Things are looking up.

Not wanting to leave Jen alone for too long, I turn back to enter the barn, only to run into Jen’s father. I pull back to let him walk by, but he steps into my path.

“Fallon Richter, is it?” he asks, bright blue eyes on mine.

I clear my throat. “Yes. You’re Mr. Newbank.”

“Indeed. A word, please?” He gestures outside with a smooth, practiced movement, as if he’s used to being obeyed.

With one last glance at Jen, I nod to her father and follow him to the side of the barn. We walk a few paces, and I try to keep a straight face when we stop near the place where I had my first real taste of Jen, up against the side of this barn.

Mr. Newbank clears his throat. “You and Jennifer have gotten close.”

It’s not a question, so I say nothing.

Studying me, the man narrows his eyes. He glances out at the forest, eyes taking on a faraway look. Finally, after a long pause, he speaks. “Our Jennifer is special,” he starts.

“She is.” *Understatement of the century.*

“Her mother and I can be...protective.”

I frown. Protective? Judging by what Jen says, they call her twice a year and call it a day. Doesn’t exactly sound like a close familial relationship to me.

“When we were approached about attending the finale, the showrunners mentioned your name. We saw the first bite-sized challenge online, and were surprised to see the two of you so close. The producers made it sound like my daughter and you were...involved.” He pauses. “You can understand our surprise, seeing as Jen never mentioned you.”

Even though I know Jen isn’t close with her parents, the barb still stings. What is he getting at?

Mr. Newbank turns to face me once more, his face hard. Unyielding. “My wife and I took the liberty of doing some cursory checks on your background.”

“Excuse me?” My brows lower. Is this guy for real?

“Mr. Richter, you must know that with your”—he cants his head—“*history*, we would understandably be worried about your involvement with our daughter.”

“Your daughter is a grown woman capable of making her own choices.”

“Of course. One question, though. Does she know about the felony charge? Does she know what you’ve been doing for six months? How *involved* you are in the prison community?”

Heat blasts through me as aggression explodes inside me. I *will* tell her. I’ll tell her tonight, when we have time! I’ll explain everything that happened, and Jen will be able to decide for herself if she wants to keep pursuing whatever exists between us.

Plus, what I’ve been doing for six months has been *good*. I was a felon with no prospects, and I know how dehumanizing

that felt. Teaching people real-world skills so they can start their lives over once they get out of prison is not a *bad* thing. But Jen's father doesn't seem to agree.

Plus, the truth is I haven't told her. I've kissed her and claimed her and accepted her love—and I've kept that part of myself separate.

Jen's father must see it on my face, because he rocks back on his heels. "I didn't think so. Do us a favor and back away from Jen, Fallon. You're not the man for her."

With one last loaded look, Mr. Newbank walks away from me. I stand tall until he's out of sight, then lean back against the barn and drop my head into my hands.

I'm insulted that they ran a background check on me. Horrified at what they saw. Ashamed of my past. Angry that they dared to tell me how to live my life—and are trying to stop Jen from living hers.

But most of all, I feel bleak, bottomless despair.

Because he's right. I'm not the type of man that could ever be worthy of Jen. Even if she listened to my past and accepted it, the fact is, she deserves better than me.

*Jen*

**T**he sound of my name makes me turn to see Amanda Bailey walking toward me. She's wearing stilettos, her hair is blown out, face impeccably made up, and she's beaming at me.

My chest seizes. Did she see me kiss Fallon? Would she care?

"You. Are. *Amazing!*" She makes to hug me, then pauses and awkwardly squeezes my shoulders instead.

I appreciate it, even though a hug would have been fine. I'm getting used to them, but I still feel like I'll need a week of seclusion to recover from all this socializing and physical contact.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I clear my throat. "Amanda. Nice to see you. I wasn't expecting you."

"I knew you could do it." She smiles at me, her red lipstick looking sophisticated and sexy on her full lips. Eyes darting behind me, she arches a brow. "I wasn't expecting to see you and Fallon together, though."

"About that..."

When Fallon quit his job at Four Cups and decided to leave town, she seemed to accept that they weren't getting back together. But will she still feel that way now?

She laughs and waves a hand. "Girl, go for it."

Hope blooms in my chest. "Really? I thought you might have feelings for him..."

She tilts her head from side to side as she hums. “I mean, kind of. Yes. Okay, sure. When he first emailed me, I thought maybe there was a reconciliation in the cards for us.” Shrugging, she spreads her palms. “But we’re two completely different people now. I’m over it—and I *know* Fallon is too.”

A breath slips through my lips. What a relief.

“I just wish you two had told me about this”—she waggles her fingers at me—“before Fallon left town. Would have saved everyone a lot of time.”

“I thought I had to choose between Fallon and the book,” I answer honestly, then bite my lip. “I thought maybe you just gave me the book deal because you wanted to get back with Fallon and it gave you a reason to be here.”

Amanda gives me a strange look, then shakes her head. “Jen, no. You got the book deal because you’re good. Because you deserved it.”

My heart hammers. “Oh.”

“You should have told me you were interested in Fallon, Jen,” Amanda says, giving me a sad smile.

I huff. “I didn’t want to jeopardize the book deal. But now I’m wondering if I wasn’t just scared of my feelings for him.”

Amanda gives me a kind smile. “Well, either way, I’m happy for you.” She points a finger at me. “But I’d better get recognition in every award acceptance speech you ever make. Don’t forget who signed you up for this competition in the first place.”

Grinning, I incline my head. “I won’t. Thanks, Amanda—for everything.”

She smiles, then excuses herself to go talk to Heather Brennan. I watch her go, feeling lighter than I did before. Amanda gave me the book deal because I’m good. Plain and simple. Not only that, but she doesn’t care if Fallon and I are together—which means there really is no reason for me not to jump into his arms and tell him how I feel.

But as I scan the room, I don't see him anywhere. Dorothy appears at my elbow and sweeps me into another conversation, and soon there's no time to think about my feelings for Fallon.

When the impromptu afterparty on set starts to wind down, Candice announces that all are welcome to come to Four Cups to continue the festivities.

Eyes landing on me, Candice arches her brow. "Bring the trophy," she commands.

I cringe. "Um, the NDAs? I don't think I'm allowed to announce the win yet."

Candice releases a long sigh. "Fine. Bring yourself and Fallon, and I *guess* that'll be enough." She winks, heading for her car.

Scanning the room for the big, bearded, dark-haired man who made this all possible, I find myself wandering out the barn doors to the fresh air outside. Dusk has fallen, the sweet scent of summer lingering in the air. The grass under my feet is soft as I wander toward the guesthouse.

I find Fallon sitting on the front steps of our guesthouse, flicking seeds at a trio of crows near the base of a tree. Planting my hands on my hips, I tilt my head. "You're just encouraging their misbehavior now."

Fallon throws another handful of seeds, then meets my gaze. His face looks...sad.

I pause. "Are you okay?"

Fallon lets out a long sigh and tosses the rest of his crow food, then stretches up to his full height. "I'm good. Just needed a bit of quiet."

"I get that." Closing the distance between us, I make to give Fallon a hug—then pause when he turns his back.

He opens the guesthouse door, not meeting my eyes as he heads across the room to take his suitcase from the closet.

He's packing already? We don't need to be out until tomorrow morning.



My footsteps echo on the wooden floorboards, the trophy dangling from my fingertips. “Candice invited us all back to Four Cups for an afterparty. You want to drive over together?”

Fallon pauses his movements, an old, worn tee clasped in his hands. “You go ahead. I’ll meet you there.”

“It looks like you’re getting ready to leave.”

He shoves the tee into his suitcase. “Just packing my stuff, Jen.”

I place the trophy on top of the dresser and cross my arms. “What happened? Aren’t you happy? We should be celebrating.”

Fallon turns to face me, his expression unreadable. He gulps. Then, as if he’s sick of holding back, walks over to me with three long steps. His palms sweep over my cheeks, thumbs brushing my skin. “I’m so proud of you, Jen. You deserve this win.”

“*We* deserve this win. It’s as much mine as it is yours.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

My brows lower. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t like it. And I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s up.”

Fallon’s eyes flick from my eyes to my lips. A breath slides from his mouth as his eyelids slide shut, and dread curls in the pit of my stomach.

“Fallon?”

“I’ll meet you at Four Cups. Okay?”

“You promise?” My voice sounds small.

“I promise.” Hands still on my cheeks, Fallon leans down to press his lips to mine. This kiss isn’t as hot as some of our others, but it makes my pulse thump. It feels...significant. When he pulls away, Fallon’s eyes are dark. “You deserve this, Jen.”

“So do you.” I tilt my head up for one last kiss, then let out a sigh and head for the door.

I'm nearly at the door when I hear Fallon say, "Hey." I turn to see Fallon holding up my trophy. "You forgot this."

Grinning, I reach for it, the metal cool against my skin. "Unfortunately, this baby will have to stay hidden for now, but you better believe it's going on display as soon as the show airs. We need a photo with it to frame for Four Cups."

Sadness flashes across Fallon's eyes, but he quickly hides it. He smiles. "I'm sure Lottie got at least one useable one."

Nodding, I squeeze his arm and linger. Something makes me hesitate. I don't want to leave. But, not having an excuse to stay, I make him promise he'll be at Four Cups soon, and I leave the guesthouse behind.

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I TAKE my car into town, parking down the street from Four Cups. When I exit the vehicle, I can already hear loud music and intermingling voices. There must be dozens of people at the café.

Strangely, the thought doesn't fill me with fear like it used to. My steps are light as I make my way toward the café, and I find myself smiling when I enter. I'm no longer worried about all the people, the questions, the conversations.

They're here for me, and there's no pressure.

A cheer sounds when I walk through the door, splitting my face into a smile.

"Coming through!" Simone elbows her way through the crush to reach me, eyes twinkling. "VIP in the house!" She hooks her arm through mine and drags me deeper into the café. I say hellos to all my neighbors and friends on the way past, then let Simone drag me toward a wall, where a new shelf has been erected.

Simone thrusts her arm to the shelf, where there's already a candid photo of me and Fallon in the kitchen from a couple of years ago. "Grant put the shelf up this morning," Simone says

with a wink. “We knew you’d come home with the trophy, and this is where it’s going to go.”

I smile. They put this shelf up before I’d even completed the challenge. Every single person in this room *believed* in me. My heart is so full it’s about to burst.

How could I have not realized that I had support all along? Why did I put so much pressure on myself? Why did I avoid affection and help from all these people that believe in me down to their core?

Beaming, I give Simone a hug, pulling away to see a shocked expression on her face.

“Who are you and what have you done with Jen?” She turns to Fiona, who walks up to us at that moment. “Jen just hugged me unprompted. I think she needs to get her head checked.”

“I’ll call 9-1-1,” Fiona answers, dead serious, reaching for her phone.

“*Har-har*, guys.” I roll my eyes, but crack a smile. I’m swept up in more conversations and congratulations, and I bask it in.

The only thing that could possibly make this moment better is if Fallon’s muscled arm was slung across my shoulders. I glance at the door, wondering when he’ll show up. He needs to be here to celebrate just as much as I do.

Instead of Fallon at the door, I see my mother and father walking in with none other than Bernard Franco. Bernard is deep in conversation with my mother, who looks oddly triumphant.

My father waves me over. “Jennifer,” he booms. “Come.”

Trundling over to them, I pick up a glass of champagne on the way and down it in one gulp. When I reach them, my father looks me up and down. “We were just discussing your performance with Mr. Franco.”

“Oh?” I give Bernard a tight smile.

“We’re so proud of you, Jennifer,” Mother says, her brown hair tied in a neat French twist. She looks every bit as refined and uptight as I remember her.

A memory pops into my head. I remember being young—a toddler—and running to the door when my mother got home from work. I’d been eating something chocolatey, and it was smeared all over my hands and face. When I gave my mother a hug and a kiss, she looked at the brown smears on her clothes and pulled away from me with disgust.

The nanny was fired that evening, and chocolate was banned from the house.

I was a *toddler*.

Staring at my parents, I wonder how many of those moments were burned into my subconscious. How many years have I spent trying to be good enough for them? How much joy did I give up because they didn’t approve?

Now that they look at me with real pride—or just plain satisfaction—in their gazes, it feels...empty.

I want Fallon’s warmth. I want his breath on my neck as he squeezes me tight. I want his generous laugh and twinkling eyes.

It would mean more to me than the trophy. More than this empty, haughty pride.

“We were just talking to Mr. Franco about your next steps,” my father says, drawing my attention to him.

I frown. “Next steps?”

“Well, officially, the prize is cash,” Bernard says. “Unofficially, I’d like to tell you how impressed I was by your work.” He takes a step closer to me, his eyes burning with intensity.

I resist the urge to take a step back, my eyes darting to the door. Where the hell is Fallon?

“Jen, I was hoping you and I could talk.” Bernard takes my hand, squeezing it meaningfully.

“Talk?”

“Maybe outside?” He nods to the door. “Alone?”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“Jennifer, darling, don’t be rude.” My mother’s lips pinch, her lipstick gathering in the creases.

I nod, gesturing to the exit.

Bernard keeps a hold on my hand as he drags me outside, then turns to face me. His bright eyes are intent, and he’s standing too close. I take half a step back. “Your parents are remarkable people,” he starts.

“That’s a common opinion,” I answer noncommittally.

“And they have a remarkable daughter.” He closes the distance between us.

If I back up any more, I’ll be up against the wall. Instead, I just clear my throat and glance to the door. “What did you want to talk about?”

Bernard lets out a breath. “Jen, I’ve watched you flourish in this competition, and I wanted to tell you how impressed I was with your work. You have real, raw talent.”

The same words Guillaume used earlier—as if raw talent is something to be plucked from the ground by one of them.

“Thank you.” I nod, fists clenched. He’s standing too close.

“I know you’ve felt something between us.”

My eyes snap to him. “What?”

“We’ve shared moments, Jen.”

“Moments?” What the hell is he talking about?

“Dinners when we spoke about your recipes. The whole room fell away and it was just you and me talking pastry.” He reaches for my hand again as my heart thumps in my ears.

Discussing my recipes with Bernard at dinner? I vaguely remember doing that, but I was more focused on the heat of Fallon’s thigh against mine.

“And you can’t tell me you weren’t giving me looks every time I came to your station during filming.”

“Looks?” I shake my head. “I wasn’t giving you looks.”

He laughs like I’m joking. Not the way Fallon does it, where it’s like he’s so full of affection that it tumbles out in a laugh. With Bernard, it seems like he’s observing some bumbling, naïve child who does something cute. I’m so *sick* of people looking at me like that! I’m forty-fucking-seven years old! When will it end?

“Jen, there’s something between us. I know you feel it. I want you to come to Paris with me. I’m opening a new restaurant, and you will be my head pastry chef. I have a residence in Saint-Germain and a vacation home on the Mediterranean. You’ll have free access to both.”

Um, *what?*

“You want me to work for you?” I feel like I’ve lost my mind. What the hell is happening?

“I want you to work *with* me. And live with me. *Be* with me.”

Okay. Working in Paris under a celebrated pastry chef—*très* cool. Having him proposition me as if this is a done deal? Insinuating that we’d be together more than professionally? *Not fucking cool.*

“Listen, Bernard,” I start, palms up.

“I won’t take no for an answer.” He takes another step closer to me, pushing me up against the wall. “I’ve been looking for someone whose talent matches mine. You’re nearly my equal in every way, Jen. You’re perfect for me.”

*Nearly his equal?* What the hell kind of compliment is that supposed to be?

Staring into this man’s—this stranger’s—eyes, I see nothing but an odd sort of light shining in his irises. He doesn’t know me. Doesn’t *see* me. All he wants is some doll he can insert into his perfect life. He’s presenting it to me like

he's doing me a favor. It's a done deal, and he's just telling me about it.

Curious about how he'll respond, I ask, "What if I wanted to stop baking?"

"Don't be ridiculous." He snorts. "Why would you throw away an opportunity like this? You'll be the face of a prestigious restaurant with my name on it!"

Calm settles over me. Bernard doesn't want *me*. He doesn't even know me. He's built up this image in his head of who I am—a pastry chef that he can shape and mold into the woman he wants.

The same way my first boyfriend wanted me to be the mother of his children instead of my own person. The same way my parents wanted me to be a mini version of them.

For the first time in my life, I square my shoulders, and it doesn't make me sick to say no to a great opportunity. A year ago, I would have jumped at the chance to work in Paris. I thought it was my dream.

But dreams change.

I sidestep away from Bernard and shake my head. "I'm sorry, Bernard, that's not what I want."

His face twists. "You'd throw away this opportunity for what? For that criminal?"

I freeze as his words clang through me. "What are you talking about?"

"Darling," my mother's voice says behind me, "there's something we need to tell you."

"And there's something *I* need to tell you!" Dorothy pops her head out of the café, a leopard-print scarf tied over her head. Chunky turquoise earrings dangle from her ears as she spreads her arms wide, a tumbler of alcohol sloshing in one hand. Her other finger points at me. "You. Are. Incredible!"

Agnes, looking very sophisticated in a new outfit Trina must have picked out for her, appears at her side and puts her hand around Dorothy's bicep to drag the drunk older woman

back inside. “Get a grip, Dorothy. I knew whiskey was a bad idea.”

“Whiskey is *never* a bad idea.” She pauses, throwing me a serious look. “Unless you’re already sad, in which case whiskey is a *very* bad idea.”

“Excuse me,” my mother interjects, her brows pinched. “We are *busy*.”

Agnes glares, not in the least bothered that in heels, my mother is nearly six feet tall and Agnes is about four foot nine. She just snorts and shakes her head. “You’re worse than Dorothy, and that’s saying a lot.”

“You know, Agnes, if you weren’t so horrible, you’d be okay.” Dorothy gives Agnes a pat on the head, then dances her way back inside.

The door closes behind them and my mother lets out an exasperated sigh.

I press my lips together to stop from smiling, then remember what Bernard said earlier. Looking my mother square in the eyes, I cross my arms. “What’s this about a criminal?”



*Fallon*

**A**cid coats my throat as I watch Bernard fucking Franco take another step toward Jen. My hand grips the car door, but I hold myself back. Jen's mother appears, with that awful, pinched expression on her pretentious face.

I should go over there. With my low-class upbringing and my criminal record, I should barge right in and claim Jen's lips in front of everyone.

But Jen looks at Bernard and she doesn't push him away. She lets him take her hand—lets him *touch her*, and says nothing.

Watching Jen and Bernard together is like watching a precious jewel fall through the grates of a storm drain only to get swept away. She showed me just how happy I could be, but I can never have her.

Mr. Newbank's words echo in my head. *You're not the man for her.*

All the fight leaves my body when the truth of those words rings through me like a bell.

Because someone who *is* the type of man who should be with Jen? Bernard Franco. He's worldly and successful and educated. I've heard him bragging about his house in the south of France, about his dozens of restaurants and his cachet in the pastry world.

*He* is Jen's equal. Not some ex-con kitchen grub like me.

Coming to this afterparty was a mistake. I should have just thrown my packed bags in the back of my Jeep and left town

again. I've done it once, and it didn't stick—but second time's the charm. This time, I'll leave and I'll stay gone—but as I turn the key in the ignition, my phone rings.

Nora's name lights up the screen and I swipe to answer. "Yeah?"

"Well, good evening to you too, Grumpy."

"What do you want, Nora?"

"Wow, what bee got in your bonnet?" There's a rustling sound behind her.

"Nora," I growl, "I'm not in the mood."

"Did Jen come to her senses and break up with you?"

Stunned, I say nothing. Even my own damn sister knows Jen is too good for me.

Nora inhales. "Oh, Fallon, I didn't mean it." The rustling stops. "Shit. Fallon, I thought she was in love with you. I was expecting wedding bells. I was just teasing you. I'm so sorry."

"Why are you calling, Nora? I thought you'd be at the Four Cups party."

"I came home instead to pack up my things. Have to be out of here by the morning so Jen can have her apartment back." She inhales. "But, Fallon...I've decided to stay."

I frown, eyes darting back down the street, where Jen is now surrounded by both her parents and Bernard. They're crowding her up against the wall. "You're staying at Jen's place?"

"No. I'm staying in Heart's Cove."

I tear my eyes away from Jen. "You..."

"I like it here," my sister says quietly. "I have friends for the first time in years. I feel like I might actually have a future."

"This place has that effect on people," I answer neutrally. Once upon a time, I felt that way too. It was right around the time Jen was coming in early to work in the café by herself.

Around the time I noticed she drank masala chai and had an unhealthy obsession with kitchen scales.

I'd come to work for an extra unpaid hour just to be next to her, and she never even gave me a second glance.

Thinking about it now, I should have known. I've wasted more than three years of my life on that woman.

"Fallon," my sister continues, "I was hoping you could come with me to Reno to pack up the rest of my stuff. Your Jeep is bigger, and plus...I'm worried Slim will be there, and...I know it's a lot to ask, but..."

"Of course," I answer. "We can leave first thing tomorrow morning. I'll talk to him and make sure he leaves you alone. Leaves *all* of us alone."

She exhales. "Thank you."

We say our goodbyes and hang up, and by the time I glance down the street again, Jen has disappeared.

Not wanting to put on a false smile to celebrate with everyone in town, I turn my car around and head back to the guesthouse.

I'll be gone before Jen returns.

*Jen*

**K**nowing I'll encounter lots of protests if I tell anyone I'm leaving the party, I end up slipping out the back door of the Four Cups Café to make my way back to my car.

I need to talk to Fallon.

My parents and Bernard told me a lot of things about him, and I'm not sure how many of them are true. Things about the past six months, and his frequent visits to prison. Things about the years he spent in prison himself...and even possible gang affiliations?

He's never said a word of that to me, and I want to know why.

"Uh-uh!" a voice says behind me. "Where do you think you're going, missy?" I turn in the back alley to see Candice standing by the back door, hands on hips with a sassy arch of her eyebrow. "You think you can sneak out on us?" My oldest friend strides toward me, then stumbles when she sees my face. "Hold on. What's wrong? Who do I need to kill?"

I snort. "No one."

She lifts a finger. "No one...yet."

"I'm just tired, Candice. Thought I'd turn in early."

"Girl, I've known you for decades. Do not lie to me."

My shoulders drop. "Fine. My parents tried to convince me to move to France with Bernard to be his... I don't even know! His concubine? His employee? His mistress?"

Candice rears back. “What? What about Fallon?”

I let out a sharp huff. “Well. That’s a whole other thing.”

“What’s a whole other thing?” Simone saunters out from the café, joining Candice and me in the alley.

I swallow a groan. “I just need to talk to Fallon.”

“Where is the big guy, anyway?” Simone asks, frowning. “The nerve of him missing a party we threw in his honor!”

“Fallon’s not coming?” Fiona drifts through the door.

This time, I can’t hold back my groan. So much for leaving without anyone noticing.

Candice curls her fingers around my elbow and drags me closer. “Now, Jen. You haven’t told us a single detail about you and Fallon. We’ve been patient for weeks, but it’s time to fess up. Where is he? Why didn’t you come together?”

“I...” I look at each of them in turn as my throat locks up. “I’m not sure. He was packing up his things when I last saw him.”

Fiona tilts her head, dark brows tugging together. “He was packing? Like, to leave? Right after you guys won?”

My pulse speeds up. I *knew* that was weird!

“Hold on.” Candice throws up her hands. “First of all, you guys *have* been sleeping together, yeah?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“And what’s this about your parents trying to sell you to one of the judges like chattel?”

“*What?*” Fiona and Simone yell in unison.

“They cornered me. Bernard kept talking about us having a ‘connection.’ Wanted me to move to France to live with him.”

“Creepy.” Simone frowns, glancing over her shoulder. “I’m going to get Wes to kick him out.”

“You’re not actually going to France though... Are you?” Fiona stares at me.

I actually laugh. The last thing I want to do is go to France with someone who thinks we have a *connection* when the only thing we have is a contract to appear on the same television show. Bernard doesn't actually know *me*. He just sees what he wants to see—same as my parents.

I'm the lump of clay they can mold into whatever they want. Never mind that I'm an actual human with thoughts and feelings and desires.

"I'm not going anywhere," I finally say. I pause, slightly afraid to say the next words out loud. "I might take some time off, though."

Candice's brows arch. "Time off work? Time off baking?"

"I'll train someone to take my place," I put in quickly. "I won't leave any of you in the lurch. I'll find someone. The young woman who was supposed to compete with me, Mary-Ann, she said she needed a job."

Candice flicks her wrist to wave the comment away. "I don't care about that. As long as I've known you, you've never taken a vacation. Always focused on success and career and growth." She shakes her head. "I get exhausted just thinking about it. I'm fully supportive of time off. You should take a month off. Two months! Six!"

I blink. "You wouldn't be mad?" I look at each of them in turn.

Fiona just frowns.

"Mad? At you? For taking a vacation?" Simone snorts. "I'll be mad if you *don't* take a vacation. Then I won't have to worry about you going into manic baking frenzies at three o'clock in the morning."

"You've been worried about me?" I stare at Simone.

"Oh, Jen." Fiona squeezes my arm. "Obviously we worry about you. We love you."

Tears well in my eyes, and for the second time today, I realize people love me—*unconditionally*. These three women don't care about me because I'm the resident baker. They

don't care about me because I'm a business partner, or because I can go work in their fancy restaurant and become their talented arm candy.

They care about me because I'm *me*.

"I need to go find Fallon," I blurt. I need to tell him how I feel, and how much he means to me.

"Go." Candice waves me off. "We'll hold down the fort."

I turn to leave, then pause. "Dorothy's drinking whiskey. Don't let her near anything flammable."

Fiona immediately starts for the door, and Simone cackles, hot on her heels.

"Good luck," Candice says, and the three of them disappear into the café.

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I MAKE it back to the farmhouse in record time, and exhale when I see Fallon's black Jeep parked in the lot. He's still here. Falling out of the car, I hurry down the beaten dirt path to the little guesthouse that's been my home for the past month.

I've learned a lot about myself during this competition—and none of it had to do with my baking skills. I've learned that my drive to achieve success might have stemmed from a place of insecurity. I've always wanted to prove that I was worthy. If I was successful in my career, maybe I'd deserve love and affection. All those years when I was a child, wanting to get good grades so my parents would give me attention and affection—those feelings never went away. I've been carrying baggage around for *decades* without realizing it.

Until Fallon.

He showed me what it meant to be supported. He stood by my side, a quiet, strong presence that was always there to ground me.

I can't let him leave again. Not when I feel like I'll burst if I don't touch him, kiss him, love him.

When I step inside the guesthouse, Fallon is zipping up the last of his bags—like he's about to leave. I freeze, not wanting to understand, not wanting to believe what I'm seeing.

“Fallon?”

He straightens up, turning ever so slowly to face me. “Jen. I thought you were at the party.”

“I was. I came looking for you.”

He snorts. “Why's that? I thought you'd moved on to better things.”

Rearing back as if slapped, I frown. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“I saw you with Bernard.” He spits the name.

The floor creaks as I shift my weight, cocking my hips to the side. “Right. And what did you see?”

“I saw you with a man who would be a much better match than I could ever be.” He spreads his arms. “You got what you wanted, Jen. We won. You said if we had sex, it would help us focus on the competition, and it did. It's over now.”

“So that's it?” I'm barely able to force the words out. “That's all this past month meant to you?” A weird mix of confusion and hurt coagulates in my throat.

*I don't even know this man.*

“You have no idea what this month meant to me,” Fallon says, turning back to his bags.

“No, you're right. And while we're discussing things I don't know, how about you tell me where you were the past six months? Visiting prison three times a week? Going to see your old gang members?” He freezes, and I snort. “That's right, I found out about that. Why didn't you tell me? Who even *are* you?”

“Jen.”



“You know what, I’m getting *real* sick of men trying to use me for what they need. Bernard wanted to use me to be the shiny new jewel in his stupid pastry king crown. You wanted to use me for... Shit, I don’t know. Sex? To win the cash prize? To get back at me for rejecting you?” Is it so much to ask that a man actually want *me*? “Is that why you came back after six months incommunicado?”

“No.” His voice is low, vehement.

“Right. And I’m supposed to just believe that? You haven’t told me *anything* about you. I worked with you for three years and I didn’t even know you had a sister!”

I’m shaking. The words are coming out of me so fast I can hardly breathe. The past month meant something to me, but Fallon just wants to pack up and leave again.

How fucking stupid can I be?

There’s no such thing as unconditional love and support. He never felt the way I do.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything about yourself, Fallon? Was the past month all fake to you?”

Fallon whirls on me, his eyes wild. “*Fake?*”

“You heard me. We’ve known each other for years, and you act like you care about me, but here you are packing up and leaving at the first chance. I find out through my *parents*, of all people, that you were in prison for three years when you were younger!” I throw my hands out to the side. “I was so *stupid* to think you cared about me for me. So fucking naïve—and I still haven’t learned my lesson, because I thought I was in love with you, but I don’t know a damn thing about you. I’ve never even seen you without a shirt on!”

“You want to see me shirtless?” Fallon seethes. “Fine.” Grabbing the neck of his shirt near his nape, Fallon rips his shirt off in one smooth motion.

The first thing I notice is that Fallon’s body is absolutely droolworthy. I’m mourning the past month, when I could have kissed every hard inch of his chest, traced the lines of his muscular stomach with my tongue. I could have rubbed my

lips against his coarse chest hair and run my tongue over the flat discs of his nipples. I could have kissed his stomach and spread my hands over his skin, and woken up wrapped up in the scent and heat of him.

The second thing I notice is Fallon looks furious, staring me down with fire in his gaze. “This is what you wanted to see?”

“Uh...yes?” I frown. What is he getting at?

Fallon spins around, arms spreading wide. His muscles pop and writhe under his skin, and he looks like a work of art. Across his back, a massive tattoo stretches over his shoulder blades and wraps around his ribs. Two snakes twist around an anatomically accurate black heart. Each snake scale is shaded to perfection, the heart dripping black blood from each severed artery.

It’s...beautiful. Unexpected and kind of dark, but beautiful. I knew he had a tattoo, but I never expected it would look like that.

“Look at it, Jen,” Fallon says, his voice losing its edge. “This is who I am.”

I frown. “You’re...tattooed?” I’m not seeing the issue. Personally, I have no interest in getting inked, but I don’t have a problem with them. Fallon’s is *hot*.

“I got this tattoo when I was eighteen. My dumb friends and I wanted to join a ‘brotherhood,’ as we called it.” Shirt still grasped in his clenched fist, he turns to face me. “A gang.” He snorts. “We weren’t the smartest kids on the block.”

“I think it’s kind of beautiful,” I tell him honestly.

“No, you don’t.”

My own shirt rasps against my skin as I cross my arms, anger flaring in my chest. I’m getting *real* sick of people telling me how I should feel and act. “Yes, I do.”

“Jen, I didn’t tell you about my past because I knew you’d think I was an ex-con loser—because that’s what I am. Right now you’re high on winning, achieving every goal you set for

yourself—as usual—so you can't see what's right in front of you. You can do better."

"Better than what?" I ask. "Better than you?"

"Don't play dumb, Jen. It isn't like you."

"It's an honest question, Fallon. Do you honestly think that a tattoo would turn me off so much that I'd want to end things between us?"

His eyes flare. "How about the knowledge that I went to prison for three years for aiding and abetting a robbery? From eighteen to twenty-one years old, I was locked up. How about the fact that the robbery was committed with a deadly weapon? Does that change what you think of me?"

My parents told me of his conviction earlier, but it still stuns me. I guess I was expecting him to have some sort of explanation.

Thoughts whirl in my head, but I can't quite seem to make words. I still feel the same way about Fallon. I still love him. I still want him to stay. I believe that people can change, and just because he made mistakes in his youth, it doesn't change that I know him to be a good man.

But why wouldn't he *tell* me?

Fallon must see the look on my face, because he shakes his head and pulls his shirt back on. "I'm going to make this easy on you, Jen. Move on. I know I will."

Then, with one bag grasped in each of his strong hands, Fallon walks past me without looking back. In the silence of the night, I hear his engine turn over, then fade in the distance. My eyes shift to the dresser, where my trophy gleams silver in the moonlight.

I may have won the prize, but I lost the only man I've ever wanted.

*Fallon*

**T**he only hotel in town is owned by the two biggest gossips I've ever met, so I end up sleeping in my car. Bleary-eyed, I pick up Nora at six o'clock in the morning, and we start to journey to Reno, Nevada.

The drive takes just over seven hours, the first three of which pass in complete silence. Nora has her own demons to battle as we head back to the home she's leaving behind, and my thoughts never stray far from Jen.

I saw the look on her face when I told her about my criminal conviction. I know she was judging me, seeing the real me for the first time.

I'm a felon. An ex-con. That's a fact that will never change.

When my sister and I stop for lunch after barely saying a dozen words to each other for hours, she stares at me from across the restaurant booth.

"What?" I bite out.

"You're surlier than usual. What's up? Aren't you all cashed-up with an extra fifty grand and a dream woman by your side?"

I just snort. "Something like that. You sure you want to move to Heart's Cove?"

Nora squares her shoulders. "Yes. I can't believe you ever left."

"Small towns can get stifling."

She frowns, searching my face. “Are you nervous about going back to Reno? Is that what this moodiness is about?”

Reno is where I got arrested. I might feel a bit apprehensive about going there, but I spent six months in Carson City this year, going to the Nevada State Prison three times a week to provide cooking lessons to the inmates. I’m not worried about being in Nevada.

I feel like shit because the woman I’m in love with will always be too good for me—and now she knows it too.

“Things don’t always work out for people like me, Nora,” I finally answer.

My sister stares at me for a beat, as if I’ve just spoken in a foreign language. “People like you?” She tilts her head. “What does that mean?”

“Criminals, Nora.” How hard is it to understand?

My sister starts laughing, then stops when she realizes I’m not. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“I went to *prison*.”

“Yeah, because that piece of shit Slim used *your* knife to rob a convenience store. You weren’t even there!”

“I still have a criminal record, don’t I?”

“Because the prosecutor knew you were a dumb, broke eighteen-year-old, and he pressured you to plead guilty!” Nora cries, throwing her arms out to the side. “Are you seriously blaming yourself for your time in prison?”

“You’ve seen the tattoo on my back,” I hiss. “You know I wasn’t an angel. I deserved to be in prison. It’s who I am.”

“You’re unbelievable.” My sister crosses her arms, jaw clenched. “You were in a gang for what, four milliseconds?” She scoffs. “Please. It wasn’t even a real gang! It was just a bunch of dumb kids smoking too much weed. The only gang you’re in is the Heart’s Cove Hotties—and that gang includes mostly elderly ladies who think it’s funny to urinate in each other’s gardens.”

“I see you’ve delved into the Dorothy-Agnes feud,” I note with a pop of the brow.

At that moment, the waitress comes to our table with our drinks. “A Diet Coke for the pretty lady,” she sing-songs. “And a water for the handsome gentleman.” Winking at me, the waitress doesn’t seem to notice the tension emanating from the two of us.

When she walks away, that fake customer-service smile still plastered on her face, my sister leans forward. “Fallon, you are *not* in the same league as Slim fucking Miller.”

Setting my jaw, I stare my sister down. “In the eyes of the law, I am. We were convicted of the same crime.”

“Yeah, and he served fifteen years while you served three. You think the judge didn’t know you had nothing to do with the robbery? He gave you the minimum possible sentence! And Slim’s been in and out of prison every few years since then.” She snorts, shaking her head. “Come on, Fallon. You can’t be serious.”

“You’re my sister, so of course you see me differently than the rest of the world.” I stare out the window, not wanting to see the incredulous look on my sister’s face. I can feel the frustration emanating from her on the other side of the booth.

“What about Jen?” Nora asks quietly.

Tension seizes my muscles. “What about her?”

“She didn’t seem to mind when she was launching herself into your arms at every opportunity.”

“That was before she knew about my criminal record.”

Nora’s quiet for a few moments. “You told her?”

“Her parents did. I confirmed what they found.” Shifting my gaze back to Nora, I give her a shrug. “She made it pretty fucking clear that she didn’t approve.”

“But you told her you weren’t even at the convenience store when Slim robbed it, right? You told her you pled guilty to something you didn’t do?”

“It was my knife.”

“Which Slim *stole* from you! The only reason the prosecutor was able to put pressure on you was because it was Dad’s knife and everyone knew you always carried it on you.” Nora blows out a breath, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. She lowers her gaze back to me. “You know, for a smart guy, you’re pretty fucking dumb sometimes.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

The sunny waitress floats back to the table with our food, which Nora and I eat in tense silence.

My sister is *wrong*. I have a criminal record. I did time in prison. Hell, I’m *still* connected to the prison system! Why else would I be teaching cooking classes to ex-cons? That’s not exactly in the same league as publishing a recipe book and winning every competition I ever enter.

Jen deserves better, and I deserve everything I got.

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WE MAKE it to Reno by dinnertime. I slow the Jeep down as we enter the city limits, and Nora directs me to her apartment even though I know every inch of this city. When we pull up outside, I let out a breath and follow her up the steps to her second-floor apartment.

Nora flicks on the lights. “Well, I’d better get started. I don’t have much, but it’ll still take me a while to pack up. You can either help or go hunt for our dinner.” She glances at me with her brow arched. “Since you’re still in a terrible mood, I vote you leave me alone and go get us some takeout.”

“Ever the diplomat.”

Nora grins, then waves me out the front door.

Instead of going to get takeout, I sit behind the wheel of my car and grit my teeth.

There’s somewhere I need to go. I drive through the familiar streets, noting all the things that have changed—and

all the things that haven't. When I get to my old neighborhood, my heart starts to thump.

According to Nora, Slim is still living in his parents' old house, which he inherited when they passed away. Driving onto his street, I look at the overgrown lawns and rundown houses in need of a lick of paint. Or a bulldozer. Tightness squeezes my throat and chest as I pull up outside Harvey "Slim" Miller's house.

I never thought I'd come back here. Never thought I'd face this man again—but he was harassing my sister, and that shit needs to stop.

So, stepping out of the Jeep, my leaden steps take me up the weed-infested path to the front door. Loud music thumps from within the walls of the house, with stained lace curtains hiding whatever's happening inside.

I ring the doorbell and wait, then finally pound my fist against the door.

Pulse hammering, I stand on the stoop and listen to the heavy footsteps approach the other side of the door. For the first time since I got out, I'm going to lay my eyes on the man who put me behind bars for three years.



*Jen*

All my plants survived the month, which is good, but Fallon left this morning, which is...less good.

*Terrible.* It's terrible. I feel like shit.

This morning I woke up in my apartment, feeling like a stranger in my own home. I would stuff my face with leftover pie, but when I checked the barn refrigerators, they were all gone. So I can't even pig out and eat my feelings.

Fallon is gone.

Fallon is a *felon*. What? Since when?

The day was spent wandering around my house, setting things right, checking my plants, and staring off into the distance wondering what the hell just happened. I also turn off my phone when my parents start incessantly calling. They told me they'd stay in town until I made a decision about Bernard, but then they ignored me when I said I'd already decided—and the answer was no.

I'm guessing the decision they're waiting on is for me to change my mind. They'll wait a long time.

As I cook up a couple of eggs for dinner, I stare at the pan, still reeling from Fallon's revelation.

Replaying our interaction makes me cringe. I reacted badly. I should have gone to him, assured him that I didn't care. But it felt like I was dealing with a wounded animal likely to lash out. Being neutral seemed like the better strategy. The more reasonable option.

God, why am I so bad at this? Did I miss the lessons in school that would've taught me to act like a normal, empathetic human being?

I don't care that Fallon went to prison. I've known him for over three years, and I've gotten to know who he is *now*. My parents told me he went to prison from age eighteen to age twenty-one. He got out of prison twenty-five years ago!

People change. Fallon isn't a criminal or even remotely violent in any way. I've seen him catch and release a huge, furry spider, for crying out loud. He nearly tamed a whole murder of murderous crows!

The smoke alarm starts blaring. I jump at the sound, splashing some oil from the pan onto the open flame of my gas stove. The whole pan goes up in flames, and I scream.

*Shitshitshit what do I do?*

Deep breath. Oil fire. Need to smother it.

I turn the burner off and scramble to find a lid that will fit my pan. I open the cabinet where I keep all my pots and pans neatly organized and curse when I see the jumbled mess inside. Did Nora not see the organization system I had?

Tearing drawers and cabinet doors off their hinges as the fire in the pan burns hotter, I finally remember I bought a fire blanket years ago and stuffed it in the back of my pantry. Rushing to grab it, I pull the tab and unfurl the blanket, then throw it over the incinerated eggs.

I slump down in my chair and lean my head against the wall. My lids slide shut, and the irrational desire to start sobbing wells up inside me. All I smell is smoke.

Why do I feel like crying? I've worked in kitchens for years. So I burned some eggs—who cares?

But a voice in my head tells me it isn't the fire that makes me want to cry. It's the fact that the one man who actually saw me for me is gone.

Rubbing the heels of my palms against my eyes, my mind flits to my conversation with Bernard.

Did I give him signs that I was interested?

I remember a cast dinner together a couple of weeks into the competition, when he complimented me on my chocolate cake recipe. I admit, I preened. I struggled with that particular recipe for weeks, toying with the leavening agents and flavor balance until I got a reliable, easy, but delicious recipe.

It's the type of recipe that seems deceptively simple, but is incredibly delicious and requires a bit of finesse. To have a world-renowned pastry chef compliment me for it made my chest warm with pride.

And there was Fallon's finger, making maddening shapes on my shoulder all the while. His thigh pressed up against mine. His big, broad body so close, my head spun.

Is it possible Bernard mistook my attraction to Fallon for attraction to *him*?

Groaning, I drop my head in my hands.

No wonder I haven't had a boyfriend. They're too much damn work. The male brain is an organ I don't think I'll ever figure out.

Pounding on the door draws me out of my eddying thoughts. I drag myself to the door and check the peephole, then brace myself for a hurricane before opening.

"She lives!" Simone exclaims, then sniffs. "Is something burning?"

"I had an accident in the kitchen," I explain.

Simone immediately puts the back of her hand to my forehead. "No fever. You sure you're okay?"

I roll my eyes. "I've burned things before, Simone." I open the door wider to let everyone in.

"We brought reinforcements," Fiona says, jerking her thumb to Candice and Trina behind me. "But first, you need to tell us everything about last night. You never came back after you went out looking for Fallon."

Trina lifts a bag. “We were thinking we could get you all dressed up and looking like a million bucks, then go to the Grove.” The Cedar Grove is a bar just outside the town limits. Mac’s father, Hamish, owns the joint.

Candice wiggles her eyebrows. “You could invite Fallon.”

“We’re not done celebrating your win!” Simone bustles into my apartment, then stops, gaping at all the greenery. She glances at Candice. “You weren’t exaggerating.”

Letting them all inside, I scratch my head. “Fallon left with Nora this morning.”

Silence crashes down on us.

Fiona’s the first to speak. “He left?”

“We, um, kind of had a disagreement last night,” I say.

All eyes are on me. I squirm.

“What happened, Jen?” Simone prompts.

With a deep breath, I let everything out. I start by telling them about Bernard again, going over our conversation from beginning to end, and am rewarded with more outraged gasps. Fiona assures me that I didn’t lead anyone on—he was the one who pushed himself on me. Then I tell them about my parents revealing that Fallon went to prison for robbery, and that a deadly weapon was used in the crime.

Everyone blinks as they stare at me.

Candice glances at Fiona. “Did we know that?”

Fiona chews her lip. “We hired Fallon because he’d worked for Wes’s parents.” Wes’s parents used to own the café space when they were alive. “I gave him the paperwork, but I’d have to check if it asks about criminal records. He never mentioned it.”

“Either way,” Simone interjects, “Fallon was a model employee. You said this happened when he was eighteen? I mean, shit, I should have been arrested for a hundred things when I was a dumb teenager.”

“Yeah, but did you rob a convenience store at knifepoint?” Candice asks quietly.

Simone pinches her lips.

“There’s got to be an explanation,” Trina says, her bag of clothes and makeup forgotten. She’s the resident style icon, and I’m secretly glad I won’t be getting a makeover today. All I want to do is crawl under a mountain of blankets and go to sleep for a hundred years.

“If there is, I haven’t heard it.” I slump onto a sofa and kick my legs up.

Fiona heads to the kitchen, and I hear her rummaging around—probably for tea. She’s a tea fiend. I almost call out to tell her that I only have chai, but the words stay stuck in my throat.

A couple of years ago, Fallon started making me tea fairly regularly. It was before the kiss, before the messiness, before everything. I’m not sure I have it in me to drink the spiced tea now—it’ll only remind me of Fallon.

“Well,” Candice says with a long sigh, “let’s talk about something happier. What are you going to do with your prize money? And when can we display your trophy?”

“When the last episode airs in three months.”

“And will you be opening your own bakery, or what?” Simone smiles at me. “We know you’ve got big things planned.”

I stare at my hands for a moment, because the truth is, right now I just feel tired. The thought of opening a bakery just seems redundant when I could keep working at Four Cups. All the reasons I wanted to win seem so...small.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I finally answer. “I think I might just take it easy for a bit.”

The girls exchange loaded looks. That’s not the type of thing I usually say.

Candice pats my knee. “Okay, honey.”

Conversation moves on, and before I know it there's food and tea and water being presented to me. The girls make sure I'm fed and comfortable, then leave with stern orders to get a good night's sleep.

When they're gathering their things to leave, I still have remnants of feelings that I don't deserve their care and affection. What have I ever done to get friends like these?

Candice must see something in my expression, because she walks up to me and squeezes my arm.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" I blurt.

Candice tilts her head. "You've been my best friend for decades, Jen."

"Yeah, but...why?"

Her eyes are steady on mine. "Well, you're loyal and caring. You're reliable and funnier than you realize. Supportive. You're great! Even if you are a logical little weirdo."

I frown at the last sentence.

My friend just grins. "I'm just telling you I love you—exactly the way you are. I'm fully supportive of you taking some time off, of figuring out what you want to do. If you don't want to start your own bakery, then don't. Hire someone to help out at Four Cups. Take a breather. You deserve it."

"Once Fallon comes back and begs you to take him back, you should take two weeks or so to hole up in some secluded resort somewhere so you can sex each other to within an inch of your lives," Simone suggests.

I just roll my eyes. "I think you mean *if* Fallon comes back. Big *if*." As in, this time he's probably gone for good.

Didn't I always know this would happen?

"He'll come back," Fiona says, slinging her purse over her shoulder. "You should have seen his face when he walked into Four Cups and asked for you after six months away. Looked like a man starved."

They say their goodbyes and leave me to myself, but their words rattle around my brain. Everyone seems so sure that Fallon will come back and want to see me...but what if he doesn't?

*Fallon*

**S**lim looks *old*. His face is haggard, blotched with red, with yellowing eyes. When he grins at the sight of me, I see his browned teeth, a few of which are missing. He's still skinny as hell, though.

It's shocking, really. Would I look like this if I had spent my entire adult life in and out of prison?

"The great Fallon Richter finally decided to grace me with his presence!" He guffaws, opening the door wider. "Come in. Drink?"

"I'm good," I answer, but Slim still heads for the fridge to grab a beer.

I catch a can against my chest when he tosses it, then nod in thanks. His kitchen is filthy. After working in professional kitchens for years—and spending the last few years alongside perma-clean Jennifer Newbank—this space makes my skin crawl.

There are old, crusted bowls and plates piled high in the sink. The same lace curtains as out front, gone brown with age, hang limp in the kitchen window. There's brown sludge in the corner between the counter and the backsplash, and worn, ripped linoleum over the floor.

My apartment in Heart's Cove was nothing like this place. Maybe I'm not like Slim at all. We came from the same place...but we've grown into very different men.

Slim belches, then cracks his own beer open. "Long time no see, brother."



The word *brother* rankles, but I hide it behind a sip of beer. “My sister told me you were looking for me. I don’t appreciate you harassing her.”

Slim leans against the kitchen counter, his wrinkled, stained shirt riding up at the front. He nods. “Straight to business. You haven’t changed a bit.”

Suddenly, I feel worn out. I’m on edge in this space, worried about Slim and his cronies talking to my family, and my heart hurts from missing Jen. With a sigh, I put my beer down and spread my arms. “What do you want, Slim?”

“I invite you into my home, I give you a drink, and this is how you speak to me? Come on, man. I want to catch up!”

“I’ve got shit to do.” I cross my arms.

Slim holds my gaze for a moment, then laughs. “All right, all right.” He gestures to a rickety table and chairs. “Have a seat.”

He throws himself onto a wobbly chair with missing braces between the legs, and I sit much more gingerly on the seat across from him, half-expecting it to collapse. Slim slurps his beer and burps behind his fist again, and it takes every ounce of patience not to get up and walk right out.

But I need to know why he was haranguing my sister—and I need to make sure he’s not going to do it again.

Finally, Slim speaks. “I have a business proposition for you.”

“Not interested.” I make to stand, but Slim puts his hand out.

He waits until I’ve lowered myself back down onto my seat before speaking. “I heard from a few boys on the inside that you were visiting the Nevada State Prison earlier this year. Giving them some cooking lessons and shit.”

I’m not quite sure what the “and shit” portion of that sentence means, but I still nod. “Yeah. So? You got a problem with that?”

Slim throws his hands up and laughs again. “Nah, man. I think it’s good. Giving back and all that.” He leans forward. “But you know you could be making a killing doing that, right?”

“I could be making a killing teaching convicts how to cook?” I blink. “I’m not following.”

Slim snorts. “Brother. Not for the cooking lessons. For the supplies you’d bring with you to the classes.” He stares into my eyes, his meaning clear.

Slim wants me to be a drug mule to bring gear into the prison.

In that moment, faced with the idiot who caused me to go to prison, I feel a moment of clarity. Slim has wasted his life. His body is a broken husk, and his house is a contamination zone that has *Biohazard* stamped onto every filthy inch. The man in front of me is stuck in a cycle of crime—a cycle that I escaped.

I’m nothing like him.

We were convicted of the same crime. I, apparently, aided and abetted *his* robbery. When we were eighteen, our criminal record was almost identical—but we aren’t the same men now. Maybe we never were the same, even as teens.

I pled guilty, but I never felt like it was right. The prosecutor was a bull of a man with big, meaty fists he loved to lean against the steel table in the interrogation room. He knew the knife was mine—had irrefutable proof. He had photos of me with the knife, and witness testimonies that proved the knife had been my father’s before it was passed down to me.

In Nevada, someone who aids and abets a crime can be charged with the same offense as the principal. Robbery carries a sentence of two to fifteen years. Use a deadly weapon like a knife? Tack on another one to twenty.

The prosecutor told me he’d ask for the maximum for me unless I pled out.

I was afraid of spending my entire life in prison, and I let the prosecutor intimidate me. I pled guilty to a robbery that happened when I was at home in bed. The only thing I did wrong was befriend Slim and let myself be influenced by the appeal of a gang. I was a kid. I was fatherless. I was *hurting*.

For the first time in my life, what Nora was saying earlier today sinks in. My criminal record doesn't define me. I moved on, made something of myself—something humble, sure. But I've lived an honest life.

Have I been punishing myself for decades for something that wasn't my fault? Have I been holding myself up to an impossible standard?

Taking a deep breath, I look Slim in the eyes. "I won't bring anything to the prison for you. If I decide to give more cooking classes to inmates, it'll be so they can make an honest living when they get out. Not to give addicts their fix."

Slim's smile fades. His chair creaks as he leans back, the linoleum groaning underfoot.

I stand, turning for the door, then pause. This guy sent people to Heart's Cove to look for me. They crept through the woods, watched me with Jen, went through her stuff. I played it off at the time, but I know someone messed with her clothes when we were in the guesthouse. If that happens again, I won't hesitate to go on the offensive.

"One more thing." I face him. "If you ever send anyone to my home again, I'll make sure they know they're not welcome. Stay away from my sister. Stay away from my woman. Stay out of my life, Slim. I'm not your fucking brother."

Slim's brows arch for a moment, then lower over narrowed eyes. "Understood." I make it to the front door before Slim calls out again, standing at the other end of the hallway. "I'll admit I asked Nora to contact you, Fallon. But I never sent anyone after your woman. Shit, I didn't even know you had one." He holds my gaze until I open the door and walk out.

My mind is spinning so much that I don't even realize I've driven all the way back to Nora's place. I park outside, then realize I never picked up any dinner. Sighing, I lean against the headrest and close my eyes, replaying my conversation with Slim from beginning to end.

I'm nothing like him. I'm not sure I ever was.

A weight lifts off my shoulders, and for the first time in decades I feel like I can breathe.

One thing bothers me, though. If Slim didn't send anyone to Heart's Cove, then who was creeping around our guesthouse?

I jump when someone knocks on the car window. Nora opens the passenger door, then makes an exaggerated show of looking around the car. "Where's dinner?"

I grimace. "Didn't know what you wanted to eat."

She frowns. "So you came back? Ever heard of a phone?"

"Shut up, Snotface."

Her smile lights her face. "And he's back! Did you do some soul-searching in the two hours you were gone?"

I nod. "Yeah. I realized you were right. I shouldn't punish myself for my criminal record."

Nora rolls her eyes. "What a revelation," she says sarcastically, then climbs into the car. "Come on. I know a good Thai place not far from here."

When her door slams shut, I turn the key in the ignition and let my lips slide into a smile. If I can forgive myself for my mistakes, is it possible that Jen would understand, too? That she would see me as more than my criminal record? Is it possible that her father is *wrong* about me...and maybe I *am* worthy of a woman like her?

Nora tells me of her plans to pick up some boxes tomorrow. She says she's rented a trailer that we can hitch to the jeep for the drive back, and I'm to pick it up in the morning.

“How long do you think it’ll take to pack up your apartment? Have you spoken to your landlord?”

“All sorted. My lease ends in a month anyway, and he was giving me stink so I just said to keep the last month’s rent and not bother me. Couple hundred bucks is worth it to start over.” She hums, then arches a brow. “If you stop driving around aimlessly and actually help me pack, I think we could be on the road by the end of the week.”

Less than a week. I can do a week. It’ll feel like an eternity, but I can do it. By next Sunday evening I could have Jen in my arms, begging her to forgive me for taking off.

I nod. “Sure. But there’s something I need to do tomorrow first. Need a few hours to head to Truckee.”

Nora’s eyes glimmer at the sound of the city just on the other side of the Nevada-California border. My little sister gives me a proud nod. “That, I’ll allow.”

*Fallon*

**T**he sun is already promising a scorching day by the time I enter the retirement village located in Truckee, California. Small, single-story houses line the street, all with accessible ramps and handrails as far as the eye can see.

I scan the house numbers, my stomach clenching when I find my destination. It's the first time I've been here.

Glancing at the time, I suck in a long breath. It's just after nine o'clock in the morning, which means my mother will definitely be awake. She's always been an early riser.

So, before I can chicken out, I exit my car and make my way up the gently sloping path to the front door. The seconds that pass between my ringing the doorbell and the door actually opening are excruciating—but within moments, my mother's shocked face appears on the other side of the threshold.

My mother is seventy-two, but she looks ten years younger. Her waist-length hair is mostly white now, although streaked with black, and knotted in her customary single, thick braid. She's wearing an old sweatshirt with my high school's name on it, furry slippers, and tan shorts.

Her mouth opens, then closes. She gapes.

Oh, God. This was a bad idea. I haven't seen my mother in person in nearly a decade. Ever since I got out of prison, our relationship has been hanging on by a thread. If I'm honest, once she gave me that ultimatum and I walked out of her house, I was too ashamed to ask for forgiveness.

Which means it's been *decades* since we saw eye to eye.

What if I misread the situation? What if coming here was a mistake? She could be totally done with me, not wanting a relationship at all. She could slam the door in my face and tell me to leave her property.

I scrub the back of my neck. "Hey, Ma. Hope this isn't a bad time."

A high-pitched keening sound comes from my mother, then she launches herself at me. Her arms wrap around my neck as she drags me down, peppering my face with kisses. Her fingers clutch my neck, my hair, her slight body trembling.

She smells like she always has: that scent of laundry detergent, fragrance-free lotion, and Mom. A thousand memories assail me as soon as I inhale, my vision going blurry with moisture.

"Mom—"

"My baby is here." She smacks a kiss onto my cheek then pulls back, her eyes roaming over my face, my body. "You've been working out." She squeezes my shoulders. "So strong. Last time I saw you, you looked so tired and drawn. You've put on muscle."

That was ten years ago. I gulp. "Can I come in?"

"Of course. Yes, yes. Come in." She leads the way inside, closing the door behind me. There's a bench next to the door. My eyes land on a shoehorn with a handle long enough to reach my hip. My mother follows my gaze and snorts. "I'm an old woman now, Fallon. I can't even bend down to put my own shoes on."

"You look great, Ma."

She just waves me into the kitchen, heading for the gurgling coffee machine.

My brows jump. "You never used to drink coffee."

"An ex-manfriend got me hooked on it."

“Manfriend?” Why haven’t I heard about this?

My mother throws me a glance over her shoulder that says, *Don’t even start with me, boy*. My lips twitch. She pours a couple of cups of coffee and sits down at the small, round breakfast table across from me. Reaching her hand across the table, she squeezes my fingers.

For the second time in two days, I’m sitting across from a skeleton from my past. This time, though, I want to be here.

“What a start to the day,” she says on a sigh. “I’m so happy to see you, Fallon.”

All my fears evaporate. I’ve avoided my mother for years. I thought she was disappointed in me, ashamed of my past—but there’s none of that in her gaze now.

My revelation last night at Slim’s house comes rushing back to me. Have I been punishing myself for my mistakes all these years? Did I push my mother away not because *she* was ashamed of *me*, but because *I* was ashamed of *myself*?

Bright eyes study my face before my mother leans back and brings her cup to her lips. “So, who is she?”

I cough into my fist. “What?”

“You look well-rested, your shoulders are back, and those shadows in your eyes aren’t as dark. You met a woman, fell in love, and she made you realize that you’re worth something.”

My eyes hold my mother’s for a beat, then I huff out a laugh. “Well...yeah. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh?”

“I’m here to apologize, Ma. I was a shitty son and I turned my back on you. I should have called you more, visited. I was only a couple of hours away in Heart’s Cove for the past few years, but I never even came to visit.”

My mother gives me a sad smile. She reaches across the table to squeeze my hand again. “You’re here now, Fallon. That’s all that matters.”



“I’ve been so stupid. I’ve pushed so many people away because of how I felt about myself.”

Her grin turns wry. “Well, I guess that means the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Huh?” I tilt my head. My hand plays with the bottom of my mug, mind still reeling that I’m actually here and that my mother seems happy to see me.

“I had a falling out with my parents too, you know. I was a second-generation kid from an immigrant family with very conservative parents, and I married for love.” Her lips curl, eyes faraway. “They didn’t approve of my American husband, didn’t approve of my children having American names, didn’t approve of a lot of things I did.”

“I don’t remember your parents at all.”

“You only met them once when you were about eighteen months old,” she tells me with a shake of her head. “I had a huge fight with my parents about how I was raising you and who I was married to, so I vowed to do it without their help. Even after your father died, I never reached out again.” She sips her coffee, arching a brow. “So I guess you’ve got one over me. You’re a bigger person than I was.”

“I didn’t know any of that.”

“I was embarrassed and angry. I thought I could do everything by myself, but evidently that didn’t work out.” My mother snorts. “Look what happened with you. Maybe if we’d had a support system, things would have turned out differently.”

My chest clenches. “Ma, you had nothing to do with me going to prison.”

“Didn’t I? What if I’d been around more? If I had asked for help, I could have gotten you into counseling when your father died. I could have been at home instead of working myself to the bone. I could have saved you from ever meeting those boys.”

The pain in my mother’s face cracks my heart right open. I never knew she blamed herself for all that. Frowning, I

swallow past a lump in my throat and say, “Is that why you didn’t push it when I told you not to come visit me?”

“I’ve been blaming myself for what happened to you for decades, Fallon. I’m the one who gave you your father’s knife.”

“That fucking knife.” I snort and stare at the ceiling, then clamp my mouth shut, waiting for my mother to scold me for swearing.

But she just huffs. “That fucking knife is right.”

A surprised laugh falls from my lips, and pretty soon the two of us are laughing in earnest. When I quiet down, I shake my head. “Ma, you can’t blame yourself for what I did. I just realized yesterday that maybe I shouldn’t blame myself as much as I have been either. It happened, I did my time, and it’s in the past.”

Her eyes glimmer. “Hmm. So, no more deflection. Who is she?”

Another laugh escapes my lips, and it’s like a balm on my soul. I haven’t laughed with my mother in years—maybe not since I was a kid. But we’re here, sharing a coffee, and there’s no rancor.

What if I had done this two decades ago? I’ve wasted so many years stuck in my own head, in my own pain. I could have had a good life with my family all around me, but I chose to walk alone.

Just like my mother did.

Maybe it’s time for me to stand up and break that cycle. To actually forgive myself for my past and rise above it. I can’t bear the thought of losing Jen because I’m too bullheaded to get over my issues.

I clear my throat. “Her name is Jennifer. Jen. She’s a genius, Ma. You’d love her. Her brain is like this intricate machine that looks at the world in ways I’ve never even considered.” I grin. “She likes your masala chai recipe.”

“Uh-uh, Fallon.” My mom slurps her coffee. “She likes *your* recipe.”

My chest puffs, lips tugging. “Yeah. I guess she does.”

“So, why isn’t she here with you?”

My thumb runs over the grain of the wood table. “Well, that’s the thing. I think I might have messed up, but I’m not really sure how to fix it.”

My mother lifts a finger, gets up to grab the coffee carafe to top us up, then sits back down. She nods. “Tell me everything.”

*Jen*

A familiar key slides into the guesthouse door, and I place my bag inside, shoulders dropping with a sigh. When I told the girls I was taking a week to myself, they were very encouraging.

When I told them I'd be staying at the Heart's Cove Manor Retreat, I got a lot of funny looks—but I like this place! I have good memories, the guesthouse is comfortable, and it's far enough that it feels like a vacation without being too far to be inconvenient.

Plus, I can still grab breakfast from Four Cups in the morning.

I'm a creature of habit. I'm not Iliana; I don't need to go jet-setting all over the world to feel like I'm getting a holiday. And maybe I feel like I need some closure...or an action plan in case Fallon comes back.

I've been able to avoid my parents for the past few days, and my hope is that they'll give up and leave Heart's Cove and let me live in peace. Hopefully by the time Fallon comes back, they'll be out of my hair.

The cot is gone. I sit on the edge of the bed and lie back to stare at the ceiling, blowing out a breath.

I spent a couple of days in Four Cups, prepping enough baked goods for the week I'll be here. I bribed Candice to take care of my plants until early next week, and I visited the library and Agnes's bookstore to stock up.

Turning my head to glance at my bags, I lift myself up onto my elbows. Might as well get started.

I've got research to do.

The first book I pull out of the bag is a thick hardback with a grizzled man's face on the front. *Life After Incarceration* is emblazoned in bold, yellow letters, and I run my fingers over the text. It's as good a place to start as any.

Curling up under the blankets, I read late into the night, using sticky tabs to keep track of insightful passages that I want to return to. I fall asleep for a few hours when dawn starts lightening the sky, then head to Four Cups for a croissant and some tea.

It's not as good as Fallon's tea, but it'll do.

Then I'm right back at the guesthouse, dragging a chair to the front porch to sun my legs while I power through book after book on prison, the legal system, the psychological effects of incarceration, and how to care for someone once they get out of prison.

It's been more than two decades since Fallon got out, but he still bears the scars. I intend to mend them for him.

A crow hops into view, its head tilting as if in question. *Where's my food?*

"Well, lucky for you, crow, I came prepared." Reaching down, I pull out a bag of bird seed. This is probably a bad idea—I can just imagine flocks of birds harassing tourists for food—but it makes me think of Fallon. For once in my life, I want to do something that might not be entirely logical.

So, I feed the birds. Sue me.

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ON THE THIRD day of my sabbatical, I get an email notification that my payment from the competition has been disbursed. Confused when I see the amount, I call Gus.

"Hey, champ," he says. "Still basking in your win?"

“Uh, about that,” I say. “The email I just got says the full hundred grand was disbursed to me. Why wasn’t that split between me and Fallon?”

“He didn’t tell you?” Gus asks.

I frown. “Tell me what?”

“He insisted on a clause that gave the prize money to you before signing the contract. Everyone thought it was awfully romantic, and it was one of the reasons I was rooting for the two of you.”

I blink, throat tight. I remember his noncommittal response when I mentioned we’d get fifty grand each. Fallon never agreed with that. This whole time, he planned on giving me the prize?

Emotion swirls inside me. My eyes grow moist as my breaths turn sharp. Fallon never entered the competition just for the money.

He did it entirely for me.

“I’m not sure what to say,” I finally manage.

“I think you could start by thanking him,” Gus replies on a laugh. “Is he there with you? I’m assuming the two of you are still celebrating your win.”

“Uh...” I stare at the familiar walls of the guesthouse. “No. He’s not here.”

“Well, when he gets home, I’m sure the two of you can discuss it. I have to go now, but I’ll talk to you later.”

We hang up, and I sit on the bed, dazed. There’s a book sitting on my thighs, my cell phone still gripped in my hands.

Fallon participated in the *Boss Baker* competition for *me*. Entirely for me. Signed off on his prize money because he thought I deserved it more.

I don’t know whether to be upset or flattered. All I know is I want to see him. Kiss him. Talk to him—and tell him that he’s not a loser or an ex-con or a felon who doesn’t deserve good things. He’s Fallon, and he’s perfect.

But when my fingers hover over his phone number, I can't quite bring myself to tap the screen. What would I say? How can you have a conversation like that over the phone?

Looking at my stack of books, I blow out a breath. I'll finish my research, come up with an action plan, *then* I'll call him—once I know how to approach things the right way.

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ANOTHER FEW DAYS PASS, and on Sunday I end up heading into Heart's Cove to visit with the girls. I spend the afternoon in the library above the Four Cups Café, laughing with my friends and feeling more at home in this town than I ever have. When the sun starts to set, I push myself to my feet and say goodbye to the girls.

"Are you heading back?" Candice asks, glancing up from her phone.

I nod. "I'm tired."

Her fingers fly over her screen. "Okay. Drive safe!"

"Next time you take a vacation, Jen, promise me you'll take an *actual* vacation. Like, outside of the town limits." Iliana arches a brow. "I can recommend some places for you to visit."

Pausing at the door as I hike my purse over my shoulder, I glance at my friend's sister and give her a smile. "That sounds good, Lily. I'd like that."

And it's the truth. Because I know there *will* be a next time. I'll be taking more vacations from now on.

The drive back to the Heart's Cove Manor Retreat is full of elongating shadows and pastel skies I spy through the gaps in the trees. Tonight, I'll finish the last book in my collection and come up with an action plan. Then I'll call Fallon and tell him to get his butt back here.

But when I pull into the parking lot, my heart jumps. There's a familiar Jeep parked in one of the spaces.

Fallon's Jeep.

He came back? I creep closer, glancing in the jeep to see one of his sweatshirts balled up in the back seat. *He came back!*

Is that who Candice was texting so frantically earlier?

*Fallon's here!*

I suck in a breath, ready to sprint inside the main farmhouse, then I freeze. I haven't formulated a plan yet. Shit! I need to make him understand that I don't care about his past. I like him for who he is *now*.

Gus's words come back to me. I could start by thanking him—and not just for the prize money, because I fully intend on splitting it. No, I can thank him for being there for me for the past month. For putting me in contact with Amanda and making my recipe book a reality. For being a steady presence at my side during many a baking meltdown.

When I hurry along the path, I'm surprised to see lights on inside the barn. One of the big doors is cracked open, and I drift closer. The familiar kitchen islands are still set up, with refrigerators lining the back wall. I inhale the scent of the room, memories of the past month flooding my head. I fell head over heels with Fallon in this room.

Maybe we can take cooking classes together here. Maybe we can *teach* cooking classes together here.

The shape of a man is bent over a refrigerator on the far wall, his body silhouetted in the light.

"Fallon?" I call out, easing my way inside the door. "What are you doing?"

The man straightens, and it's not Fallon at all. He turns, and the first thing I notice is that he's shirtless. The second thing I notice is smears of something on his chest...blood?

No.

*Pie.* The man has cherry pie all over his chest and mouth, like a toddler, a chunk clutched in his hand.



Then I register his face.

“*Guillaume?*”

“*Ma chérie,*” he croons, stumbling closer to me. “Finally you came to me.”

Cherry pie is smeared all over his lips, his chin, dripping onto his bare chest, as if he stuffed his face right into the pie.

*What the fuck?*

“What are you doing here?” I’m frozen on the spot, heart racing.

My old boss takes another step toward me. “I’ve been waiting for you to realize we belong together. I know you love me.”

Uh...

Oh, *hell* no. Another one? Two in one week? Is there something in the water? Why are these men now obsessed with me, thinking I feel the same way? I haven’t had a real boyfriend for two decades, but all of a sudden these men are coming out of the woodwork trying to get with me? What the hell is going on?

Is it the money? The trophy?

And the one man that I actually want lied about his past! Or at the very least, lied by omission....and then he left!

My limbs are shaking. Guillaume takes another step closer, and I throw a hand up. “Stop right there.”

“I’ve watched you this past month, Jennifer. Watched you with that big, bumbling oaf. You deserve better. He’s finally gone, and you’re here with me. You’re just as beautiful as I remembered in our kitchen. I know you’ve missed the long nights we spent together, cooking and cleaning until the sun came up.”

“Actually, no,” I answer. “I don’t miss those nights at all.”

He chuckles. “You’re so sweet when you lie to me.”

“I’m not lying. Come one step closer and I’ll call the police. You shouldn’t even be here. Whose pie is that? Did you steal someone’s food from a cooking class?”

“You deserved to win. This is your pie. I’ve hidden it here all week, but I couldn’t resist finally eating it.”

I stare at the smears of cherry all over his body. “I can see that.”

He comes closer, and my eyes are drawn to a strip of pink near his waist. I inhale sharply, eyes bugging. “Are you... Are you wearing my undies?”

That day I thought someone had messed with my stuff... that was *Guillaume? He’s wearing my underwear?*

Breath fills my lungs, horror floods my system, and I scream.

*Fallon*

I've got two gifts to give to Jen, which will hopefully help mend whatever went wrong between us. The first gift is contained in a basket dangling from my fingers, and the second is housed safely in my pocket. My mother insisted I take it when I left her house, and now it sits like a weight against my leg.

I've just finished knocking on the guesthouse door and am waiting with bated breath to hear Jen's footsteps when I hear...a scream? What was that? An alarm or a whistle of some kind?

Then I hear the crows.

It starts with just one bird cawing, soon to be joined by too many to count. The racket gets so loud I step out from under the porch, only to see dozens of birds flapping near the barn.

What the...?

Frowning, I put the basket down near the door and step away from the cabin. Glancing up, I see the black birds going wild in the sky. One flies above the trees toward me, alighting on a branch. It caws loudly before flapping its wings to circle overhead.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I yell at the bird, half expecting it to answer.

Glancing over my shoulder at the dark guesthouse, I exhale and walk onto the path. These fucking birds. Jen was right; I never should have fed them. I just wanted to make Jen laugh, and look what I've done. I've created a monster—a

deafening murder of crows that goes ballistic on a quiet Sunday evening.

But...I've never seen the birds like this before, and over the past month, I've spent a lot of time feeding them.

And I *did* hear a scream—or was it another bird? An animal?

My feet take me down the path, through the trees, and into the clearing. Glancing up at the sky, I watch the birds flapping and cawing like I've never seen before.

What the hell is going on?

Then I see movement. Through the windows of the darkened farmhouse, I see a man—

And Jen. She's rushing for the door, her face panicked.

Adrenaline dumps into my veins, and before I know it, I'm sprinting. I rush around the side of the barn and tear the door open so hard, one of the hinges snaps clean off.

Jen stumbles out, eyes wild. "He's wearing my undies!" she cries.

Protective instinct roars inside me. There's a man in the room stumbling after Jen, and he needs to fucking go *down*.

I rush him, so full of fury that I'm ready to rip his head off with my bare hands. Pop it off like a champagne cork. Right before I tackle him to the ground, I register his face.

Guillaume, then man who accosted me the day of the finale. What the hell is he doing here? Why is he covered in pie? Why isn't he wearing a shirt?

The sight of Jen's undies sticking out from his pants blankets my vision in red. I wrap him in a bear hug and slam him on the ground, a primal yell tearing out of my throat. I reach for something—anything—and manage to find a metal bowl.

The clang of the bowl hitting Guillaume's head rings out in the space, but does little to stop him squirming.

He snaps his teeth at me, and I just manage to avoid them by jerking my head back. Flipping him over, I grab his wrists and try to subdue him, but he bucks like a man crazed.

“The cops are on the way!” Jen yells, phone in hand. She rushes around the room, producing some kitchen twine. With shaking hands, she wraps his wrists as I do my best to hold the man down. He’s speaking gibberish, yelling things as his body writhes.

It’s not until his wrists and ankles are bound that he quiets down, panting, trussed up like a pig with his face down on the floor. Jen slaps a hand to her forehead, eyes wild.

The sound of sirens in the distance makes her shoulders relax. She turns to me and wraps her arms around my waist so tight I can feel her heart thumping against me.

Then she pulls away. “I’ll go direct the cops.” She points a finger at my face. “Don’t you dare go anywhere in the meantime. I need to talk to you.” She heads for the door, then whirls back to face me. Planting her hands on my cheeks, she drags me down and kisses me so hard our teeth click. Then she’s running out the door and toward the parking lot.

Dazed, I turn back to the creep on the floor. He’s struggling against his bonds, the rough twine already slicing his wrists. I feel no sympathy as my eyes move to the pink material poking from under his pants.

It wasn’t Slim’s cronies sneaking around us at all. It was this fucking guy.

The cops burst through the door and instinctively, I stiffen. But they rush to the man on the ground, handcuff him, and drag him away.

Then Jen and I are giving statements to the police about what just happened. It takes forever. I get a lot of weird looks when I mention the crows alerting me something was wrong, but what can I say? That’s what happened.

I’m still keyed up by the time the police leave. Jen watches them walk away, her arms hugging her middle. When I make a

move to go to her, three familiar faces rush toward us from the parking lot.

“Jennifer!” Mrs. Newbank cries. “Oh, you’re okay!”

Mr. Newbank whirls on me. “This is your fault. I *told* you to stay away from my daughter.”

“You *what*?” Jen straightens, jaw slack. “You told Fallon to stay away from me? What the fuck, Dad?”

“Don’t speak to your father that way,” her mother chides. She steps aside, and who walks out from behind her?

Bernard. Fucking. Franco.

A growl rumbles through my chest before I can stop myself.

Jen glances at me, her chin held high, shoulders pushed back. She turns to her parents and Bernard. “Mom, Dad, Bernard. Thank you for stopping by. As you can see, I’m safe and Fallon is safe, so your concern isn’t necessary. I’m tired, though, so I’ll call you tomorrow if you want details about what happened.”

“Who was that guy?” Mr. Newbank demands, ignoring Jen’s speech. “Is he from Fallon’s gang?”

“I’m not in a fucking gang,” I spit.

Jen’s father just snorts. “Right. That’s not what your criminal record says.”

“Dad, that’s enough.” Jen puts up a hand. “You can’t speak to Fallon like that.”

He puffs his chest. “Jen—”

“Dad. Stop.” Jen’s voice is hard as steel. She turns to Bernard. “If you’re here to invite me to Paris, save your breath. I’m not going with you. We didn’t have a connection. I’m never going to date you.”

Bernard scoffs, eyes darting to me. “Is this because of Fallon? Jen, you can do so much better.”

I cringe, waiting for Jen to deflect. But she faces Bernard with a snarl on her lips. “There is no one—*no one*—better than Fallon. Goodnight to you all.” She starts to turn, then pauses. “Feel free to leave Heart’s Cove at your earliest convenience. I’ll talk to you when whoever’s birthday is up next. Or the holidays. Or never. I don’t care.”

Her mother splutters as her father protests. Bernard gapes like he just got slapped.

Jen ignores them all. She faces me and extends a hand. “Fallon, take my hand and take me home.”

This woman. My heart cracks right there in my chest, and I cross the distance between us. In a familiar movement, my arm slides around her shoulder, and everything feels right again. We walk far enough that the trees hide us from our audience and Jen pauses, wrapping both her arms around my middle. When she turns to snuggle into my chest, I let out a breath.

This is perfection. Having Jen in my arms makes something click inside me, like the last piece of a jigsaw slotting into place. With her head nestled under my chin, I pull her close and wrap my arms around her. We stand like that for a few long moments, inhaling each other, letting the tension of the last couple of hours seep out of our bodies.

Then Jen pulls away and frowns at me. “You left.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry.”

She bunches her lips to the side. “I suppose you *did* come back. And you sort of saved me from my creepy, stalker ex-boss. And you’ve been kind of amazing for the past month.” She glances at the sky. “And did those crows sense something was wrong? I’ve never seen them react like that.”

“Maybe they’re loyal because we fed them for a month.”

Jen’s brows tug together. “I’ll have to look up if that’s even possible. But if it is, then I should definitely be thanking you.”

My lips twitch. “So the crows tip the scales in my favor?” I can just imagine the pros and cons list Jen is making in her mind, trying to figure out if she’s happy I’m here or not.

She slides her gaze back to mine. “Only if you promise to stay the night.”

“That, I can do,” I answer. “Plus, I brought you something. I left it by the guesthouse door.”

She straightens, dropping her arms from my waist. “You did?”

I can’t resist catching her hand in mine as we turn down the familiar beaten dirt path. “I did.”

We walk in silence until the guesthouse comes into view, then I pull away from her to grab the basket. I present it to her and watch as she pulls away the tea towel I laid over the contents.

Tilting her head, Jen picks up one of the croissants in the basket and inspects it. Her eyes flick to mine. “Croissants?”

“I felt the need to redeem myself.”

Her eyes glimmer as her lips curl. “You made these?” Jen’s smile widens. “You learned how to make croissants for me,” she says, almost to herself. Then she gets that focused look on her face as she rips the baked good open. “Good layers,” she says, inspecting. “Crisp on the outside, tender inside.” She pops a piece in her mouth and chews, nodding. “You used good butter.”

My lips twitch. “I did.”

“It’s good, Fallon,” she says, finally lifting her eyes to mine. “Really good.”

“Spent all week trying to get them right. My mom and sister think I’m crazy.”

Jen’s smile is like the first ray of sunlight after a never-ending storm. She places the pieces of her croissant back in the basket, then straightens and reaches for the door. “I spent all week thinking of you too,” she announces.

On the other side of the door, I find the guesthouse scattered with books. Each of them has color-coded tags throughout, dozens per tome. There’s a thick notebook and pen



on the nightstand. Jen makes a beeline for the journal, flipping it open to read the first page.

My eyes land on the title of the nearest book: *Psychology of a Prisoner*. Heart thundering, I grab it and flip it over to read the back, then open one of the tabs Jen must have put in it. It lands on a page that details the difficulty of starting your life over after a prison term.

Throat tight, I realize what Jen's been doing. She hasn't been judging me for my past; she's been trying to *understand* it. She never turned her back on me when she learned I'd been to prison. In Jen's typical rational way, she just set to work untangling the complicated strands of my past in a way that made sense to her.

Emotion clogs my throat. How could I ever think that she would look at me differently after learning about my incarceration? My past could never stand between us. When she asked me about my conviction, her reaction was one of shock, but not judgment. I thought she was pushing me away, but she was just trying to figure out how this puzzle piece fit into the whole.

"So," Jen says, consulting her notes, "I've read a dozen books so far, but I think it would help if I understood the intricacies of your case. Three years seems pretty short for robbery with a deadly weapon, based on everything I've read about Nevada law. My best guess, without going through your case notes, is that you pled guilty, but you weren't directly involved. You were so young, you know? Facing that kind of prison time must have been terrifying." She clicks her tongue, still scanning her notes.

My heart warms, lips unable to stop twitching. "You've been reading about Nevada law?"

Jen frowns, eyes still on the notebook. "Yeah. I'm trying to figure out your headspace so I can convince you to stay here and be with me. But I need to understand what you've been through, at least on some level. My next step was to try to find the details of your case to confirm my hypothesis about the guilty plea and the light sentence, but I figured I'd ask you

first since that seemed kind of...invasive.” She bites her lip, flipping to a new page to scan her neat handwriting. “Hold on, I know I wrote something about long-term effects of incarceration. I had a whole plan for how we would talk about this.”

I. Fucking. Love. Her.

Reaching over to toss her notebook away, I band an arm around Jen’s back and tug her close. “You don’t need your notes to talk to me. I’ll tell you everything you want to know, Jen. Ask me anything, and I’ll do my best to answer.”

Her brows climb. “Now you want to talk about it? You’ve had a change of heart.”

“I’ve had a revelation,” I answer.

“Oh yeah?”

I nod. “Yep.”

“What’s that?”

“That I love you,” I say. “I’m crazy about you. Can’t live without you—and the only way for me to do that is move on from my past.” I cup her cheek, thumb brushing the slight hollows under her eyes. “I also realized that I don’t need to be defined by my past. It’s time for me to move on. If you’ll let me, I’d like to grow into the type of man who’s worthy of you.”

Jen’s eyes fill with tears as she places her palm over my hand, tilting her face into the touch. “Fallon, you don’t need to grow into anything. You’re already the perfect man for me.”

“Jen,” I say through a tight throat, “I’ve acted like a fool, but that’ll change. No more running. No more pushing you away. No more hiding all my scars. I want to be better.”

“What could be better than you?” Her hands drift to my chest, sliding up to wrap around my neck. “I love you just the way you are, Fallon. Wouldn’t change a thing.” She brushes her lips against mine, then pulls away, a serious expression on her face. “But I draw the line at the crows. They might have

saved me today, but I won't have flocks of birds following us around everywhere."

Grinning, I lean my forehead against hers. "Deal."

Then I kiss the woman of my dreams, lay her down on the bed, and love her till we fall asleep in each other's arms.

For the first time since I was a child, my heart beats easy, and I'm at peace.

## Epilogue

JEN

It turns out Fallon had nothing to do with the robbery that landed him in jail. He wasn't even there. Some deadbeat used Fallon's father's knife, the knife got tied to Fallon, and he got bullied into accepting a guilty plea.

Fallon's been beating himself up about it for *decades*.

I'd give him stink about it, but I'd be the pot to his kettle. I've been beating *myself* up for decades because I've never lived up to some impossible standard that was embedded in my brain when I was too young to know any better. Just like him, I never questioned the story I told myself about, well, *myself*. I thought I was a winner. I thought I was successful. I thought my success was what made me worthy of love.

But the magical thing about Fallon is he's made me understand that what makes me worthy of love is that I'm *me*. He loves me just the way I am, quirks and houseplants and all. And I love him for him, weird hang-ups about misspent youth and all.

Slowly, we're working through it.

We stay in the guesthouse for another three days, mostly in bed with a few food and shower breaks in between bouts of crazy-hot sex. I turn my phone off when Candice starts blowing it up on the second day, knowing the girls will give me a mountain of shit for shutting them out.

I don't care.

My man is here, he's in my bed, and I can have a couple of days to enjoy that fact.

I find out that Fallon texted Candice when he arrived in town to ask where I was, since I wasn't home when he stopped by. That's who she was texting furiously when I left the library the evening of my confrontation with Guillaume.

Since Fallon already gave up his apartment in town, he moves in with me. I make him promise not to touch my plants. He jokes about buying a bird feeder to add to the balcony garden, then laughs at the look on my face.

Then his arms are around me, and we end up christening my bed...and the couch...and the kitchen counter...and the bathroom...

The police keep Guillaume in custody and end up pressing charges against him when they found a tent in the forest not far from our guesthouse. He'd stolen a bunch of my underwear and had lots of photos of me. He'll be assessed for psychological problems and hopefully kept in custody for a long time. There's a restraining order against him as well, so if he ever comes near me again, he'll be straight back in jail or a psychological facility. To be honest, I don't even care. I hope he gets the help he needs.

Fallon is with me, and I know he'll keep me safe. There's nothing that can bring me down from the high I'm on—not even a creepy ex-boss.

My parents ended up leaving Heart's Cove in a huff the day after the confrontation. I couldn't give a shit, and it's the best feeling in the world. They get put on a strict information diet. In our first phone call after the incident, they criticize the fact that I refused Bernard Franco and threaten to cut me out of their will. I'm just...done. Now that I've seen what it's like to be supported unconditionally, the way my parents use emotional manipulation and threats leaves me feeling oily and unclean.

I'll call them on their birthdays, but I won't work myself to the bone trying to make them love me.

I've already got people in my life who love me even when I mess up. Judging by how hard Fallon laughs when it happens, sometimes I think he loves me *because* I mess up.

Bernard never speaks to me again. He's probably prancing around Paris with another baker who fits his requirements for arm candy. Good riddance.

I decide not to open another bakery for now. Maybe I will down the line, but the girls are right. I need more vacations. More time off. Less pressure.

Plus, Four Cups is a rocking coffee house with a kick-ass kitchen. I can bake to my heart's content back there, and I know I'll be surrounded by people who love me. By the time Fallon and I are moved into my apartment, I get a call from Mary-Ann, the chocolate expert who was supposed to compete alongside me. She agrees to come work with me at Four Cups, and I feel excited that I might be able to hand off the reins to someone else.

In the meantime, Fallon and I pick up shifts at Four Cups. We talk about future plans—no new bakery, but maybe something else? I feel like the whole world has cracked open to offer up opportunities to me. If I don't need to be the *best* at what I do, it means I can do anything! I can pursue a passion project or just sit on the beach and drink cocktails for a month.

Fallon still stubbornly refuses to split the winnings with me. I confront him about it one day a few weeks later, when we're in the Four Cups kitchen, baking late into the night like old times.

"You only refused to split the winnings because you didn't feel like you deserved the money," I tell him, wrapping a tray of baked goods in plastic.

He grunts. "Yeah. Exactly."

I turn to face him and cross my arms. "So what about your big revelation? The fact that you're not defined by your past, that you deserve good things too?"

"That's different."

"How?"

He puts a clean bowl away and turns to face me, crossing his big beefy arms as he leans against the counter. "It just is."

“Fallon, you told me a couple of days ago that you’d like to get a degree in counseling so you can work with ex-cons. You talk about giving more classes to people who have been incarcerated. Those things are much easier to accomplish when you have money!”

“I have money,” he stubbornly replies. “And I’ll use my own money for those things.”

“There’s fifty grand of your own money sitting in my account! If you’d just let me transfer it over, you could enroll in community college tomorrow and maybe even start your own cooking school for ex-cons.”

He bunches his lips to the side as if he’s considering it, but then he shrugs. “It’s not my money. It’s yours. I like those ideas, but I’ll find some other way of accomplishing it.”

I huff, crossing my arms. “Explain to me why you don’t want any part of this cash prize. If your argument is compelling, you know I’ll agree.” I point at my head. “You’re the one who said I had a big, fat brain.”

His eyes sparkle. “I’m starting to regret that.”

“No, you’re not.”

Lips twitching, he takes a step toward me. “Okay, I’m not. How about this: We spend the money on something together. A down payment for a house, or a round-the-world trip...” Fallon reaches me, hands sliding over my hips. “Or a wedding.”

“I’m not spending a hundred grand on a wedding.” I arch a brow.

He tugs me closer, lips curled into a full, satisfied smile. “But you’re not opposed to the wedding itself?”

“Is this how you’re proposing to me, Fallon? In the kitchen of the Four Cups Café when we’re covered in sweat and oil and flour?”

I mean, seriously! I know I’m not romantic, but this is the second time a guy has just assumed I’ll marry him. Fallon and

I haven't even been together for a full month since the end of the competition!

Fallon's hands hook behind my back, fingers interlacing right above my ass. "Yep." He backs me up against the counter. "I've known you for years, and most of our time spent together was right here. Plus, you'd hate a big, elaborate proposal. Photos and people and hugs and crying?" He shakes his head. "You've gotten more comfortable around people lately, but you're still an introvert."

Hmm. He has a point.

"What about my big honking diamond ring?" I challenge. "Don't I get one of those?"

Reaching into his pocket, Fallon pulls out a little velvet box and flips it open to reveal a vintage Art Deco ring. Tiny diamonds are studded in fine looping patterns around the center stone which glitters under the lights of the kitchen. It's delicate and unique and really freaking cool.

"My mother gave it to me when I told her about you," Fallon says, eyes soft. "I've been carrying it around for weeks."

Okay, that's a little romantic. I take back what I said earlier.

Fallon pops the ring out of the box and positions it near my finger. His eyes meet mine, the question clear.

Throat tight, all I can do is nod. When the ring slides over the third finger on my left hand, I let out a breath, watch the stone glitter for a few moments, then throw my arms around Fallon and kiss the daylights out of him.

I'm not going to be an old, perfectionist spinster. I'm not a robot who hates sex.

I've got a whole world of possibilities open in front of me and an unbreakable support system at my back. But most importantly, the man of my dreams will be at my side for whatever comes next.



Fallon nuzzles his nose against mine, then pulls back. “Would you really encourage me to keep working with ex-cons? That wouldn’t make you uncomfortable?”

“Fallon.” I sigh. “No. It would make me *proud*.”

His face splits into a smile, then he dips his lips to kiss me.

With my arms wrapped around the man of my dreams, a big honking diamond ring glimmering on my finger, and a world of possibilities opened up in front of me, I’m happier than I’ve ever been.

This isn’t midlife. I’m just getting started.

Lily

Things are dire.

Jen is all loved-up, Candice and Trina are the same, and my mother keeps dropping hints about me finding a man of my own.

And I'm still carrying this secret inside me that will change everyone's opinion of me. The secret that's about to change my life forever.

There's one thing I know for sure: I should stay far, far away from Rudy with his sparkling blue eyes and his muscular arms and his sexy stubble and that smile that burns the panties right off my body.

Somehow, though, my traitorous feet take me right back to the bookstore when I see him through the window. I've finished all the books he recommended, and I *did* promise to tell him what I thought.

I'm just keeping my word, is all. Being polite.

I'm not walking through this door and hoping he'll give me that heated look and drop his voice when he says my name again.

Nope.

Just normal, a platonic conversation between two consenting bookworms. I promise.

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# *Dirty Little Midlife Secret*

HEART'S COVE HOTTIES: BOOK SIX

*Lily*

**T**here are two secrets, really. One is a blessing, and the other is a curse.

I'm still coming to grips with them both—and trying to figure out how to tell my family. My mother, Lottie, won't know how to react. She'll be ecstatic and dismayed and overwhelmed. She'll tell her best friend Dorothy, which means the whole town will know what's happening within minutes.

My two sisters, Candice and Katrina, will burst into mother-hen mode.

Telling them what's been going on will be a good thing. They'll be supportive. They'll have my back. I'll be able to grieve all the things that have gone wrong, and maybe even celebrate the things that might go right. I'll be able to move on.

So why haven't I told anyone yet?

The past six weeks have felt like I'm driving through a snowstorm in the dead of night. I can see four or five feet ahead of me, a small cone of light that quickly falls away to complete darkness. Snowflakes swirl and dart above the blacktop in front of me as my windshield wipers flick over and back at full speed, and I'm just gripping the steering wheel praying there isn't a patch of black ice beneath my tires. Ask me what bends are coming up in the road, and I'll just laugh. How the hell would I know? I'm barely able to keep the car between the lines, let alone see what kind of hairpin turns are coming up next.

Running my finger along the edge of one of the ten thousand brochures I've been given over the past four weeks since I've been back in Heart's Cove, I try to focus on what my doctor is saying.

My obstetrician, Dr. Alder, leans against the edge of his desk, crossing his legs at the ankle. He's a handsome man in his late fifties. He has an easy confidence about him that put me at ease the first time I met him. Now, the familiar nerves that have been plaguing me for just under two months are bubbling up again. "We've reviewed your file from the hospital in Milan and are happy to monitor your condition for the next three to five weeks. As you know, we won't be able to start any further treatment until you enter your second trimester."

I nod. I do know this. I probably have three or four or ten brochures shoved in one of my kitchen drawers that say something to that effect.

I found out I was pregnant six weeks ago. The first day of my last menstrual period was three weeks before that, which means I'm nine weeks along. I found out about the second big bombshell in my life four and a half weeks ago and ran back to Heart's Cove a few days later.

So, here I am. Surrounded by loving family, feeling isolated in my own personal midnight snowstorm.

"Now, with geriatric pregnancies there are a host of added risks." Dr. Alder looks at me with his warm brown eyes, his voice soft and understanding. "Not to mention the treatment plan we've put together for your—"

Before he can finish his sentence—and before he can jump into the even longer laundry list of things that might go wrong with me—I sit up. "Can we call it something else?"

Dr. Alder frowns. "Pardon?"

"Geriatric pregnancy," I explain. "I'm turning forty next week. That's hardly geriatric, and I feel old enough as it is." I spread my hands. "Maybe, 'mature?' Or, um... 'sunset?' 'Grown-up pregnancy?'"

Dr. Alder gives me a patient, kind smile that makes me want to throttle him. “It’s just the term used for pregnancies in women over the age of thirty-five. Some doctors use it for women over thirty. It doesn’t mean you’re geriatric.”

“No, only my womb.” I suck in a breath and shake my head. “Sorry. I guess ‘sunset pregnancy’ sounds ridiculous.”

Dr. Alder studies me for a moment, then stands up as he inhales sharply. “I’m going to give you a referral to Dr. Melissa Gardner. She’s a psychiatrist who specializes in fertility, pregnancy, miscarriage, and postpartum depression and anxiety.”

“You think I need a shrink?” My voice comes out shriller than I’d intended. I haven’t even told my mother about this, and he wants me to spill my guts to a stranger.

Dr. Alder flicks through dozens of business cards until he finds the right one, then hands it to me. “I think a woman going through as much as you should take advantage of all the support she can get.” His face grows serious, and he leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Iliana, this will only get more difficult. You’ll need help.”

The use of my full name sends an involuntary dart of tension spearing through me. Most people call me Lily—have done since Candice came up with the nickname when I was a baby. My full name was reserved for times when I was in trouble.

Which...I am, I guess.

I take the card and read it. Another piece of paperwork for my ever-growing collection. Gulping, I nod and wave the card in a small circle. “Thanks.”

“Mention my name and Dr. Gardner will slot you in as soon as she can.”

“Name-drop you. Got it. Does that work for other things? Exclusive clubs? Discounts at local restaurants? Do I get a senior discount card now that I’m officially geriatric?”

Dr. Alder starts typing on his computer and completely ignores my irreverence. “Make the call, Iliana.”

Knowing when I'm dismissed, I gather my purse and bid him goodbye. After a quick stop at the reception desk to make my next appointment, I step outside into the mid-July sunshine. Northern California has never been my home, but I think I might have liked it here if my life wasn't a complete mess.

How can it feel like a snowstorm in the middle of summer? How can the sun soak into my skin, yet all I feel is cold?

The edges of the business card cut into my palm, and in some dark corner of my mind, I know Dr. Alder is right. I need to talk to someone. A *professional* someone.

My phone dings, pulling me away from my thoughts. I fish it out of my purse and look at the screen, heart jumping.

It's Rudy, the thirty-four-year-old who has been adding to my growing to-be-read list for the past couple of weeks. He works part-time at his grandmother's bookstore, and he's just about the hottest guy I've ever seen in my life.

Then again, I'm a hormonal, emotional wreck, and he happens to have a nice smile. I might be overstating his attractiveness.

I've gone to the bookstore twice since I arrived in Heart's Cove last month, and both times left me hot and bothered as I trundled back to my car with an armload of new books. I'm *fairly* sure he's been flirting, but...you know. Hormonal, emotional, et cetera. He could just be friendly.

How did he get my number?

I swipe to unlock my phone and read his message.

*Rudy: Hey Lily. Rudy here. Got your number from Candice. We just got the newest Lee Child book in stock and I set one aside for you. I'll be here until the end of the day if you wanted to grab it.*

I've got my phone in one hand, and Dr. Gardner's card in the other. I glance at both hands, eyes shifting from one to the other. It would be easy to dial the number on the card and



make an appointment. Maybe it would be easier to talk to a stranger about everything that's going on.

Or I could ignore the shrink and answer Rudy.

Is it a good idea to continue this less-than-innocent flirtation with Agnes's grandson that will probably end with me heartbroken and embarrassed? No.

Is it a good idea to get involved with *anyone* considering what I'm about to go through? *Definitely* no.

Am I someone who usually makes good decisions?

I stuff the card in my purse and answer Rudy's text.

*Me: Be over this afternoon!*

---

BEFORE I CAN INDULGE in a little Rudy-shaped distraction, I have a date with my sister. A few minutes after my OB appointment, Trina meets me outside the local nail salon and gives me a big hug.

"I'm so glad you could make it." She beams at me, opening the door to let me in. "Things have been hectic, but the kids are with Mac, and Mom is busy at Candice's new house, so I figured we could use some alone time."

Tension still grips my chest, but I hide it behind a smile. "You always say a pedicure solves ninety-nine percent of problems."

"And it's true, too!" Trina laughs and waves at the nail tech who appears from behind a door at the back of the salon.

We're led to big, black massage chairs and told to sit down. I kick off my shoes and rest them on the foot pad, sinking into the seat. The chair starts vibrating and rolling along my back and instead of soothing me, it makes me feel like vomiting. I've been doing that a lot lately.

I turn the chair off and catch my sister's watchful eye. She arches a brow.

"So, tell me how you and Mac met." I give my sister my best casual grin. "You promised me the story when I first arrived in town, but all you've done is deflect."

Trina laughs. Since I last saw her, her whole demeanor has changed. Then again, last time I saw her was a couple of years ago, when she was still married to her jerk of an ex-husband. She looks younger and more vibrant than ever, and she tells me all about the whirlwind romance that happened between her and Mac. How he let her ride on his motorcycle and she just about died from how raw and sexual it was. Then they got —ahem—*messy* doing pottery together, and she thought she *had* died and gone to heaven. She laughs as she tells me how she thought everything went wrong, but now that all's said and done, she knows he's so perfect for her his kisses make her teeth ache from the sweetness of it all.

"You deserve someone to treat you like a queen," I tell her as I finally make my nail polish selection from the thousands of available shades. The nail tech smiles as if I've just made the most important decision of my life. She nods solemnly at the little plastic sample of nail polish and moves to the wall of bottles to grab my selection. It makes some of the tension in my shoulders seep out, and I wonder if Trina is right about the whole pedicures-solve-all-problems thing.

"Enough about me," Trina says. "You still haven't told anyone why you're back. Mom is asking me about it every day."

"Funny, she's not asking *me* about it," I deadpan.

"She's too scared you'll take off on an international trip and not come back for another three years." Trina laughs, but I hear the truth in her words.

I've spent the last fifteen—nearly twenty—years of my life traveling the world. Six months in one place, two years in another. Wherever I could get a visa, I'd lay some shallow roots and explore. I built my business to be entirely remote, and as long as I had my laptop and an internet connection, I

was all set. It was perfect for me...until it wasn't. Until the freight train of life came down the tracks and flattened me.

The woman doing my feet squirts some lotion on my legs and starts massaging my calves, and a tiny bit more stress ekes out of me. Maybe I could tell Trina about the baby and about...everything else.

Stress seizes every muscle in my body at the thought of spilling my guts to my sister.

I grip the edge of the chair as my nail tech glances up, frowning. She can feel the tension in my legs as I do my best to let the thoughts pass through me and let my muscles relax.

How can I possibly say the words out loud when *thinking* them sends me into a panic?

*I definitely need professional help.*

“Okay, if you won't tell me why you're back, why don't you tell me why Rudy was asking Candice for your number?” Trina's eyes glitter, and I groan.

“No secrets in Heart's Cove, huh.”

“Girl, get used to it.” My sister laughs. “I went through hell trying to keep this thing between me and Mac under wraps. It's only fair that I get to have some fun too.”

I roll my eyes. “Nothing's going on. He just got the new Lee Child book in stock and wanted to let me know.”

Trina purses her lips and inspects her fingernails before flicking her eyes to me. “Funny, he didn't text *me* about any new books.”

I wave a hand. “It's nothing.”

“Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Lily.” Trina grins. “From Jen and Fallon to you and Rudy, this summer is shaping up to be a lot of fun.”

“There's nothing going on between me and Rudy. I'll prove it to you. Look.” I pull out my phone from my purse. The movement sends part of my brochure collection spilling

out of my bag, but I hold them back with a hand while I unlock and hand over my phone. “See? Books.”

Trina reads the texts with an arched brow as I try stuffing my crumpled brochures back into my purse. When Trina passes my phone back, she catches a little square of cardboard as it slips off the arm of my chair.

Before I can snatch it back, Trina pulls the business card toward her. “Dr. Melissa Gardner,” she reads. “Perinatal psychiatry.” Her eyes widen as her head whips around toward me. “Lily...”

I extend a hand. “Give it back.”

“Is this why you came back? Are you...?” Trina lets the word hang. Her eyes drift down to my stomach, but I know I’m not showing yet.

I clench my hands into fists to stop myself gripping my middle. The last thing I need is the game of Heart’s Cove Gossip Telephone to start about me. “Give it back, Trina.” My words tremble, and I stare into my sister’s eyes when she meets my gaze again.

She says nothing as she hands the business card back to me.

I stuff it back into the depths of my purse and shake my head. “It’s nothing.”

Trina stays quiet for a few long minutes. We finish our pedicure in silence and when I stand up to leave, I jerk my thumb over my shoulder. “I’m going to go to the bookstore. I’ll see you around.”

Trina opens her mouth to say something, but reconsiders. Finally, she just nods. “Okay. And Lily?”

“Yeah?”

“You know you can come over whenever you want, right? I can ask Mac to watch the kids or get a sitter or whatever. We can grab dinner or just go for a walk. I’m always here. I won’t tell anyone about the business card.”

My throat is tight and I manage to nod. “Okay. Thanks.”

It's not until I'm down the street and out of sight that I manage to take a full breath.

## CHAPTER 2

*Lily*

When I enter the bookstore, Agnes, the silver-haired owner, has her hands on her hips, her face screwed up into a frown. For the life of me, I can't figure out why—until I look at the back of the store.

She's staring at a dozen children aged three to seven sitting in a semi-circle around a soft leather chair.

And in the chair is Rudy, holding a picture book out to face the children so they can see the illustrations. He puts on a scratchy voice and pretends to be an evil witch, and a little girl squeals and claps her hands over her face in fear. From the far side of the chair, Rudy pulls out a toy sword and brandishes it out as the knight in the story comes riding to the rescue. The same little girl thrusts her arm in the air, mirroring his motion with a triumphant giggle.

It's the cutest thing I've ever seen.

Then my gaze turns to Rudy.

I only just manage to stay standing as my knees turn wobbly.

This has got to be pregnancy-related, right? Seeing an attractive man in charge of a room full of children must send some instinctive signal to the cavewoman in me. Things went horribly wrong with the father of my unborn child, and now my hindbrain is looking for someone to fill his shoes.

Someone who might be sitting in a leather chair, captivating a dozen children with nothing more than his beautifully deep voice and a plastic prop.

I squeeze my eyes shut and suck in a deep breath. I need to get a grip. I'm here for a book—nothing more.

“Oh, not you too,” Agnes says with a huff. I open my eyes to see her scowling at me. “I've got enough women falling over themselves to come watch my grandson read picture books.”

I blink, then notice the crowd of mothers standing along the edges of the bookstore. Oh dear.

“I'm here for a book,” I explain. “Rudy texted me earlier.”

Agnes's eyes narrow. “You're Lottie's daughter.”

“That's right.”

“Are you staying at that bedraggled excuse for a hotel?” Her voice takes on a sharp edge.

I gulp, then shake my head. “I've rented an apartment in town.”

The old woman lets out a grunt that might be approval, and I remember that she and Dorothy, who owns the hotel with her twin, have had a long-standing feud. Apparently not staying at the hotel means I'm allowed to buy books here.

I'm saved from this minefield of a conversation by clapping coming from the depths of the bookstore. Rudy's done with story time. I watch with a touch of amusement as he's mobbed by children and mothers alike, then stand to the side as the mob moves to buy every single copy of the book Rudy just read.

Agnes rings them up one by one, looking none too happy even if she does give her grandson a satisfied nod. Rudy meets my gaze from the far end of the narrow, long bookstore and gives me a look that I think means, *Wait for me. I'm almost done*. I watch him skillfully direct a particularly handsy mother toward the cashier's counter, where he slides behind it to give himself some space.

“Well, you have my number,” the woman says, completely unbothered by Agnes's derisive snort. “Don't be a stranger.”

She turns to the little girl who was so captivated by Rudy's story and takes her hand before leaving the bookstore.

Rudy meets my eyes, and I think I see a little bit of embarrassment flushing over his cheeks.

"That was quite the performance," I say.

A rueful smile curls his lips, and my knees do that wobbly thing again. He didn't grin like that when that handsy mother begged him to call her, my brain helpfully points out.

"Children's books are popular," he answers noncommittally. "I do a few readings a month. Everyone loves a fairy tale, especially little kids."

I snort. "I don't."

"I like her more and more every minute," Agnes says, scowling at her next customer, who looks suitably terrified.

Rudy ignores his grandmother and arches a brow at me. "No?"

"Too...unrealistic," I answer. "Not every damsel in distress gets saved by a knight in shining armor."

Agnes agrees with one of her expressive grunts. "*Hmph*. Maybe you have a brain in that head of yours, after all."

"I... Thank you?" I answer, frowning.

Rudy covers his laugh with a cough.

"Fairy tales are for children," Agnes says as the last customer leaves the shop. "But story time sales cover most of our bills. Silly mothers think I don't see them drooling over my grandson, but their money spends just like everyone else's."

Rudy gives me a wry grin over his grandmother's head. Before I can ask him about the new Lee Child thriller—or maybe talk to him without his slightly terrifying grandmother hovering between us—Agnes pulls out a box of lightbulbs and thrusts it at Rudy's chest. "Help me with that."

We both look where Agnes points to see a dark bulb in the ceiling at the back of the store. Rudy gives me one more



apologetic glance, then moves to get a stepladder.

I pretend to browse the books while mostly staring at Rudy. Somehow, over the next few minutes, I find myself drifting to the back of the store where Rudy and his grandmother are trying to fix the light. When he's at the top of the stepladder, he reaches up to unscrew the bulb and his shirt rides up the tiniest bit. He has a trail of burnished golden hair running from his navel to his belt buckle. It's darker than the hair on his head—a fact that I notice for no significant reason whatsoever.

“It's the wrong wattage, Grandma.” Rudy's voice is patient, and my eyes snap up from his stomach. His face is calm as he meets his grandmother's eyes. In profile, Rudy looks almost aristocratic. Strong jaw, straight nose, barely tamed hair come together to give him a handsome, effortless appearance.

I don't blame those mothers. Not one bit. Who knows? In a couple of years, I might be one of them. I turn to the stack of books and realize I'm looking at biographies. I grab one at random and pretend to read.

“Those are the same bulbs I've bought for thirty years,” Agnes grumbles. As Rudy starts coming down from the stepladder, she turns her ire to me. “What do you want, anyway? Why are you still here?”

I jump and nearly drop the biography. “Um...I want a book?” I answer, eyes flicking to meet Rudy's.

His lips curl into a smile, and he gives me a small, self-deprecating roll of the eyes. “Grandma, I held one of the new Lee Child books for Lily. She's been waiting for me to help her for fifteen minutes, so I'd better go ahead and do that. I'll buy the right bulbs this afternoon and put it in before you open tomorrow.”

“I told you not to hold books for people. Especially not new releases. Lee Child is a big seller around here.”

“We have a hundred of them, Grandma.” Rudy makes it to the bottom of the ladder and wipes his hands on his pants,

jerking his head to the front of the bookstore for me to follow.

I'm not scared of Agnes, I swear. She's four foot nine, has to be nearly ninety years old, and I could definitely take her in a fight. Well, I'm fairly sure I could take her in a fight. Probably.

Still, as I step around her and join Rudy, my shoulders soften.

The store is deeper than it is wide, with three rows of bookshelves arranged lengthwise from the front of the store to the back. The thousands of books are mostly arranged like a normal bookstore. I say mostly, because there are signs denoting various genres, but the political thrillers are next to the cookbooks, and the spy novels are on the other side of the shop next to the steamy romance section. The children's books, for some reason, are arranged by color instead of by author name, which almost looks like it was done at some point in the past and no one ever bothered to change it back. One whole shelf is empty, and I'm guessing it's as a result of Rudy's performance today.

In the depths of the bookstore, two large, soft, leather-clad wingback chairs are arranged around a small table, which Rudy moved back into place after story time. It would be an inviting place to sit and read a book, if Agnes didn't make a habit of sitting behind the cashier's desk like a dragon guarding her gold.

I follow Rudy through the stacks to the front of the store. We definitely could have grabbed a copy from the massive display set up with the newest thriller from Lee Child, but I stand in front of the counter as he reaches into a cubby below. He pulls out a copy of the book.

"You really did set one aside for me," I say, then give a pointed glance to the table laden with hundreds of copies of the same book behind me.

Rudy grins. "You never know when a stampede of readers will come through and pick us clean." His long, masculine fingers brush the front of the book, smoothing over a yellow sticky note with my name on it. For some reason, the thought

of him writing *Iliana Viceroy* on a sticky note, asking my sister for my phone number, and making sure to set this book aside makes my insides melt. I watch him peel the sticky note off the glossy cover before pushing the book across the counter to me. “Here. Take it.”

I reach for my purse, careful not to disturb my pamphlets, and pull out my wallet.

Rudy shakes his head. “I already paid for it. It’s my gift for all the business you’ve given us over the past couple of weeks.”

“Oh,” I answer, too shocked to answer properly. I don’t remember the last time someone bought me a gift without an occasion. “Thank you.”

His hand moves back over the book, and a gleam enters his eyes. “There is a condition, though.”

“Here we go,” I say, arching a brow. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you that a gift with conditions isn’t a gift at all?”

“She’s right!” Agnes’s voice calls out from the front of the bookstore.

Rudy laughs. It’s a warm sound that sends a thrill rushing through my middle. His eyes grow serious as he leans his strong, narrow hips against the counter. Even with Agnes apparently able to hear everything, his closeness still makes me forget we’re not alone. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

His voice is low, intimate—and having dinner with him is a bad, bad idea.

What I should do is reach into my purse, open my wallet, and pay for the book myself. I should thank Rudy for the offer, but tell him I’m not interested in dating anyone right now.

I just came from my obstetrician’s office, for crying out loud. I’m going to be having a baby in thirty-one weeks or less. Not only that, but there’s my second secret sitting like a hot coal in my chest.

I haven’t even told my family about any of it! Not the baby, not the other stuff.

Getting involved with a man would be such a bad idea, it's not even funny. Dating is so far off the table, it's not even in the same neighborhood. Pretty soon, I'm going to be a forty-year-old single mother...if I'm lucky.

Rudy leans forward, his palms resting against the counter in a way that makes the muscles on his arms pop. His eyes are brilliant blue, and laughter dances in them as his lips curl into a smile. "Come on, Lily. One meal. No strings attached. If you don't enjoy yourself, you never have to speak to me again."

"That's the problem," I hear myself saying. "I think I might enjoy myself too much."

Rudy's smile widens and damn him, but he looks too good to resist right now. "Doesn't sound like a problem to me."

"Do you have a thing for older women?" I blurt.

Rudy tilts his head.

"First Fiona, then my sister Candice, and now me? Are you just trying to work your way through the Four Cups Café ladies in record time or something?"

Rudy grins, raking his fingers through his hair. "Fiona and I never did anything. As I recall, all I ever did was ask her if she wanted a tour of Heart's Cove when she first arrived." He moves around the counter and drops his voice. "Candice and I went on one date, we had a chaste after-dinner kiss, and we went our separate ways. Amicably. I'm quite sure she's moved on, as have I." He takes one more half-step toward me, his toes brushing mine, chest only inches from my own. "Does any of that bother you?"

*Ugh.* Of course it doesn't bother me. How am I supposed to resist him when he's so damn irresistible?

When Rudy reaches over to grasp my hand and give it a squeeze, I can feel my resolve crumbling. So, rising from the ruins of my defenses, I make a decision.

One meal won't hurt. Maybe this is a good thing! Maybe Rudy can be my one final hurrah, one last tryst before my life changes forever.

He said it himself: no strings attached.

What if I just indulged, for once? What if I go out to dinner with him, maybe enjoy a chaste kiss of my own, and lock that memory away somewhere precious? Why do I feel like I have to deny myself things that please me?

Because I have a child on the way? Because that child's father left me when he found out? Because things are about to get a whole lot more complicated, and I'm too terrified to even think about the reality of it all?

One dinner. One meal. One date. One night that involves a whole lot more than a chaste kiss, hopefully.

Tonight, I can feel like a human—like a woman. I'll enjoy Rudy's company and *indulge*. Then, in the morning, I'll call Dr. Melissa Gardner and I'll get my life in order. I'll tell my sisters and my mother about the baby—and everything else. Both secrets will be out in the open, and I'll be able to deal with the consequences. Rudy and I can have the same post-date amicable split he had with Candice, and everything will work out all right.

Easy. Freaking. Peasy.

"Fine," I hear myself say, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "But only as a thank you for the book." I hug the thriller to my chest as Rudy rewards me with a dazzling smile.

"Works for me." He squeezes my hand again, then brushes past me as he calls out for his grandmother. "I'm leaving!"

I hear a harrumph from the depths of the stacks and hide a smile behind my fingers. Rudy reappears at my elbow and gestures to the door. "Let's go. It's nearly five. We can have an early dinner."

"Right now?" I make sound that is embarrassingly close to a squawk. "Don't I get a chance to go home and change?"

"Nope. I'm afraid you'll reconsider, and you look perfect anyway. Got to strike while the iron is hot." He says the words near my ear, and I inhale the delicious, manly scent of his cologne.

His words catch up to me then, and...he thinks I look perfect?

When I turn my head to look at Rudy, his lips are only an inch from mine. Something passes between us—a flash of tension. A moment. My body grows taut, and I know in the depths of my heart that going out with him tonight is a very, very bad idea.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Rudy*

Lily pulls at her hand and I spin around on the sidewalk without letting go, tugging her closer. She catches herself against my chest, dark tendrils of hair bouncing around her face. Gorgeous woman, all curves and angles.

“If we’re going on a date right now,” she says, “I have conditions.”

“Are you a lawyer, Ms. Viceroy?” My voice drops as I say the words, and I’m rewarded with a flush on her cheeks.

“No. But I have to be honest with you.”

Nodding, I put an inch of space between us. “Sure.” My hand finds the curve of her hip and I notice it fits perfectly there. Like her body was made for me to touch. To hold.

“This is casual,” she says in no uncertain terms. “There’s a lot of stuff going on in my life right now, and I absolutely do not have time for a relationship. The only way I’ll go to dinner with you is if we agree that this is going nowhere.”

I arch a brow. “Nowhere?”

“Nowhere serious,” she amends.

“Are you planning on taking off on another international trip soon?” I’m surprised to realize I don’t like that thought. I don’t like it at all. Having her this close to me is making my cock harden shockingly fast—and she’s thinking of leaving already?

Lily’s lips bunch. “Something like that.”

Shaking off the weird feeling I just got, I give her a shrug. “Baby, I’m the King of Casual. If you don’t want anything serious, that works for me.”

Her eyes narrow. “And no pet names.”

I can’t help it. I grin. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize it’ll be much harder to keep things casual with Lily than it has been with other women...but why would I think that? I haven’t had a relationship in five years. Not since my ex took everything from me—including the family I thought we were building together—and I vowed to never put myself in that position again. I’m not lying when I say I’m the King of Casual. I don’t *do* serious relationships.

I should be jumping for joy right now. Lily Viceroy is basically offering me a fun, no-strings-attached sex fest on a silver platter. Her requirement that we keep things casual is a *good* thing.

But I feel...odd. A bit bereft.

She’s still scowling at me over the “baby” comment, so I relent with a deep nod. “No pet names. We keep things casual.” I put a hand on my heart. “I solemnly swear to not talk about the future or the past, and to tamp down my irresistible charm to give you a chance to walk away from me when this is over.”

Lily rolls her eyes, but her twitching lips betray her. “Fine. Let’s go.”

My cock pulses again, telling me he’s very happy with the way this conversation is going. I give her a broad smile. “You won’t regret it.”

In the next town over from Heart’s Cove, a town called Edgeville, there’s a famous fish-and-chips restaurant that sits on a boardwalk overlooking the Pacific Ocean. As I open my car door and help Lily inside, I already know I’m going to take her there. We should make it right in time for sunset.

Not a bad place for a first date—even if it is casual.

Lily settles into the passenger seat, setting her purse on her lap as I slide behind the wheel. She’s wearing a loose summer



dress and white sneakers, her dark hair tied back in a messy bun. The strap of her sundress slides off her shoulder, revealing the top curve of her breast. I stare at it for a beat too long, wishing I could reach over and push it down all the way. Would she make a soft, sweet noise if I took her breast in my mouth? Would her nipples turn to hard little points against my tongue?

I turn the key in the ignition and give her a smile, hoping she's not regretting her decision to accept my invitation. The Lee Child book sits on her lap next to her purse, a reminder that I'm not above bribery to get a date.

A few weeks ago, Lily walked into the bookstore looking beautifully undone. Her cheeks were rosy, her lips full, and her eyes raked over me like a physical touch. She walked in like a woman who knows what she wants, all confidence and quiet swagger.

I wanted her right then and there. We were alone in the bookstore and my brain served up images of me bending her over the counter and making her come with my mouth, fingers, then my cock. I think I've been hard ever since.

"Where are we going?" Lily asks, tucking the book into her purse.

"You like fish and chips?" I glance over in time to see her smile.

"I lived in London for three years. I have a very discerning fish-and-chips palate, so I hope you know what you're getting into."

I grin. "I'm ready for anything."

A strange look crosses her eyes, and she turns to stare out her window. I frown, reaching to flick on the radio. Did I say something wrong?

"How long have you worked for Agnes?" Lily asks, sounding almost desperate to change the subject.

"Since I was thirteen," I answer with a laugh. "My grandmother raised me. Knowing the value of money was a priority in our home."

“I can only imagine what a slave driver she must have been.” Lily grins.

I shrug. “Sometimes, but I’m grateful for everything my grandmother did for me. She’s only tough on the outside.” I put my turn signal on and merge onto the freeway with signs pointing to Edgeville.

Lily shifts in her seat and hums. “I always liked Agnes.”

That makes me laugh. No one likes my grandmother, except her long-time partner Hank Cheswick and, I suspect, Dorothy, the local hotel owner—although she does her best to pretend otherwise.

“I’m serious!” Lily laughs. “She strikes me as a realist, and I like that in people. I’ve been around a lot of people from a lot of different cultures, and I can spot someone who’s genuine.”

Her words make something still inside me. I’ve grown up with my grandmother being the butt of jokes and comments, but she’s a special woman. Strong. Hearing Iliana say good things about her makes me want to reach over, grab her hand, and press my lips to her fingers.

Someone in a casual relationship doesn’t do that, though. Especially not on a first date.

Instead, I rest my hand on the gearshift and settle back in my seat. We drive in silence until I take the exit to Edgeville and make my way down the coast. We have to park a little way away from the boardwalk, but Lily tells me she doesn’t mind walking.

“Good thing you’re not wearing heels,” I say, nodding to her sneakers as I turn the car off.

Lily scoffs. “Wouldn’t catch me dead in them. Heels are nothing more than instruments of torture.”

I grin and shrug. “They look good, though.”

Lily cups her ear. “You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“That’s the sound of me not caring.” She arches her brow, then opens the car door and steps out.

I laugh, surprised, loving her snark. I’d kiss the attitude right off her mouth if she let me. When I make my way around the vehicle, I extend an arm and watch Lily hesitate for a moment. Then, with a sigh that seems to say, *Oh, what the hell*, she links her elbow in mine and lets me lead her down the gently sloping street toward the boardwalk.

She smells sweet and floral, and I want to wrap that scent around me like a blanket. Her fingers tighten on my bicep, sliding up an inch, as if she can’t help feeling the shape of my muscles. I like her touching me, I decide. I like it a lot.

The sound of seagulls and crashing waves grows louder, and Lily inhales the scent of seaweed and salt. Her smile makes my heart stutter, and I wonder if what I said earlier is true.

No strings attached? One meal? Would I really be satisfied with so little?

Of course I will be. I wasn’t lying when I said I only do casual. Lily is no different.

We make it to the restaurant and get a seat on the patio. A gentle breeze sweeps over us as I pull out Iliana’s chair, admiring the curve of her neck and the grace with which she moves to sit. She smooths her dress over her stomach and sides, then gives me a shy smile as I move to sit across from her. That damn strap slides off her shoulder again, and she scoops it back into place.

When she refuses wine and asks for water instead, I follow her lead. The sun is starting to set and the sky is slowly transforming into a tapestry of colors. We both look out over the waves in comfortable silence until Lily turns back to me.

“So what do you do when you’re not in the store?”

“How do you know I ever leave?” I grin. “Maybe this is the first time I’ve been out in weeks.”

“Just a bookstore goblin, huh?” Her eyes twinkle.

“Someone has to change the lightbulbs.”

Lily laughs and leans back in her chair. “Seriously. You told me you’re only there a couple of times a week. What do you do with the rest of your time?”

“I run a real estate brokerage. Got my realtor license right out of high school because I felt like I needed time to figure out what I wanted to do before committing to college. I was good at it, so I eventually got my brokerage license and started hiring other realtors to work for me. Sixteen years later, and I’m still wondering what I should major in,” I say, happy when Lily laughs. I hold up my hand. “I know, I know. Hold onto your seat. I live a dangerous life.”

Another laugh slips through Lily’s lips and she tries to tamp it down, as if she feels like she’s not supposed to be enjoying herself. “Well, I’m an accountant, so I think I’ve got you beat in the living-life-on-the-edge department.”

My eyebrows arch. “An accountant?”

“So surprised?”

I shrug, glancing down at my menu after studying Lily’s face for a moment. The fine-boned features, full lips, bright eyes. “You don’t look like an accountant, is all.”

Lily snorts, her own eyes dropping to her menu. “I’m not sure what that means, exactly, but it’s not the first time I’ve heard it.”

“I meant it as a good thing,” I amend, scrambling to think of something better to say. I just meant that she’s beautiful and funny and charismatic. Not someone I’d imagine sitting in front of spreadsheets and tax forms all day.

“For someone who works in sales, you’re doing a good job of sticking your foot in your mouth.” Lily’s eyes glimmer as she meets my gaze.

The waiter interrupts us to take our order. Conversation moves on to more neutral topics—the best coffee in Heart’s Cove (from her sister’s café, naturally), Jen and Fallon’s recent television appearance (hilarious and heartwarming), Katrina’s scandalous love affair. I love making Lily laugh, and she

teases me about the fact that I've flirted with half her friends. It doesn't seem to bother her, which is more of a relief than I like to admit.

When our food arrives, I wait for Lily to take a bite of her fish, and smile when she nods appreciatively.

"Passed the test?" I ask.

She grins, dunking a chunk of battered and fried cod in tartar sauce. "It's decent."

"It's delicious, is what it is."

Lily laughs and crunches on another bite, and I realize I'm enjoying this. I've been on a lot of dates—a lot of first dates, mostly—and none of them have felt this easy. I've rarely wanted to know more, but with Lily, I find myself asking question after question. I want to know what's the best fish and chips she's ever tasted. I want to know her favorite memory, her favorite trip, her favorite country. I want to know why she took off and decided to travel the world while both her sisters seem to have chosen a different path. I want to know why she came back.

But when I ask that question, Lily's spine stiffens. She keeps her eyes on the last few French fries sitting on her plate. The easy laughter and conversation from a moment ago is trickling away like sand through my fingers.

As the sun touches the horizon, Lily glances at the glittering ocean—

And a man walks up to our table.

"Well, if it isn't Rudy Dorset," Jared Spark says with a cocky smile. My cousin has his arm around a younger woman's shoulders, her own arm slung around his waist. "Another first date, huh?"

Lily arches a brow at him, then at me.

I give my cousin a flat stare. "Nice to see you, Jared."

"I'd say the same, but I only like to speak the truth." His laugh sounds like a donkey's bray, and his girlfriend giggles beside him.

He gives me that cocky, punchable grin, and jerks his chin at Lily. “How much did Rudy bribe you to accept this date? I know you’re only here out of pity.”

Lily just blinks at him without answering.

Jared doesn’t let up. “Is Rudy bringing you to the charity auction next week? He’s been trying to find a date to the event for ages. I keep telling him to just give it up and accept that he’ll end up alone. No sense beating a dead horse.”

Lily bristles. “As scintillating as this conversation is, you’re blocking my view of the sunset.” Her voice is ice-cold, and a surprised chuckle falls from my lips. Then, for added emphasis, she waves her hand for him to clear out of the way.

Jared gapes at her, mumbles something under his breath that sounds a lot like an insult, and sneers at me. “You seem to have found your match, Rudy. Congratulations.”

The two of them walk away, and Lily stares at their retreating backs before flicking her gaze to meet mine. “They were pleasant,” she deadpans.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say. “He’s my cousin. Well, my great-aunt’s grandson. So...second cousin? Removed? I don’t know, I just call him my cousin. He’s always had this weird competitive streak with me.”

“He’s kind of a jerk.”

I laugh. “And a sunset-view-blocker.”

“One and the same.” Lily’s eyes crinkle at the corners. The sun has almost slipped below the horizon, and the last few rays of golden light are glowing across her face.

“I have to say, the way you dispatched him was pretty hot.”

She sips her water and gives me a casual shrug. “I aim to please.”

I bite back a growl. I like this woman. I like her fire, her attitude. I like that she’s no wilting flower and that she’s not afraid of standing up for herself. I wonder if she’d have that

kind of fire in bed, if she'd rake her nails down my back and tell me exactly what she wants.

"So," she says, setting her glass down and flicking her eyes up to mine, "what's that charity thing about?"

I wave a hand. "A family thing. Jared's parents are throwing a silent auction to fight against elephant poaching in Kenya." I give her a grim smile. "Sounds great in theory, but is actually an evening of elitist drivel, full of people who peacock about the fact that they're doing a good thing. I'm dreading it and I was planning on going alone. It happens every year, and every year it's torture."

"I'll go with you if you want. If you think it'll annoy Jared." A mischievous gleam flashes across her eyes. "I'll even wear heels."

A strange kind of excitement curls in my stomach, but I school my features into a casual expression. "You don't have to do that."

Lily laughs. "I know that, Rudy. What if I *want* to?"

**S**tupid, stupid, stupid.

What was I thinking?

Rudy pulls up outside the Four Cups Café, where I asked him to drop me. I can see the lights on in the private library space above, and I know my sisters are up there. Being around a band of chattering women so I can unwind some of this tension in my gut is far, far preferable to going to my lonely apartment and thinking of Rudy.

The car's engine turns off, and my fingers smooth over the strap of my purse. Rudy's hand moves to the back of my seat, and I gather my courage to look at him.

Night has fallen around us, and he looks harsher in the shadow from the streetlights. His hand is inches from my face, his thumb moving to brush the very top of my shoulder.

"I had a good time," he tells me, his voice a low growl.

I nod. "Me too."

This is where we kiss, I realize. I made that whole speech about keeping things casual, and if I want to have some hot roll in the hay with him, things are going to get physical.

I *want* things to get physical.

As if he can read my thoughts, Rudy moves his hand to my cheek and shifts closer. He stares into my eyes for a beat, then closes the distance between us. His lips brush mine, barely even touching, his hand gripping my jaw and neck so tenderly it's like he thinks I'm made of glass.



Then he pulls away.

I blink.

His moves his hand back to the gearshift between us, and my brows draw together.

“That’s it?” I blurt.

His eyes cut to mine again, amusement dancing in their blue depths. “Were you expecting more?”

“Um, yes.” My body is tense, nipples tight, core pounding. He barely even touched me, and I feel horribly off-balance.

This is bad. I should just run away. Forget the charity auction, this was a terrible idea. Why would I think going on a date was a good idea? I can’t start something with a man. My life is in shambles!

I reach for my door and start mumbling a goodnight when Rudy’s hand reaches out to curl around the back of my neck again. Just as I part my lips to ask him what the hell he’s doing, he takes my mouth in a hard kiss. I gasp, my hands flying to his chest as my fingers curl into his shirt.

He deepens the kiss, sliding his tongue into my mouth and groaning at the taste of me. My hand moves to slide through his thick, blond hair, and Rudy tilts my head to kiss me harder. My body is on fire. My breasts are heavy, aching, and the space between my legs feels painfully empty.

I want to climb onto his lap, shove his pants open, and sink down on top of him. I pull his hair and kiss him back, tangling my tongue with his as he lets out another sexy, masculine growl.

I think I’ve lost control of my body. My panties are drenched, my blood is molten lava, and I might die if I don’t feel him inside me.

“Fuck, you taste good,” he growls, leaning his forehead against mine.

I pant, closing my eyes as I try to figure out what the hell just happened. I want to invite him to my apartment. Screw the

library. Screw my sisters and their friends. I need Rudy inside me *now*.

Then my phone buzzes. I ignore it, still panting with one hand curled in Rudy's hair and the other gripping his shoulder. It buzzes again.

Groaning, I pull away and hunt through my purse until I see the screen. "It's my sister," I say when I see Candice's name. Suspicious, I angle my head to look at the second-story windows. Sure enough, there are three or four faces pressed against the glass. "I'd better go."

Rudy lets out a low chuckle, but it sounds kind of pained. He shifts in his seat, pressing the heel of his palm against his crotch. Then he nods. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I'd like that," I whisper, surprised to realize it's the truth. In a distant part of my brain, a little Iliana screams that it's a bad, bad sign how much I want to see Rudy again.

But I ignore her because what's happening between my thighs is much more potent. Smiling at Rudy, I climb out of his car and make my way to the red door beside the Four Cups Café. When I close the door and lean against it, I take a deep breath. The soft thud of my head hitting the door fills the space, and I groan.

That was supposed to be a one-time thing. A pleasant evening and maybe—hopefully—sex. One last hurrah before my life changes forever...and then I go ahead and invite myself on a second date with him? One where I'll meet his entire extended family? What the hell is wrong with me? Tonight was supposed to end in sweaty, hot sex that scratched an itch for me one last time.

But that kiss...

One night of sweaty sex with Rudy won't be enough. Not with that kind of chemistry between us.

Now I'm standing in the dark, heart pounding, cheeks flushed, knowing I'm entering dangerous territory. Maybe I should have taken him home and screwed his brains out all

night. That way, I could point to my actions and say to myself, *See? It's only physical.*

But this? This is turning complicated.

I can't enter a relationship with him—with anyone! Not just because of the baby, but because of everything else. How am I supposed to date someone when there's a guillotine hanging over my head? I'm leading Rudy on, because I know this relationship can't go anywhere.

But I *told* him that, didn't I? We agreed. Maybe things can be casual, even if we do go on another date.

But then my phone dings, and I pull it out to see his name on my screen.

**Rudy:** *I had a good time tonight. And I might regret this, but I'm looking forward to the charity auction for the first time in my life.*

I clutch the phone to my chest and close my eyes, only opening them when I hear the door at the top of the stairs open.

Simone's red head pokes out of the opening as she flicks on the lights in the stairwell. She glances at me, then turns back to the room behind her. "It's Lily. She's just standing at the bottom of the stairs like a total weirdo."

Then she turns the light off, closes the door behind her, and I'm alone again.

Huffing out a laugh, I make the trek up the creaky stairs and enter the library. Wes—Simone's husband—renovated this space for her, and it's become like a second home for the ladies of Four Cups. There are bookcases lining an entire wall, filled with floor-to-ceiling steamy romance. There's an entire section of regency romance. Must be hundreds of books.

I remember tiptoeing into my mother's bedroom as a child to take furtive glances at the books she kept on her nightstand. The stepback covers—the images inside the front covers with the models in scandalous poses—were pretty much burned

into my mind. I remember the exciting thrill of flipping open the book and seeing those covers, then sneaking minutes to read the books on my own. I even dove into my mother's closet and hid there with a book a few times.

Blinking away the memory, I greet the ladies in the room. They all answer with hellos and good evenings, then stare at me expectantly.

Simone and Fiona are sharing a sofa on the far wall. Fiona is blowing over a mug of tea while Simone swirls red wine in a glass. Beside them, in an armchair, my sister Candice has a mischievous look in her eyes as she leans over the arm of the chair toward me.

My other sister, Trina, chews her lip and tries to burn a hole through my face with her eyes.

"So," Simone starts, rolling her wrist in a *go on* motion, "why were you in Rudy's car at this hour?"

"*Lingering* in Rudy's car, no less," Candice adds.

"I'm sorry, Lottie?" I ask Simone, ignoring my sister entirely. "You look a lot younger and more redheaded than you did a few hours ago. Didn't know my mother was here to give me the third degree."

Simone just cackles. "You're not getting out of this that easily, Iliana. Go on. Spill."

I shrug. "There's nothing to spill. We had dinner."

Candice squeals. "Excellent. Wonderful. Where? How was it? Did you kiss?" She turns to the group. "Rudy is a good kisser. I could tell even if I wasn't into it."

*You have no idea.* Somehow, I know down to my marrow that the kiss I just shared with Rudy was very, very different than what happened between him and Candice.

The other women nod sagely, even though Trina still steals furtive glances my way. I really wish she hadn't seen that business card this morning.

Flopping onto the only remaining armchair, I slouch down and end up with a hand over my stomach. Trina's brows arch,

and I quickly move my hand away.

I should just tell them. I could tell them everything—the baby and the other thing. But when I open my mouth, nothing comes out.

Candice takes over and gives us all a rundown of her failed date with Rudy, peppered with Fiona’s recollection of the few times he flirted with her. The consensus is that he’s a stud, and they’re glad we seem to be hitting it off. Personally, I think they’re crazy and possibly delusional since they’ve all paired off with hot men, one after the other. I happen to live in the real world, where that doesn’t happen to people like me.

But my sister’s friends are good people, and for the first time in a long time, I find myself relaxing into my seat—and I realize why I came back here. I’ve been traveling the world for years. I’ve been the wild child, the free spirit. I haven’t had a home since I left my mother’s house—college dorms felt like more of a prison than a home to me—but I knew that coming back here would feel safe.

And that’s why I can’t tell them what’s going on. Not yet.

If I open my mouth and spill my guts, everything will change. I’ll be on the outside again. I’ll have to endure their sympathy, their questions, their pity. I won’t be Lily, the one who travels. I won’t be the one who’s had countless trips and adventures.

I’ll be the one who made a mistake. The one who’s going through a hard time. The one who might not make it to next year.

I *like* being the person who laughs, who has no roots, who isn’t tied down by the normal rhythms of life. All that will change, of course, but maybe I can cling onto it for a little while longer.

“So?” Fiona leans forward. “You haven’t said a word. Where did you eat?”

“He took me to Edgeville. We had fish and chips.” I shrug. “It was cute. Casual.”

Candice whistles. “Sunset on the boardwalk. Romantic. Did you go for a walk along the beach afterward?”

“What am I, a walking cliché?” I throw my hands out to the sides and when none of them react, I relent. “Yes, we went for a walk on the beach.”

The ladies squeal, and I tamp down the smile threatening to curl my lips.

“Is he a good kisser?” Simone leans forward. “I don’t trust Candice’s opinion on the matter.”

“Hey!” Candice sits up, outraged.

“We need a second opinion,” Fiona says, nodding to Simone. She turns to me. “So? The kiss?”

I straighten my dress and cross my feet at the ankles, shrugging. “It was okay.”

*Liar, liar, panties on fire.*

Silence descends on the room for a few moments and I take a peek at the women around me. Trina has been unusually silent. She’s still studying me with that assessing stare, but it’s not judgmental. I wonder what she’s thinking.

“Just okay?” Simone cries, breaking the tension. “What a disappointment! What a waste!”

I laugh. “I didn’t know you all were counting on me making out with him to get your thrill for the evening.”

“Well, now you know, honey,” Fiona says, standing up to put her mug in the kitchenette sink. “At least think of us a little next time,” she adds with a grin.

“There will be a next time, right?” Candice arches her brows at me.

I clear my throat. “Yeah. I’m going to some charity event with him next weekend.”

Simone blows out a breath. “That boy moves fast.”

I laugh. “Except I kind of invited myself to it.” I tell the group what happened with Rudy’s cousin, and they all nod in

approval when I tell them how I reacted, and hoot when I say Rudy texted me that he was happy I'd be his date to the event.

Trina finally clears her throat to speak. My chest seizes as she meets my eyes, and for a horrible, interminable moment, I think she's going to ask about the pregnancy. But she just gulps and jerks her chin at me. "What are you going to wear?"

Tension melts away from me as I shrug. "I was hoping you might help with that."

Trina gives me a soft smile. "Of course."

"Speaking of help," Fiona cuts in, "is everyone helping out with Dorothy's community garden project tomorrow? She's been pestering me about it all week." Dorothy and her twin Margaret recently got approval from the town to create a community garden on the lot where Candice's old café used to be before it got condemned and demolished.

"Jen's coming out of her love nest with Fallon to help with the planting," Candice says. "She said to be there at eight o'clock tomorrow morning with work clothes on."

I hum. "I have a few clients waiting on work from me, but I can be there in the afternoon."

"Jen is out of her mind," Simone says as she drains the last of her wine. "I'm not going to be there before eleven, and she better not complain about it."

"She'll complain about it," Candice replies with a laugh. "But you'll both live."

When we break up for the evening, I feel lighter than I did when Rudy dropped me off. I've spent so long on the road that I'd forgotten how good it felt to have a home—a real home. Somewhere where people are so comfortable around each other that they know each other's moods and reactions. Where it's a given that there will be an army of helpers for a new town project. Where I'm automatically included.

So, with a smile on my face, I head back to my new house and wonder if it's already a home. Even when things end with Rudy, it doesn't mean I have to give it all up and leave again.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Rudy*

The day after my date with Lily, it's hard for me to focus on work. One of my employees is sick, so I end up having to show a new client around a few potential homes. It's been a while since I did this type of work, but at least I don't have to be in the office on a Saturday.

I drive up to a stately house that sits on two acres a few minutes before a sleek Mercedes pulls up behind my car. The woman who gets out of the vehicle is beautiful. Tall, lithe, built like a supermodel. She's a bit older than me, but that never bothered me before. I've never been picky. Her hair is shiny and curled to perfection, and every inch of her looks like money and class.

She's looking at a four-million-dollar home, so it's not surprising.

What *is* surprising, however, is the fact that I don't feel an ounce of attraction to her, even when she rakes her eyes over my body in an overtly suggestive way.

"You must be Mr. Dorset," she says, extending a hand toward me. Her nails are long—really long. Lily kept hers shorter.

"Call me Rudy. Mrs. Neves?" I paint a professional smile on my face and shake her hand.

"If we're doing first names, you should call me Georgia." Her smile is flirty.

In response, I angle my body toward the property. "Gorgeous, isn't it?"



“You can say that again,” the woman says, still looking at me.

She’s laying it on thick. Tamping down my frustration, I jingle the keys in my hand and start rattling off statistics about the property. Number of bedrooms, bathrooms, square footage, the smattering of outbuildings, including a workshop.

Georgia follows me, her heels clacking on the wide paving stones that lead us to the front door. “Is there a view?” she asks.

In response, I take her through the home to the huge windows overlooking the ocean. Forgetting her flirtation, Georgia Neves’s jaw drops. She floats through the room, ignoring the expensive finishes, and stares out at the lawn that falls into the ocean beyond.

We live in a beautiful part of the world. There are old-growth forests all around, with national and state parks protecting the beautiful landscape. Heart’s Cove is nestled on the coast and has recently gained notoriety for being a haven for artists.

Since Candice started dating Hollywood star Blake Harding, I’ve noticed the luxury properties around here have been snapped up too.

Ms. Neves turns shining eyes to me. “This is gorgeous.” Her flirtation is forgotten, and I wonder if she was doing it out of habit more than anything. Maybe she’s as desperate for distraction as the rest of us.

“It is.” I nod.

“I divorced my husband a few months ago, and this is exactly the type of place I’ve been looking for. Somewhere private but not secluded. A cute town, a beautiful landscape, and maybe the possibility of a new life.” For a moment, her face is part sad, part wistful. Then, like a mask dropping, she turns a flirty smile to me, and I know with odd certainty that she isn’t flirting because she necessarily wants me—or any other man. She just wants to forget whatever happened before. “A new life sounds fun, don’t you think?”

“Lucky for you, this place is available.” I smile my best salesman’s smile. I’m a bit rusty because Georgia just tilts her head.

“And you?”

Clearing my throat, I frown. “Me?”

“Are you available?”

Her question shocks me. It shouldn’t, because she’s been giving me the eye since she got out of her car, because I know her interest in me is some kind of fleeting habit designed to distract her. But what surprises me most is the answer I give. “No, I’m not.”

“Shame,” she says, almost to herself. “I’m going to take a look around the rest of this place.”

“I’ll meet you in the kitchen once you’re done.”

She waves a hand and her heels echo down the hallway. Sighing, I make my way to the vast kitchen and pull out my files. If she wants to place an offer on this house, I can get the ball rolling now. I’m still sorting through paperwork when she comes back to the kitchen.

I look up just as she turns the corner, the light from the windows almost giving her a halo. She really is very beautiful. Exactly the type of woman I’d be interested in on a regular day. Fit, unattached, uninterested in commitment. She would be more than willing to have casual sex with a younger man, then let things fizzle out naturally.

So why do I feel nothing toward her?

Every time I look at her, all I can think of is Lily. The way Lily’s dark hair reflects more reddish shades than Georgia’s. How her effortless sundress-and-sneakers outfit turned me on far more than this pseudo-corporate tailored dress complete with stiletto heels. Objectively, Georgia’s outfit should be sexier. But my cock was hard as rock all evening yesterday, and it hasn’t so much as twitched today.

“I know I said I wanted this place, but the layout is all wrong. Do you have any other properties that are similar to

this, maybe with an extra bedroom? I'd like a pool, too."

I incline my head. "Of course. I can have one of my team members call you on Monday with some options."

"I'd rather deal with you," she replies, smoothing her manicured hands over her thin body. Too thin, maybe? Lily has more curves.

I shove the thought aside. I'm here to sell a house—not compare two women and dissect why I might be more attracted to one over the other.

Biting back a word of protest—I don't do much realtor work anymore, choosing instead to manage the agents who work for me—I nod. If she wants a modern, move-in-ready six-bedroom home, plus pool, plus ocean view with this size lot? That's pushing five million, maybe even more. I can't afford to lose that sale.

If she wants to deal with me, I can manage a bit of flirtation.

"No problem." I flash her my best smile. "I'll be in touch."

"I hope so." She winks at me, and I lead her back outside. "You know," Georgia says, "I think moving here might be the best thing that ever happened to me."

I smile as politely as I can manage, ignoring the hunger in her gaze. "You wouldn't be the first person to feel that way."

We make a plan to talk soon, and I head for my car. Sighing as soon as I'm behind the wheel, I close my eyes and let her drive off before me. The smile that's been plastered to my lips melts off, and all I feel is exhaustion. Not wanting to go to the office, I head home to start on her file. I have a few properties that might work for her, and I'd like to compile a list of them before Monday. I'll have to call a few local agents to see if they have any properties that aren't on the market yet.

But when I get home, all I can think of is Lily.

That woman today—Georgia—wanted to sleep with me. Under any other circumstances, I would've wanted her too. So what changed? One date with Lily? The promise of another

one? What the hell happened to casual? She never said we had to be exclusive, but the thought of another woman turns me off completely.

Unsettled, I walk to my home office and slump down in my desk chair. I stare at the blank screen of my laptop for a while, then scrub my hands over my face and stretch my neck.

I haven't enjoyed myself that much on a date in a long, long time. Not since I fell head over heels with my ex-girlfriend nearly six years ago, and it ended in disaster. As I lean back in my office chair, overlooking the backyard I've carefully tended for the past three years, I think of last night.

That kiss will be burned in my mind for the rest of my life. Even thinking about it now makes my shaft stir in my pants, and I rub my palm over my jeans in an absent motion. I smelled her on my skin all evening. I dreamed of her. I woke up harder than I ever have, and I made myself come to the thought of her lush, pink lips wrapped around my cock. Her hair would look good wrapped around my hands, I decide, and even better splayed across my pillow. Her skin was buttery-soft under my fingertips. I can still feel a whisper of it across my skin. If I woke up to her curled around my side, I think I could die happy.

But I held back from taking her home and screwing her senseless. In the light of day, I'm not even sure why. We had a good time. We're planning a second date. She's funny, snarky, intelligent, and drop-dead gorgeous.

I should have just gone for it—but it felt wrong. For some reason, I want to take my time with Lily. Of course, I would have loved to bury my hands in her hair and hear her moan against my lips. I would have loved to strip that dress on her body and make love to her all night...but then what?

I've slept with women after a first date before. Hell, I've been doing that since Tracey and I broke up. My ex-girlfriend was supposed to be my wife. I was supposed to adopt her daughter, and I planned on being the best stepfather that kid would ever need.

When we split, it broke something inside me and I'm not sure I've ever tried to fix it. I've been dating women casually since then, and nothing has ever stopped me from getting them in bed after a successful first date.

The thought of waking up next to Lily and having that awkward morning-after conversation makes my stomach turn. I want our mornings after to include pancakes and bacon and sex and coffee and endless hours together. That's not how this morning would have been if I'd taken her home with me last night.

The doorbell rings.

My chair creaks as I stand up and I take a moment to arch my back, feeling the satisfying crack and pop of my too-stiff spine. Barefoot, I pad along my knotty pine floorboards to the front of the house, seeing a large, dark shape in the frosted glass of the front door.

Lee Blair is standing on my stoop wearing jeans and a black tee. He arches a brow at me. "You don't call. You don't text. I thought we had something, Rudy. I thought it was special."

Grinning, I step aside to let him in. His motorcycle boots echo in the hallway as we make our way to the kitchen at the back of the house. Lee flops down onto the sofa in the open-plan room as I start making myself a sandwich for lunch. He nods when I offer to make him one, then stands up to grab himself a soda out of the fridge.

The tab on the can pops as the drink fizzes and Lee takes a long drink. Then he sets the can down on my counter and crosses his arms. "How was your date with Lily Viceroy last night?"

I choke on air and clear my throat, then glance at him. "How did you know I was out with Lily?"

Lee grins. "Lily told Trina. Trina told Mac. Mac told me." Mac—Lee's brother—and Trina are together. Apparently all three of them are worse gossips than the hotel ladies are with my grandmother.

When I tell Lee that, he just laughs. “Come on, Rudy. We all know she’s been going to the bookstore. Took you long enough to ask her out.”

“She’s only been in town for a few weeks,” I protest.

“My point exactly.”

“This is ridiculous. So I went on a date—so what?”

“You didn’t take her home, though. Was she not into it?”

“I’m not talking about this.” I slam the top piece of bread on his sandwich and toss the whole thing onto a plate. “Eat that and be quiet.”

Lee laughs again, and I’m sure he’s doing it because he knows it’s getting under my skin. I take a huge bite out of my own lunch and chew angrily, then go on the offensive. “What about you? You spend all your nights at your father’s bar just to avoid meeting anyone. You’ve been wallowing since Drea left you.”

Lee rolls his eyes, red tinging his ears. “Yeah, right. I don’t wallow, asshole.”

We eat in silence for a while and the food settles my stomach. Thoughts of Lily pop up uninvited, like the way her eyes looked in the front seat of my car last night, or how her laugh made something stir in my chest—and my pants.

I want to see her again—but maybe it’s a bad idea. We both agreed to be casual, and I have no desire to make things any more serious than she does. Maybe it’s better for me to just back off.

“You coming to help out with the community garden?” Lee says, brushing a few crumbs off his fingers onto the plate.

I glance at the time and swear softly. “I forgot about that. I told Dorothy I’d be there two hours ago.”

Lee arches a brow. “We’d better get going, then.”

“Let me change.”

I live in a three-bed, one-bath house that I bought when I was thirty-one, intending to fix it up. I haven’t gotten very far.

In the three years I've owned it, I've managed to rip the tiles off the kitchen backsplash and fix up the office. My mattress in the bedroom is still on the floor.

In those three years, however, I've managed to sell countless properties and grow my real estate business to the point that I have a comfortable lifestyle, look after my grandmother without making it obvious that I've been looking after her, and work part-time at the bookstore. I'm not lazy; I just haven't quite cared about my house enough to finish fixing it up.

When I make my way upstairs and enter my bedroom, my stomach clenches. I can't bring Lily here. A woman like her? A woman who knows what she wants, who's seen more of the world than most flight attendants? She'd take one look at my place and think I'm a permanent bachelor.

She wouldn't be wrong.

Throwing on some work clothes, I bound back down the steps and find Lee leaning against the wall next to the front door. He jerks his head at me. "I rode my bike here, so I'll meet you in town."

I grunt in agreement and listen for the roar of his motorcycle as I slip on some old steel-toed work boots I've had since the days I worked as a construction laborer in my teens. They're stiff, with gray concrete stains splattered over the tan material, but they still fit.

Locking the door behind me, I exit my old house and make my way into town.

Maybe this is exactly what I need. A bit of physical labor to get me away from my computer screen—and away from thoughts of Lily.

*Lily*

**S**neakers on my feet and sun hat firmly stuffed over my head, I make my way down Cove Boulevard, the main street that runs through the center of Heart's Cove. It's lined with quaint shops and full-grown trees, the leaves bright green and rustling in the warm summer breeze.

I walk past the hardware store and take a quick peek at the bookstore, quickening my steps as I reach the Four Cups Café. I wave at Allie, Candice's daughter, who's busy behind the till. It's only another block and a half to the hotel, and just beyond it is the new community garden.

Wes's pickup truck is parked on the street along with a large trailer full of supplies. The whole area is abuzz with activity and people and that pleasant, energetic feeling of people who are doing a good thing.

Margaret is the first one to spot me. Dorothy's twin is the more refined, elegant of the two, with her favorite hairstyle being a French twist and her neck almost always adorned with pearls. Today, she's managed to look dignified in dirt-stained gardening clothes.

She gives me a broad smile and a tight hug. "Thank you for coming, Iliana."

"Of course." I reach into my bag and pull out a pair of stiff, brand-new gardening gloves of my own. "I came prepared."

"Good, good." She ushers me onto the lot, which has been flattened and cleared of the building that used to stand here. On the back of the lot, Grant—Fiona's husband—and Wes are



halfway through building a row of raised planters. The leftmost wall is already done, with an army of people filling up the timber boxes with rich, dark earth. Jen, the resident baker, is standing with a clipboard, barking orders at people along the line. Fallon, the chef who stole Jen's heart, has a little grin on his face as he walks by with a bag of potting mix slung over his shoulder. He pauses beside Jen and leans down to bite the space between her shoulder and her neck. Jen immediately stops talking and her face takes on a dreamy look. She closes her eyes and leans into him, turning her head to accept a gentle kiss.

I glance away, feeling like I'm intruding on a private moment. My attention snags on the right side of the long, narrowish lot. Rudy is here, and he's not wearing a shirt. He has his back to me, and I can't quite tear my eyes away from the bronzed, glistening skin. Even from a distance, I can see the sweat dappling his shoulder blades, the writhing of his muscles as he moves.

Can I blame pregnancy hormones for the rush of lust that nearly knocks me over? My stomach tightens as I watch his beautiful, strong body move in the sunlight.

He's using this large tool that looks like a combination of scissors and a scoop to create a post hole in the ground. I stand entranced as he lifts his arms above his head and brings the post hole digger down into the hard earth, only to lift it out again and dump earth onto a small mound at his side. There's a row of posts already secured into their holes, where more helpers are pouring quick-set concrete into the bases.

Rudy pauses, wiping his forehead on his arm.

Movement snaps me out of my stupor as Simone appears at my side, dabbing at my face with a tissue. "You've got a bit of drool there, Lily," she says. "Let me get it for you."

I give her a flat stare and bat her hand away, and Simone just cackles.

The noise draws Rudy's attention. He turns to look over his shoulder and pauses when he sees me, then turns the whole

way around. I freeze, caught in his stare—and in the tractor beam created by the honed masculine perfection of his chest.

He's lean and muscular, with a sprinkling of golden hair over his chest. He has abs—real, visible abs. Eight of them that lead my eyes down to the carved Adonis belt that disappears into his low-slung khakis. I get a good, long look at that trail of hair I noticed yesterday.

Oh dear.

Suddenly, my lips are tingling, as if my body wants to remind me what it felt like to kiss him. I fell asleep thinking of the growls and the rough timbre of his voice when he pulled away from me. Would his voice go gravelly and harsh if I used my tongue to follow that happy trail all the way to its destination?

Somehow, I manage to drag my eyes up to Rudy's face when he comes to a stop in front of me, leaning on his shovel-thingy.

“Hey, Lily,” he says, and those two words send heat rushing through my core.

“Hey,” I manage. “Nice...shovel. It's really...big.”

*What the hell did I just say?*

Rudy's eyes twinkle as he shrugs. “Thanks. I get that a lot.”

Now heat is rushing up my neck and over my cheeks too.

Simone, still standing beside me, snorts as her shoulders start shaking. “I'm going to leave you two kids to it,” she finally says. “Jen is giving me a death glare.”

I glance over at the baker who, sure enough, is looking our way with an expectant arch of her eyebrows. Simone calls out and glides across the lot toward her, and I'm left with Rudy and half a brain in my head.

*Say something. Say anything.*

“You're building a fence?” I give him a smile and hope I don't look stupid.

Rudy glances over his shoulder at the row of posts, and I steal a glance at his chest and stomach. He has muscles I didn't even know existed. His body could be an anatomy textbook. Where's that tissue Simone was holding?

"Lattice," Rudy explains. "We're going to grow a vine over it."

Before I can answer, Dorothy calls my name. She's wearing a matching cheetah-print shorts-and-tee combo, with a straw hat that has a decorative band of the same material. "Lily, get your butt over here! You can help us paint." She glances at Rudy. "And you get back to work, young man. Those post holes aren't going to dig themselves."

"Who knew Dorothy was a slave driver?" I say with a smile.

Rudy winks at me, then gives me a fantastic view of the muscles on his back as he makes his way back to his half-dug hole. When I make it to Dorothy's side, she gives me a long look, then thrusts a paintbrush in my hand and commands me to start working.

We have a fence to paint around the whole garden, pavers to lay between the raised beds, and shade cloth to install over some of the shade-loving plants. Most of the planting won't happen until the cooler months, but Jen has a list of plants and timing for the garden. Of course she does. Her notes are color-coded and marked up with her usual precision.

Time flies, and I only steal a few glances at Rudy. Okay, more than a few.

Once he finishes the post holes, he helps with the concrete bases, then starts hammering the lattice to the newly installed posts.

"Nothing better than a man with a hammer," Fiona says with a secret grin on her face.

My cheeks heat as I look away, dipping my paintbrush into the pot, then freeze. Is it even safe to be doing this? I stare at the white paint dripping off my brush as my heart starts pounding. I've been standing here for two hours inhaling these

fumes. Is that going to hurt the baby? I didn't even *think* about that!

I'm so incredibly unprepared for this. I can't be a mother! I know I'll be forty next week, but honestly, I feel no different than I did when I was twenty-two. Fine, okay, I'm a little sorer after a workout and hangovers seem to last four days instead of four hours, but I'm still *me*. I'm not fit to be a parent!

What else have I done to put the baby in danger? I've tried to stay away from coffee and soft cheese and processed meat and sushi and, and, and...

My chest is heaving as I drop my paintbrush. Fiona calls out my name and I wave her away, stumbling over an uneven paver as I try to get away from the paint smell. I'm going to throw up. I used to love the smell of paint, but now it makes me feel like I'm endangering my unborn child.

Trina is the one who follows me onto the sidewalk and around the corner. I'm sucking in a breath of fresh air when I feel her hand on my forearm. "What's wrong? Do you need me to take you to your doctor? Are you in pain?"

"I've been inhaling paint fumes for two hours," I hiss, glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one can hear me. "I didn't even *think* about it, Trina. I can't do this. I have no idea what I'm doing and I'm going to screw up."

Instead of answering, Trina just wraps her arms around me and squeezes. Her voice is low, gentle. "We're outdoors, Lily. You're fine. I had the same worry when we did Toby's nursery. My doctor told me that sanding and scraping is a no-go, especially if it's older, lead-based paint, but most modern paints are fine. You didn't hurt your baby. If you're worried, just ask your obstetrician about it next time." When she pulls away, her eyes are kind. "And we all screw up. It's just part of being a parent."

I close my eyes. Trina rubs my back until I take a deep breath and nod. "I'm fine. I just freaked out a bit."

My sister studies me for a moment. She opens her mouth, then closes it again. After taking a breath, she finally speaks.

“Are you going to tell anyone?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Eventually. I mean, it’ll be obvious in a few months anyway.”

“And Rudy?”

Her voice is neutral. Non-judgmental. Still, I wince.

What am I supposed to say? I could tell her that I just wanted to sleep with him last night in order to have one last night of fun before my whole life changes. But if I told her that, I’d probably have to tell her everything I’ve been hiding besides the baby. And if I do *that*, then it becomes real. It becomes everyone else’s problem too. All this happy, buzzing energy? All the laughter and lightness? I can pretty much kiss all of it goodbye.

But it wasn’t just one night of fun with Rudy, was it? Because today, the sight of him made me stop in my tracks. And I’m going to that charity auction with him. And it might make me an irresponsible, bad person, but I *want* to go on another date with him.

“It’s casual,” I finally say.

Trina just nods. “Well, come on. I was on my way to the café to get drinks and treats for everyone. You can help me with that.”

Heaving a sigh of relief, I nod to my sister and follow her to my car. It’s only when we approach that I see Rudy on the sidewalk. I don’t think he heard anything Trina and I said, because he just meets my eyes with a concerned expression on his face.

“You okay?” he asks, catching my hand in his and squeezing. “You rushed out like something was wrong.” His other hand slides over my hip and damn it, but it feels good to be wrapped up in his arms.

“Just got a little nauseous from the smell of paint,” I tell him. It’s the truth—sort of. I point my thumb over my shoulder to my sister and her car. “I’m going to Four Cups to grab drinks and snacks for everyone. You want anything?”

“One of Jen’s salted caramel brownies,” he says. His hand drifts lower, fingertips touching the cleft of my ass. “Those things are like crack. I think I’m addicted.”

My eyebrow arches as I let my eyes roam down to his chest and back up again. I even work up the nerve to slide my hand over his sweaty bicep and squeeze. There’s not an ounce of excess flesh on him. “Somehow I doubt you’re eating too many of them.”

Rudy gives me a grin that makes my knees weak, that hand on my lower back pressing ever so slightly.

Then I realize he’s hard. I can feel it up against my stomach, and I’d be lying if it didn’t send my body into a lust-induced tizzy. If I keep hanging out with him, I’m going to need to start carrying spare panties in my purse.

Just then, Trina honks her horn, and I jump. He gives it one last squeeze and lets me go. I feel his eyes on my back until I’m safely in the passenger seat of Trina’s car.

She gives me a completely unimpressed stare. “Casual, huh?”

I just click my seatbelt and nod. “Yeah. Casual. We agreed.”

*Trina*

I never knew how good I was at biting my tongue until I found out my little sister was pregnant and couldn't tell anyone. As we load up boxes with pastries and sandwiches from the Four Cups Café, I steal surreptitious glances at Lily.

She looks...fine. Maybe there's a little tension in her shoulders, and her smiles are a touch forced. But if I hadn't seen that business card, I doubt I would have even known there was anything wrong. I would have assumed she was just a bit awkward being in Heart's Cove instead of some multi-month, multi-country trip.

She's never been good at staying in one place. Did she come back here because of the baby? Because this is the only place she has any family?

"Allie," my sister asks the curly-haired blond girl behind the counter, "would you mind wrapping up a salted caramel brownie separately for me?"

Candice's daughter nods, a rogue curl bouncing with the movement. "No problem."

As Allie works, I lean against the counter. "Are you excited about leaving for college?"

My niece glances at me and gives me a brilliant smile. "Can't wait. Six weeks seems so far away and I just want to go now."

"It'll fly by, don't worry," Lily says. "Time seems to speed up these days—or maybe I'm just getting older."

I throw her a sharp glance, which she ignores. Her words had a distinct flavor of...dread.

Behind us, the café door opens, and I hear Nora Richter's voice. "This is the best café in town," she proclaims.

"I thought you said it was the only café in town," a wry voice answers.

I turn to see a beautiful woman who could be anywhere from her mid-fifties to mid-seventies standing beside an equally beautiful Nora. The older woman is short—shorter than Nora, who can't be more than five foot five. The woman's back is straight as a rod, her silver hair streaked with black, tied back in a thick braid that falls over her shoulder and down to her ribs. Her skin is deeper than Nora's, a rich bronze color, and her eyes are as black as Fallon's. She casts an assessing eye over the eclectic mix of tables and chairs, the local artwork, and the handmade cups and saucers that give Four Cups its unique vibe.

She must be Nora and Fallon's mother.

When the woman's gaze falls on me, she tilts her head.

I wave. "Hi. You must be Mrs. Richter. I'm Trina and this is my sister, Lily."

"Call me Prisha," she says with a kind smile. "So this is where my son worked for so long?"

Nora gives her a gentle nudge closer to the counter as Allie finishes loading up our boxes of goodies. "Ma insisted on helping me set up my new place in town," she explains. "But I think it was just an excuse to finally meet Jen."

Prisha grins, her dark eyes twinkling. "Any woman who gets my son to knock on my door after so many years must be special."

"Jen is special, all right," Lily answers. "She's a force to be reckoned with."

"She's down at the community garden," I say. "You two would be welcome to come join, but be prepared for someone to hand you a spade or a paintbrush and put you to work."



“Oh—is that today?” Nora asks, eyes wide. “I told Dorothy I’d help. I completely forgot.”

“She’ll forgive you if you show up with food,” Lily says, thrusting a box of goodies toward Nora with a smile. “Just pretend that was your plan all along.”

Nora gives her a grateful smile. We say goodbye to Allie and head back outside. The four of us pile into my car, and I drive back down the few blocks to the worksite. Lily’s eyes immediately stick to Rudy like glue, and I bite back a snarky comment.

She’s got it bad...and that’s not a good thing. Lily has other things to worry about right now, like the tiny human growing in her womb.

But I know it’s not my place to say anything, so all I do is turn off the car and help the other ladies get the boxes of food out of the car. Fallon appears beside us, one of his muscular arms curling around his mother’s shoulders as he gives her a tender kiss on the temple.

“Food’s here!” I call out.

The army of helpers looks up at me, and then the stampede starts. Rudy makes a beeline for Lily, who presents a paper-wrapped brownie to him like it’s precious. His smile is warm and secretive, and he says something near her ear that I don’t catch.

Mac, my man, manages to elbow his way closer to the boxes of sandwiches and treats, but he doesn’t stop there. He reaches me and wraps his arms around me, dipping me down and kissing me square on the lips. When he straightens me up again, I’m flushed. “What was that for?”

“You looked like you were in need of a kiss.”

“Gross, mommy!” Katie says, a smear of white paint across her jeans. She’s been helping with the fence, apparently.

“We got here while you were at the café,” Mac explains. “Toby’s not bad with a hammer.”

My son blushes, grabbing a sandwich from the box and scampering away. I smile, tilting my head as Mac lays another kiss on my jaw.

I look at the assembled crowd and see a real community. Everyone is laughing and eating and working together. Dorothy and Eli are having a heated debate, waving their arms as they gesture at a wrought-iron arch that will serve as an entrance to the garden.

Margaret has her head bent near Hamish, Mac's father. Hamish, being the old biker he is, is wearing a leather vest and an old Harley-Davidson tee, and somehow beside Margaret's classy, put-together outfit, it works.

Wes, Grant, and Blake are all topless and attacking sandwiches, while their respective women look on, smitten. I don't blame them. There's a lot of male flesh on display, and all of it is drool-worthy.

I lean my head against Mac's shoulder and glance up at him. My kids are eating and laughing, my sisters are here, and even if Lily's secret is weighing on me, I can't deny that I'm happy.

Then my mother appears beside me and slips her hand into the crook of my elbow. I glance at her, brows arched in question. "Everything okay?"

She pinches her lips and glances at Lily. "Your sister still hasn't opened up about what's going on. She's not herself, and I think something's wrong. She tell you anything?"

I gulp. "No," I answer. It's not *exactly* untrue. Lily never actually *said* anything—I just happened to find a business card and Lily never denied it.

My mother hums, eagle eyes still narrowed on Lily.

Feeling protective of my little sister, I blurt out, "She's going to some charity event with Rudy next weekend."

Mom's eyes light up as she turns to look at me. "She is?"

*Uh-oh.* Maybe knowing about the pregnancy would be better than my mother thinking she can play matchmaker. But

I just nod and run with it. “Yeah. They went out on a date last night. She said it was fun.”

My mother lets out a squeal that is decidedly un-Lottie-like. “Fantastic. Great! I’m going to go tell Dorothy. She likes Rudy, even though he’s related to Agnes. I’m sure she’ll tell me all there is to know about him.”

As my mother rushes toward her friend, Mac lets out a chuckle. “You sure that was a good idea?”

“Nope,” I answer, and that, at least, is the truth.

*Lily*

**S**omehow, I manage to convince my family that I don't want to do—or get—anything for my birthday. It's a relief when they mostly agree. On Wednesday, I turn forty with little fanfare and only a quiet family dinner at Trina's house. I watch Allie with her cousins, Toby and Katie, and it takes all my self-control not to run my hand over my stomach.

I'm going to have a child. The three of them will have a new cousin in a matter of months.

The thought of it is enough to make me want to run down the street in a panic—but that would *definitely* raise a few eyebrows...and questions.

So instead, I shift my eyes away from the kids and refuse, for the thousandth time, Candice's offer of wine.

"You used to love wine," she says, eyeing me suspiciously.

"I'm not drinking this month," I say, hoping that's the end of it. Maybe I can keep using that excuse for the next six months or so.

Candice nods and moves to the next half-full glass that needs a top-up.

"So, Lily, tell us about this second date you have with Agnes's grandson," my mother says. She's already asked me about it half a dozen times since she found out about it at the community garden, but obviously I haven't satisfied her curiosity.

“It’s not a date,” I lie. “I’m just helping him stick it to his arrogant cousin.”

“Okay,” Candice hums, “and what are you going to wear to your non-date? It’s a black-tie event, right?”

“Trina’s in charge of that,” I answer with a grin. “I’m hoping she has a plan.”

At my words, Trina launches into a detailed explanation of what she’s thinking for my outfit, hair, and makeup. She expertly navigates the conversation to clothing, then to her own business ventures as a new stylist, and I use the opportunity to slip out the back door for a breath of fresh air.

After a few moments, the patio doors open and Trina joins me. She gives me a small smile and jerks her head to the door she just closed behind her. “They’re talking about Candice’s new house, so it’s probably safe to go back inside now.”

I grin. “Thanks for helping me deflect.”

Trina laughs, then clears her throat. “Listen, I know you said you didn’t want anything for your birthday...”

“I don’t. I’d rather just forget that I’m forty altogether.”

She laughs. “Hey, now. Careful. You make it sound like a bad thing. My forties have been the best decade so far.” She jerks her head to the side. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

Our footsteps echo on the timber patio until we take the three steps down to the gravel pathway leading to the side of the house. Trina walks ahead of me in the gathering dusk, a motion-activated light illuminating our way. She stops at the side door that opens into the garage, and steps inside.

Flicking on the lights, Trina walks to a corner of the room where a half-dozen unopened boxes are neatly stacked. A tarp covers a knobby-shaped piece of furniture beside the boxes, which Trina removes with a flick of the wrist.

Beneath the blue plastic, a crib and stroller appear. They’re wrapped in protective plastic and look a little worn, but still in good shape.

I take a step backward.

“I don’t even know why I kept all this stuff,” Trina says, opening up one of the boxes and peering inside. “But I did.” She points to the boxes. “There’s clothing, swaddles, blankets, toys, books. I’ll go through the stuff this week and keep some of the more sentimental items, but the rest is yours if you want it. I’m sure in the past six years, there have been a thousand new baby items on the market that are bigger and better than all this, but at least it’ll get you started. I have a car seat somewhere, too, and a gliding rocking chair that was a lifesaver for feeding and soothing. I got rid of the changing table because it was a bit rickety, but I’m sure you can get one that isn’t too expensive.”

My heart is pounding. My breath is coming in short gasps, and I can’t quite find the words to say anything. I don’t even know what I would say.

Trina glances at me and frowns. “Lily?”

“I... Thanks. It’s just...” I turn my back on all the baby things and suck in a shaking breath. I square my shoulders and manage to get my breathing under control before turning back around. I look at my sister and nod. “Thank you,” I croak. “It just seems a little...real.”

“Like if you start thinking of logistics, you’ll have a panic attack?” Trina asks as the corner of her lips tug.

I nod.

“Well, don’t worry. I felt the same way, and I was married and settled when I had Toby. I think that might be normal.” She glances at the door across the garage that leads to the house and jerks her head. “Come on, let’s go back. We can tell everyone I was showing you outfit ideas for this weekend.”

We walk to the door and I catch my sister’s arm. Before she can pull away, I wrap her in a hug. “Thanks, Trina.”

She just smiles at me. “You’ll be fine. Trust me.”

Instead of comforting me, her words send a chill skittering down my spine. If it were just the baby I was facing, I’d

believe her. I know I'll love and protect my baby...it's everything else that scares me.

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SATURDAY COMES AROUND FASTER than I can blink, and I find myself in my apartment with my sisters and their friends. Every horizontal surface is covered in various bits of makeup, skincare, hair tools, and wine glasses. Simone is trying one of the dresses I vetoed, smoothing it over her curves as she takes a sip of wine. It's a red dress with a keyhole neckline that shows a hint of scandalous cleavage, a form-fitting bodice, and a skirt that hits right above the knees. Way too sexy for a black-tie charity event, but it looks like dynamite on her.

Candice is doing dishes I hadn't gotten around to this afternoon, and Fiona is lounging on my couch watching everything happen with Jen at her side.

Trina taps my shoulder to make me turn toward the vanity mirror again as she sections another piece of hair to curl. The dress I chose is hanging on the top of the door, the black velvet fabric looking luxurious even from a distance.

"There," Trina says as she gives my hair a last spritz of hairspray. "We'll let the curls cool, then we'll brush them out. You'll look like a goddess."

"Question," Candice says, evidently done with the dishes as she runs her hands over a sequined yellow gown lying on the sofa. "Why do you have so many formal dresses? What kind of events were you attending before you came here?"

Trina grins. "Not many, but I like pretty things. They come in handy in times like these." She taps my shoulder and gestures to the dress. "Put it on. You got a strapless bra?"

I nod and make my way to the bathroom to change. The only strapless bra I own is a lacy black La Perla thing that cost an ex-boyfriend of mine far too much money—but it fits me like a second skin and makes my boobs look incredible. The pregnancy helps in that department too.

As soon as I put it on and look in the mirror, that same sick feeling of dread twists in my gut. I run my fingers over my chest and blink away a wave of emotion that threatens to make me cry. Can I blame that on the pregnancy hormones or on the terrifying issues that loom behind me like the grim reaper? I touch the lace edge of the bra, where the soft skin of my breast meets the fabric, and I close my eyes. I won't be able to do that soon.

Shaking my head, I turn to the velvet dress. I will *not* ruin the makeup Trina just spent an hour putting on my face. I'm ten weeks pregnant, but thankfully not showing yet. When I slip the dress on, it feels like a second skin. The floor-length gown is inky black, the fabric thick and well-tailored. The straps are spaghetti-thin, but the dress is so well made that I'm pretty sure it'd stay up without them.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I gulp. I look...*good*.

For someone who's spent a large part of her life living out of a suitcase, glamorous evenings like this don't happen very often. I'm used to either being sweaty from plane or bus rides, or tired from walking around a new city for a day. When I work, I usually wear sweats and tees. A glamorous woman, I am not. And ever since I found out about the pregnancy and everything else going on, I've made even less of an effort.

The man who was supposed to be by my side walked away when he found out about the baby, and I've been hanging on by my fingernails ever since.

But this... Even if my date with Rudy turns out to be a total disaster, at least I can look at my forty-year-old self in the mirror and know that I look good.

When I open the door and walk out of the bathroom, the thigh-high slit at the side of the dress makes the fabric kiss my just-shaved legs.

A chorus of wolf whistles sounds in the room, which makes me blush and roll my eyes. Trina snaps her fingers and waves me over. "Let me finish your hair." She brushes out the curls, puts a few pins in my hair, sprays it one last time with the bottle of hairspray that has to be nearly empty by now, then



spins me toward the mirrored closet doors next to the entrance to my apartment.

“There,” she proclaims.

“Damn, Lily,” Simone says. “Rudy isn’t going to make it all the way to the event without ripping that dress off of you. I hope you have time to stop off for a quickie before dinner starts.”

I roll my eyes, but my cheeks flush. Ducking to my bedroom, I reach into the top drawer of my dresser and pull out one of the only pieces of jewelry I own. It’s a simple tear-shaped pendant with tiny diamonds studded all along the border. In the center is a larger pear-shaped sapphire of the darkest blue. The chain is white gold, which Trina helps clasp behind my neck as I hold up my dark hair.

“You carried Grandma’s necklace around the world with you, huh?” Candice asks, suspicious moisture gathering in the corners of her eyes.

I look at her in the reflection of the mirror and shrug. “What else would I do with it?”

Trina stands behind me, looking over my other shoulder, and the three of us stand in silence for a moment. Our father passed away nearly twenty-three years ago. Before he died, he gave each of us girls something from his side of the family. Candice got his mother’s engagement ring, Trina got beautiful dangly earrings, and I got this necklace. I’ve worn it a grand total of six times, and the chain rests against my neck feeling a lot heavier than it should.

I might not get many more chances to wear it, so I might as well have it on tonight. Who knows if I’ll ever attend a black-tie event again?

Fiona gives me an approving nod. “You look amazing. I approve.”

Then the apartment buzzer sounds, and butterflies explode in my stomach.

Rudy’s here.

*Lily*

**B**y some divine miracle, I convince the girls to stay in my apartment while I go meet Rudy outside. The door is always locked from the outside, so all they have to do is pull it closed when they leave. The last thing I want is for a whole stampede of women to follow me down the stairs to wave me off like proud parents sending their eldest kid to prom.

Still, when I step outside, I feel their eyes on my back. I'd bet if I looked up, there would be faces pressed against the front windows.

My attention isn't on the windows, though. It's on Rudy.

There's something uniquely powerful about a good-looking man in a well-tailored tux. Fabric of the deepest black is cut close to every hard line of his body, with a crisp white shirt clinging to his chest. I watch him straighten up from where he'd been leaning against the black car behind him, a different one than he had on our date—this one a sleek Audi that looks like money. Tugging at his cuffs, Rudy straightens his jacket while his eyes run from the black strappy heels on my feet all the way up my body.

His gaze lingers on the pendant necklace that rests just above the straight-cut neckline of my black dress. Then he meets my eyes, and there's something in his expression that I can't read. He extends a hand toward me, and I've slipped my palm against his before I even realize I've lifted my arm.

"You look incredible." His voice is half an octave lower than usual, sending a hot thrill to pierce my stomach.

“Jared will eat his words,” I reply.

Rudy shakes his head. “I’m finding myself not caring about my cousin at all right now.”

I blush as Rudy tugs me closer, his other hand moving to the small of my back. The touch is intimate, possessive, and I can almost hear the squeals coming from the upstairs window. Somehow, I resist the urge to look.

Rudy opens the door for me and waits until all the velvet fabric has been tucked inside the car, then he moves to the other side of the Audi. He gets behind the wheel as I strap on my seatbelt, his eyes lingering once more on my dress, my shoulders, my face.

Then, shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts, he puts the car in gear.

“Are we picking up Agnes?” I ask as he turns the car around to head down Cove Boulevard on our way to the freeway.

He makes a noise at the back of his throat. “She’s driving over with Cheswick. My grandmother doesn’t like to rely on anyone else for a ride. She’ll probably stay long enough to sneer at her sister, then walk out.”

I grin, turning my face to the window so Rudy won’t see. I can’t deny it: I like Agnes.

“I like my grandmother,” Rudy says, as if he could read my thoughts. “I mean, I love her, obviously, but I like her too. Once you get past the bulldog exterior—”

“She’s just soft and gooey inside?”

Rudy laughs. “Don’t know that I’d go that far.” He chuckles again. “And I certainly wouldn’t say that to her face, but she’s loyal and tough and she taught me how to take care of myself.”

“She raised you?” I remember him telling me that on our last date—and then my muscles seize, because I’m going on a second date with a man and I’m ten weeks pregnant. What the hell am I doing?

This time, Rudy doesn't read my thoughts and doesn't seem to notice the tension hardening every muscle in my body. He just drives the vehicle past the town limits and merges onto the freeway, every movement confident and in control. "She did," he finally says. "My mother had me young—really young—and I never knew my father. Grandma adopted me when I was born."

"And your mom?"

His hands clench for a moment. "She died in childbirth." Then, as if it takes a great effort, he relaxes.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He shrugs. "Your father died when you were young too, right?"

"Seventeen years old," I say. "But I'm grateful I had those years. Must be hard to not have any memories."

"I had a good childhood. My grandmother was everything I needed."

I nod, even though he's staring at the road in front of us. The night is as velvety as my dress, and even with the streetlights illuminating the freeway, it feels like a cocoon shrouding our car. I find myself running my finger over the pendant necklace, over and back along the tear-shaped diamond border.

It was only six months after my father died that I went on my first trip. I went to Peru by myself, visited Machu Picchu, and felt a bit of my grief eke out through my pores at the sight of the ancient Incan citadel. I felt awe—real awe—and it was the first good feeling I'd had since cancer had ripped my father away from me.

Sometimes I wonder if I've been running ever since, hunting for that feeling of calm.

"Does Mr. Cheswick live with Agnes?" I find myself asking, just to pull myself out of my own memories.

To my surprise, Rudy laughs. "No. They've been dating for as long as I can remember, but Grandma says she's too set

in her ways to share her space with anyone else. She says the key to their relationship is healthy boundaries.”

I grin. “She’s not wrong.”

Rudy laughs, and we lapse into comfortable silence for a while.

“So who is going to be at this gala?” I ask, trying to keep my voice light. “Am I meeting all your extended family under false pretenses?”

Rudy throws me a rueful grin. “What false pretenses are those?”

“That we’re dating.”

“Are we not?”

I grin as another thrill spears through me. “You know what I mean.”

I’m not sure *I* know what I mean, but Rudy inclines his head in acknowledgement. “You’ll meet most of them, but don’t worry. If it all goes wrong, I’ll just get my grandmother to play guard dog.”

I laugh, relaxing into my seat. It’s easy with Rudy. From the first moment I walked into the bookstore a few weeks ago, it’s been easy to talk to him, easy to forget about all the problems plaguing my future.

The car slows as he takes an exit, and within minutes we arrive at the venue. It’s a yacht club in Edgeville, lit up by a thousand fairy lights strung up on the building, with a valet booth and a parking lot full of luxury cars. Considering the hostels, cramped airplane seats, and stinky busses I’ve spent the last decades of my life in, this is definitely out of my comfort zone.

Still, when my heel touches the ground outside the car that costs as much as I make in a year or two, Rudy’s hand is there to help me. His lips are tipped in a secret smile, and he tucks me close to his side as he tosses the keys to the valet.

Rudy places my hand in the crook of his elbow and leans toward my ear. “Let’s have some fun.”

With those four words, Rudy manages, once again, to make me forget about all my worries. I forget about the upcoming challenges I face, about the baby, about everything that may or may not come after. I forget that my body will soon change in more ways than one, and I just let Rudy lead me through a vine-covered arch and into a courtyard of twinkling lights.

The air is warm in the middle of summer, but there's still a chill. The shawl Trina persuaded me to bring slips off my shoulder and Rudy's fingers brush my skin as he brings it back up again. The touch is soft, but it speaks volumes. His blue eyes meet mine for a moment, then turn to the entrance door which has already been opened for us.

If we were in a foreign country where no one spoke English, I'd feel more at home than in this place. I'm accustomed to feeling uncomfortable. I thrive on it. I enjoy walking out of an airport I've never been to before and being mobbed by taxi drivers clamoring for my attention—and my money. I like feeling the sticky heat of the tropics or the chill of a Siberian wind. I like treading on streets I'll only ever see once.

What I'm saying is, I *like* the discomfort of the unknown.

But a yacht club in Edgeville full of rich people wanting to save elephants is a whole other beast.

Rudy is a warm presence at my side, strength and grace and confidence. He leads me into a large reception room that overlooks the water and all the million-dollar yachts docked in the bay. Delicate music floats through the air from a string quartet as waiters drift through the crowd carrying trays full of food and champagne.

“You want a drink?” Rudy says quietly, his voice pitched so only I can hear it.

I shake my head. “Not drinking for the month.” Or the next, or the next, or the next...

“Might take the edge off.”

I shrug. “I like a challenge.”

“Rudy!” a booming voice calls out. A man with pure white hair spreads his arms, the shoulders of his tux pulling against the movement. “Get over here, kid!”

“Hey, Uncle Mike.” Rudy paints on that charming grin he deploys when he needs it and moves to give the older man a hug. Then his hand moves to the small of my back and he tugs me closer. “This is Lily. Lily, this is my uncle Mike and my aunt Nancy.”

“Lily,” Nancy cuts in, extending both arms toward me. “You’re even more gorgeous than Jared said. Lovely to meet you.”

Somehow, I doubt Jared was extolling my virtues and beauty, but I manage to smile and make small talk long enough that Mike and Nancy are called away.

Rudy searches my face with a gleam in his eyes, his hand still lingering on my hip. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Champagne, sir? Ma’am?” A waiter presents us with a tray of bubbly. Rudy grabs one and raises his brows at me, but I shake my head.

When the waiter walks away, I let out a sigh. “That’s the beginning of the end.”

Rudy arches a brow. “What is?”

“He called me ma’am. I might as well get my senior discount card now.”

I love the way Rudy laughs. It takes him from attractive to out-of-this-world. A few heads turn at the sound, and this time I find myself putting a possessive hand on his arm.

I quickly pull it away, but the damage is done. Rudy’s eyes lower as he tugs me closer and jerks his head to the open space in the middle of the floor. “Dance with me.”

Nights like these are dangerous. Not because I’m uncomfortable being around people whose net worth probably rivals that of small countries, but because it makes me forget about all the things that are bearing down on me. All the

problems knocking on my door that I'll only be able to ignore for a few more months.

And I'm not talking about the baby. That's not so much a problem as a...change. It's everything else that worries me.

Nights like these make me forget that Rudy and I have an expiration date, and that we're not supposed to actually like each other beyond something frivolous and casual.

But Rudy puts his untouched champagne on a waiter's empty tray. He takes my hand and places it on his shoulder, then grips my other hand in his. "Just follow my lead," he says, and then we dance.

We glide, twirl, and dip, and it's true—I forget about everything except the music and Rudy. The scent of his cologne that seems to embed itself into my skin every time he tugs me close, the feel of his hard body against mine, the way my dress whispers and flows over my legs.

By the time the music ends, the dance floor has filled with a few other couples. We clap for the musicians and I feel flushed and happy.

"May I cut in?" a familiar voice says behind us.

I turn to see Jared standing there in a tux, a funny kind of smirk tugging at his lips. I want to refuse, but Jared extends a hand toward me. Rudy has a question in his eyes, and I know I could say no if I wanted to, but in the interest of not causing a scene, I incline my head. "Sure."

Rudy backs away from us and is immediately accosted by a few elderly ladies who paw and fawn over him like it's their job.

"So, you and Rudy, huh?" Jared puts his hand on my waist and pulls me closer than I'd like.

I put a few inches of space between us again. "Me and Rudy," I repeat noncommittally. The music starts, and Jared starts leading me through the steps of a dance with practiced ease. Maybe they had to take classes at rich-boy school.



“I hadn’t realized he was seeing anyone.” He spins me, and I have to admit he’s competent, but he doesn’t have the same grace as Rudy.

When he tugs me back against his body, I pop a brow. “I hadn’t realized it was your job to know.”

A flash crosses the man’s eyes, then his lips curl into a dangerous smirk. “You could do better, you know.” The music swells, and we glide through other couples.

“Let me guess. With you?”

“Your words, not mine,” he answers with a laugh. Then he spins me again and pulls me hard against his chest. I pull away again, but it makes me stumble in the dance. I bump into an old couple and have to apologize.

“When I saw you at the restaurant, I had no idea you’d clean up this well,” he says, his lips near my ear. “But why would a beautiful, classy woman like you want a guy like Rudy? You must have heard that he never lasts more than a few weeks with a woman? How many other chicks does he have on the side? He’s just using you, Lily.”

His words needle at a worry that shouldn’t even exist. Rudy and I are not exclusive; it doesn’t matter if he’s going on dates with other women.

But...it *does* matter. It bothers me a lot.

I jerk away from him and narrowly miss banging into another couple. “I’m not doing this.” I spin around and clomp off the dance floor, searching the room for Rudy.

I find him chatting with Agnes and feel a wave of relief when she turns her scowling face to look at me. “How the hell did you get stuck dancing with Jared the Dolt? There’s something wrong with that boy. I keep telling Nancy about it but she won’t listen.”

I grin, tension melting away. “Hi, Agnes.”

Hank Cheswick has his half-dozen gray hairs combed over the liver-spotted skin on top of his head, and his old body is clad in a sharp tux. His twinkling eyes meet mine. “We

haven't met." He extends a gnarled hand toward me and we shake just as a waiter appears with a tray full of delicate little bites of fancy-looking somethings. Hank plucks one from the tray as the waiter explains that it's some sort of Greek shrimp canapé.

"Perfect," Hank says. "I'm on a seafood diet."

Agnes snorts. "Here we go."

Cheswick winks at me. "I see food, I eat it."

Rudy throws his head back and laughs, as if it isn't the oldest dad joke in the book. Somehow, his laugh clears the last of the discomfort from my body and I find myself giggling along with him.

Rudy's arm curls around my shoulders, and I find that I like having it there. Surely he's not dating other women right now? Where would he find the time? And why do I care? His breath ruffles my neck as he leans in to say, "Was everything okay with Jared?"

"Fine," I lie. "I just found I was sick of dancing."

He pulls away and stares at me for a moment, then nods. There's a strange look in his eyes that he clears as soon as Agnes says something to catch his attention.

If someone had told me that Agnes and Mr. Cheswick would look at home at some fancy charity gala, I wouldn't have believed it. But both of them expertly navigate the conversations of people that drift in and out of our little circle, and I find myself relaxing and even enjoying myself.

When Mr. Cheswick convinces Agnes to dance—after many protests from her that I think might be exaggerated, based on the grace she displays on the dance floor—Rudy smiles and takes my hand. He tugs me through the crowd of tuxedo- and gown-clad people glittering with jewels and expensive accessories, out through a glass door that leads onto the wooden pier.

"I'm wearing heels," I warn him. "So either walk slow or risk me getting stuck between these slats."

Instead of answering, Rudy just bends over and picks me up like a groom carrying his bride. I yelp, arms hooking around his neck, and he brings me down to the end of the pier. By the time he sets me down again—carefully, making sure my feet are solidly on the wide planks of wood—I’m laughing so hard my cheeks hurt.

Rudy’s hands linger on my waist, his thumbs sweeping soft arcs that brush the bottom of my ribs. “I like this,” he says softly, eyeing my dress. “Soft.”

“Velvet,” I explain as I let my hands rest on his arms. His tuxedo jacket is unbuttoned and I can see the strong body beneath it. “It’s my sister’s,” I add. “She’s a lot more glamorous than I am.”

“Could have fooled me.” His eyes are on mine now, and soft pressure from his hands makes me take a step closer to him. My hands slide up to his shoulders and I distract myself from the pounding in my chest by straightening his bowtie.

Waves lap at the timber pier as yachts bob up and down in the water beyond. The bay arcs around us, with lights from houses dotted on the dark landscape. It feels like we’re the only people in the world.

“Thank you for coming,” Rudy says in the soft silence. “This is the most fun I’ve had at one of these things in a long time.”

When his eyes drop to my lips, my breath hitches. The fabric of my dress doesn’t shield me from the heat of his hands as they wrap around to the small of my back. My body grows taut, the soft fabric of my gown suddenly feeling rough. The lace cups of my bra abrade my skin as Rudy tugs me closer and presses his chest to mine.

Every time I’m with Rudy, I forget myself. I forget the promises I made to myself ten—nearly eleven weeks ago. I forget what it felt like to see the father of my child walk away. I forget that the grim reaper might tap my shoulder any minute and rip all this away from me.

I forget about the secrets that made me run home to my family, because all that matters is the feel of his fingers digging into my hips and the way his eyes darken at the sight of me.

I swore off men when my last partner walked—ran—away. And look at me now. Arms around another man’s neck, feeling ten years younger and a lot healthier than I truly am.

Rudy’s arms are a warm cage that I don’t want to escape. When his hands move lower to rest on the swell of my ass, I don’t pull away. I crave it. Crave him.

His head dips, and I know he’s going to kiss me.

If we’d only had the one date, I think I would’ve been able to walk away. We could have slept together, and it would have been casual. But as Rudy’s tongue darts out to moisten his lips and my heart beats a rapid drum inside my chest, I know this kiss will ruin me.

Thankfully, when his lips are a fraction of an inch from mine, close enough to feel his breath ghosting across my cheek, a voice calls out his name.

“We’re about to do the champagne pour, Rudy!” Agnes’s voice carries to us, sharp and unyielding. I wouldn’t be surprised if people in the houses on either side of the bay can hear her too.

Rudy closes his eyes for a moment and rests his forehead against mine. Then he pulls away to answer, “We’re coming!”

Agnes grumbles something, but it’s too quiet to hear the words. I have a feeling she knew what she was interrupting, though. Part of me wants to throttle her—and the other part wants to thank her.

“To be continued,” Rudy says grimly, clamping his hand around mine.

“That sounds like a threat more than a promise,” I quip, arching a brow at him to hide how much the moment rocked me. If I’m snarky, at least it hides the tremble in my voice.

“Maybe it is,” he answers in a soft growl, that roguish grin returning to his lips. “I guess you’ll find out.”

With the heat of his words lingering, I turn to walk back to the party. By some miracle, I manage to make it all the way back without losing a heel to the pier’s wooden slats.

*Lily*

**T**he champagne pour is a tradition, I'm told, that marks the start of the silent auction. What looks like hundreds of champagne coupes are arranged in a crystal tower on one side of the room. The hundred or so guests are arranged in a loose semi-circle around the tower as a crisply uniformed waitress stands on a step stool holding the largest bottle of champagne I've ever seen. Another worker, a young man, stands on another step stool supporting the bottom of the massive bottle.

"That's called a Nebuchadnezzar bottle," Rudy says in my ear, his body pressed up against the back of mine from where he guided me through the throng of guests. "It holds the equivalent of twenty standard bottles of champagne."

"Seems excessive," I answer in a low voice.

I feel Rudy's smile against my cheek more than I see it. "It is."

We shuffle a bit closer as more people crowd in. Rudy leads me to the left of the tower of glasses. The light plays on the crystal as the two workers shift their grip on the huge bottle of champagne.

Rudy's aunt steps in front of the delicate tower of crystal, and a hush falls over the audience. Nancy seems perfectly comfortable in front of the crowd, her hands clasped gently in front of her stomach as her multitude of diamonds glitter at her neck, wrist, fingers, and ears. Suddenly, my delicate pendant doesn't seem so over the top.

“Thank you all for coming,” Nancy says in a voice that feels quiet but carries to the far reaches of the room. “Your generosity tonight will go to help not one but three elephant sanctuaries in Kenya and will help fight the scourge of poachers in the region.”

She pauses for polite applause, and I know she’s made many of these speeches before.

“We will open the silent auction after the champagne pour. I encourage you to be generous, and don’t be afraid to outbid your best friend or your own mother.”

I smile as a laughter sounds in one corner of the crowd. There must be some inside joke there, but I’m more focused on the feel of Rudy’s hands on my arms. When his aunt started talking, he moved to grip my biceps, and now his hands are stroking my arms slowly, torturously, and I wonder if he craves the feel of my skin as much as I seem to crave his.

Leaning against the hard wall of his body, I let myself relax. Nancy’s voice lulls me as she stands in front of the audience of rich yacht owners, delivering a speech with practiced ease. I don’t belong here—I know that. Not only is my net worth probably small enough to get me turned away at the door on a regular occasion, but my life itself has been the opposite of what this represents. I’ve been a nomad. I’ve lived out of a suitcase for most of my adult years; none of the things I’ve wanted have been silent auctions with people dripping in jewels.

But for now, it feels good. Maybe it’s the fact that Rudy radiates safety. That with him—if nowhere else—I feel at peace. I don’t have to think of yesterday or tomorrow, unless it’s to imagine what it’ll feel like when we finally kiss again. His hands sweep up and down my arms, moving up over my shoulders and sending shivers coursing down my body. His fingers brush my collarbones, a spot on my body I hadn’t realized was erogenous until this very moment. My skin tingles from my chest down to my navel, my nipples tightening at the featherlight touch of his hands.

Eyes half-closed, I listen to another successful joke land with the audience, followed by Nancy's direction for the two waiters to start pouring champagne. With the audience gasping, champagne starts pouring out of the massive bottle and down the tower of glasses, spilling over and down in a cascade of bubbles and excess. I watch the bottle tip higher, more golden liquid filling another glass, and another, and another, until the entire tower of glasses is spilling with the golden drink. All the while, Rudy's fingers dance over my shoulders, my collarbones, my arms. When his thumb traces the strap of my dress, I can't help the way I soften against him. He's turning my body to jelly in a room full of people, and I can't quite remember why that should bother me.

That's the reason I'm not braced for the collision.

Between one breath and the next, I go from relaxed and a little turned on to off-balance and stumbling. The hem of my dress gets caught in my stupid spike heel, and I can't take a step. Rudy grabs my waist, but he's as off-balance as me. When his hands wrap around my middle, the momentum of his body sends us both crashing into the tower of crystal and champagne, just as the last drops are poured from the huge Nebuchadnezzar bottle.

I fall on the floor, crushing the table that held the tower of glasses, and the sound of shattering crystal echoes along with gasps from the guests. Rudy, through some sort of masculine-strength-induced voodoo, manages to yank me at the last moment and shield most of my fall. He lands mostly underneath me with only the sharp bite of broken glass eating against my arm. Champagne sloshes and falls to cover us both in sticky shards of glass.

For a few heartbeats, I lie still.

Rudy is beneath me, his arm clamped around my waist. I'm gripping his tuxedo as a drip of champagne runs down the side of my neck. Rudy's cheek is bleeding and when I use my hand to turn his chin in order to check the wound, I notice my arm and hand is sliced too.



Blinking rapidly, I stare at the blood, the glass, then at Rudy's face.

"You okay?" Concern is written all over his features, his arm still banding tight across my back, his other hand cupped over my cheek.

I do a quick inventory of my body. A sharp stab of worry pierces through me when I think of the baby, but when I feel nothing more than the ache of the cuts on my arm, I nod. "Yeah. I think so. For someone with such a hard body, you make an okay cushion."

Tension leaves him in a whoosh, and his lips tilt into that smile that makes my knees go weak.

Then, as if a spell has been broken, I hear Nancy calling out orders as dozens of hands reach over to help the two of us up. Two unfamiliar male hands lift me right off Rudy and when I'm standing, I totter on my heels again. Stupid things. The strange hands on my arms linger until Rudy glances over my shoulder with a hard expression on his face.

"What the fuck was that about? I felt you push me."

Jared's hands drop from my arms as I turn, and he throws up both his palms. "Someone nudged me, man. It was an accident."

Rudy's jaw clenches as a bead of blood trickles down his cheek. I've never seen him like this—angry. Fearsome. He has one arm curled protectively around my shoulders as he takes half a step to put the bulk of his body between me and his cousin.

His cousin's girlfriend curls her hand around Jared's arm, her eyes flicking between the two men. Jared ignores her. My gaze snaps to Rudy, who swears quietly and viciously. Jared bristles but says nothing.

I find myself turned on by the fury written on Rudy's face, and then I wonder what the hell is wrong with me.

The easygoing Rudy is the one I was first attracted to. The man behind the bookstore desk with laughing eyes and a mischievous smile. That's the man I laughed with as the sun

went down while we ate fish and chips. That's the man who asked me for salted caramel brownies as he worked on the community garden.

This Rudy is entirely different. I find myself noticing just how much taller and stronger he is than me. How much I like the way his arm is still wrapped around my shoulders and how he seems angrier that I could have been hurt than the fact that he's clearly bleeding from multiple injuries.

"Wait until Dorothy hears about this," Agnes grumbles as she elbows her way to the eye of the storm. At four feet, nine inches, Agnes should not take up as much room as she does. The woman is made of iron and acid, and her mere presence seems to make everyone give us a wide berth. She manages to look down her nose at Jared for a long moment, until he drops his eyes and takes a step back.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Agnes. It was an accident. Someone bumped me and I bumped into Rudy."

Agnes says nothing. She stares him down for another long moment, then snorts. Just like that, Jared is dismissed. Agnes turns to Rudy and me, arches a brow at the lines of red carved into his cheek, his neck, his hands. She grips Rudy's chin and turns his head, making a low, harsh noise at the sight of his blood. Then she turns to me and takes my hand, turning it this way and that to assess the damage.

Without Rudy's presence beside me, I feel suddenly bare. I'm sticky with champagne, my arm is bloody, I know my face and hair are a mess, and it's possible I've ruined Trina's dress. Even worse, the eyes of all the guests are on me, and I can almost hear their whispers.

I close my eyes against the humiliation of it all.

Rudy must notice, because he disengages my hand from Agnes's and leads me to the edge of the room and down a hallway. Within moments, he's pushing open the door to a unisex bathroom. Unsurprisingly, it's gorgeous. The vanity is long and looks like real stone, white interspersed with pink and grey veins. The taps are a trendy matte black, the soaps

look expensive, and there are soft-looking towels rolled and stacked in a basket beside the sink.

Rudy turns the lock on the door and points to the vanity. “Sit.”

When I don’t move, he just grabs my waist and lifts me onto the counter himself. Then he leans over and produces a first aid kit from underneath the vanity, placing it on the other side of the sink.

“We should check you first,” I say, even though Rudy is already opening the first-aid kit and sorting through its contents until he finds a pair of tweezers in a sterilized packet. He opens it up without even deigning to answer. Then he begins a thorough, methodical examination of my injuries. First, he checks the half-dozen cuts on my forearm and hand for shards of glass. He plucks two tiny pieces out of the largest cut and places them on the counter, his face set in absolute concentration.

This is new to me—having someone look after me. I’ve been on my own a long time, but even the last few boyfriends I had wouldn’t have reacted like this. For all I call myself a strong, independent woman, I find myself enjoying this moment with Rudy.

The last time I was vulnerable with a man was when I told my ex-boyfriend about the baby. We’d been dating for only ten months, but it felt like so much longer. We’d talked about him coming here, meeting my family. We’d talked about the future. I’d been living in Milan for twice that length of time and had fallen into a whirlwind romance with a man who was in Italy on a work assignment. Phil was a fabric supplier for all the major fashion houses, so he was always flitting between Paris and Milan and London and New York and any other fashion mecca, seeing me every few weeks and promising me the world.

I thought I was in love with him, which was not my brightest moment. It was only after I told him about the baby that he admitted he had a wife and three kids back home in Paris. I didn’t even know he had a home other than his

apartment in Milan. That's how blind I was. We'd dated for *ten months*, and I had no idea I was the other woman.

When I told him I was keeping the baby, he walked out and hasn't spoken to me since.

I suppose it would have been devastating, if not for the news I got a week later. The news that I haven't even been able to face, even though the reality of it looms like a black cloud. Since then, I haven't been able to catch my breath.

Until now.

Rudy runs clean water over my forearm and hand, patting it dry with a white towel that's soon streaked with pink. He places bandages over every cut, smoothing them down over my skin with more care than I'd have for myself. Then, when it's over, he lifts my palm up and places a kiss in the center of it.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous," I answer. "Is there another pair of sterilized tweezers in there?" I jerk my head to the first-aid kit. "Seems to me it's your turn."

Rudy holds my gaze for a moment, then rustles through the kit for another pair of tweezers. Still sitting on the counter, my knees having spread open at some point to let him inspect my body, I nod to his jacket. Without a word, Rudy removes it and stretches to hang it on a hook behind the door. He keeps his hips firmly planted between my thighs.

Blood has soaked into the collar and cuffs of his shirt. Gently, I undo his bowtie and unbutton the top three buttons of his shirt. I try to stop myself from inhaling sharply as a triangle of bronzed male skin is exposed at his throat. My hands, thankfully, manage to stay steady as I start my own methodical examination of his injuries.

Rudy took the brunt of the damage. Besides the champagne drying in his hair and making his skin sticky, both his hands, his neck, and his cheek have been cut. He leans his palms against the counter as I start with his face, using a clean

towel to wipe the dried blood away once I've checked for shards of glass.

Thankfully, the cuts on his face and neck are shallow nicks, and there are no pieces of glass. Once they're cleaned and bandaged, I ignore the movement of his chest with every hitched breath and I try not to think about the scent of his cologne embedded in my nose.

This feels intimate. I'm not sure the way I'm tending to his injuries is exactly medical, either. My fingers might have drifted over his cheek a little more softly than I intended. I might have stared at the shape of his lips for a moment too long.

When I take his left hand, Rudy winces. I give him a sharp look, then pinch my lips at the sight of the bloody piece of glass in the largest cut.

All thoughts of intimacy and lips leave my mind as I use the second pair of sterilized tweezers to rid his wounds of glass, then clean and bandage his hands. He stands between my spread knees, stoic, still. Neither of us says anything.

It's better that way. I'm not sure I'd be able to speak, anyway.

The last of the bandages feels rough under my fingertips as I smooth it over the back of his palm. His cuffs have been rolled up to reveal strong forearms, his shirt open at the neck in a way that feels more undressed than if he weren't wearing a shirt at all.

When I finally find the courage to lift my eyes to meet Rudy's, I know I've already lost the battle against my own self-control. His bandaged hand cups my jaw as he tilts his head up to mine, his other hand resting so high on my thigh his thumb might be brushing against the edge of my panties through the black velvet of my dress.

Without saying a word, Rudy kisses me. There's no hesitation in the way his lips claim mine, in how his hand tightens over my neck and jaw, in the way he crowds me against the mirror. I find myself clinging to his shoulders and

pulling him closer, deepening the kiss until I lose myself in his touch.

This is better than the first time.

A growl rides out through his lips, a very masculine noise that comes from the back of his throat. The hand on my thigh moves to my hip, then my waist, then my ribs. When he moves to kiss my jaw, I tilt my head and close my eyes, gulping down breaths as my hands scramble to unbutton his shirt and push it off his shoulders.

Rudy's lips find mine as he rips his shirt out of his pants, helping me with the last of the buttons. The shirt falls away and his hands are on me again, as hungry as his mouth.

He cups my breasts, and a dart of panic makes me freeze.

Rudy immediately lifts his head. "What's wrong?" His eyes search mine, a little wild.

I shake my head and swallow a breath. "Nothing." It's a lie, but the truth is worse.

The frantic need that had gripped us a moment ago seems to ease out of both of us. I put my hands on his chest and trace the hard muscles of his body, closing my eyes as he kisses me again more tenderly. When he touches my breast again, I manage to keep my body from seizing, but Rudy must still feel something in the energy between us, because he drops his palms to the counter on either side of my hips. He leans his forehead against mine and lets out a shuddering breath.

"I'm not doing this here," he tells me quietly. "Not with my entire extended family in the other room. Not when you feel like a scared rabbit every time I touch you."

I pull away and arch a brow. "A scared rabbit? I'm a forty-year-old woman, Rudy."

"A forty-year-old scared rabbit," he amends, then chuckles at the look on my face.

I open my mouth to explain why I reacted that way to his hand on my breast—but nothing comes out. The words are there, on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't make them

come. Relenting, I straighten up and nod to the crumple of white fabric on the ground. “You think your shirt survived the evening?”

Still standing between my spread knees, he glances at the bloodstained shirt on the floor. His hands move to my thighs as he gives me a gentle squeeze, then he leans over to pick it up. After he flicks his wrists to straighten the shirt with a snap, turning it this way and that to inspect it, he gives me a rueful glance. “Barely.”

After sliding his arms into the shirt, he leaves it open and turns to me. Strong hands wrap around my waist as he lifts me off the counter and deposits me gently on the floor, his bare chest brushing against the soft fabric of my dress. His finger tilts my chin up, and he kisses me gently.

Even in the soft brush of his lips against mine, I feel a fire burning low in my gut. It’s like my body is fully attuned to his, and any touch can make me melt.

Then, we’re both busying ourselves cleaning up first-aid detritus and straightening our clothes. The reflection that stares back at me in the mirror is one of a flushed woman with bright eyes. I brush my fingers through my hair and do my best to tame the hairspray-and-champagne-soaked mess, then tug my dress to straighten it over my chest.

I don’t know what the hell I’m going to tell Trina about her dress. The truth, I guess. Knowing her and her cackling coven of girlfriends, they’ll probably think it’s funny.

When my hands brush the curves of my breasts, my throat tightens. But I shake the thought away and turn to face Rudy, who’s straightening the cuffs of his shirt to let them poke out of the black tuxedo jacket.

His gaze meets mine. “Ready?”

Suddenly nervous about facing a room full of people after falling into a tower of champagne glasses and making out with a man six years my junior, I nod and manage to keep my voice neutral. “Let’s do it.”

*Nora*

**T**he last of my boxes is finally unpacked. It took me nearly a month to get my new apartment set up, but it feels good to be here. I've made a few trips over and back from Reno, transitioning to a full-time work-from-home arrangement. Well, mostly full-time. There seem to be more mandatory meetings in the office than I remember ever having before.

My mother straightens up from putting a mug in the dishwasher and glances at me from the kitchen, arching a brow at the box at my feet. "Is that the last of them?"

"I'm officially a resident of Heart's Cove," I say with a smile. I can smell Ma's famous carrot cake baking in the oven, and my mouth waters. She knows it's my favorite, and she said she made it to celebrate me moving in—which I understood to mean that I needed to unpack every last box if I expected to eat any.

She tilts her head, studying my face. "You like it here."

"If you stick around more than a week, you might start liking it too."

My mother waves a hand, but there's a grin on her face. I'm driving her back to Tahoe in a few days' time, and now that I'm settled into my new place, I'm sure she feels more comfortable going back. My mother might let Fallon and me live our own lives, but she's got a protective streak a mile wide.

I know part of the reason she's staying here has to do with Fallon too, of course. The two of them have been spending



time together for the first time in two decades. Her staying with me doesn't fool me—she just wanted to give Fallon enough space to retreat if he didn't want to see her.

What my mother doesn't understand is that Fallon pushed her away because he was ashamed of *himself*, not her. Since he met Jen, that's changed.

A knock on the door draws our attention. I cross the small, open-plan living room to unlock the door, only to see Dorothy and Margaret, the two ladies who own the Heart's Cove Hotel, on the other side. They're both wearing leather jackets.

"Someone let us in downstairs," Margaret says after nodding to me to explain how she and her sister bypassed the buzzer. She glances over my shoulder. "Hamish wanted to know if you wanted to go for a ride, Prisha."

My mother frowns. "A ride? Who's Hamish?"

"Hamish is my lover," Margaret says in that confident, nonplussed way that older people use the word *lover*. "And he rides motorcycles." She steps inside and closes the door behind her.

To my surprise, my mother's eyes spark with interest. "A motorcycle? I've never ridden a motorcycle before."

"You'll love it." Dorothy bustles past me and hooks her arm through my mother's to start tugging her to the door, then pauses. "You'll need closed-toed shoes. Actually, you'll need to change out of that dress and into jeans. You can borrow my jacket and helmet."

"You ride motorcycles as well?"

Dorothy straightens up. "I'm learning. Doing the test for my license next week."

My eyes bug. "Really?"

Dorothy turns on me with an arched brow. "Are you so surprised that an old woman like me could try something that's supposed to be reserved for younger men?"

I throw my palms up at the challenge in her tone. "Of course not. I think it's great."

Dorothy settles back and gives me an impish grin. “I’m planning a custom paint job for my new bike. Hamish, Mac, and Lee will help me pick one out, and their man at the body shop, Remy Something-or-Other, said he knows someone who can paint it the way I want.”

“Dorothy’s very proud that she’ll have the only motorcycle in Heart’s Cove with a leopard-print body,” her sister cuts in, mirth dancing in her eyes.

I exchange a glance with my mother, and when I see the question in her gaze, I shrug. “It’s up to you, Ma. You want to go for a ride with Hamish?”

There’s a moment of silence, then a smile breaks over my mother’s face that makes her look ten years younger than she is. “I’ll go get changed. Nora, if I’m not back in time, can you take the cake out of the oven when the timer goes off?”

“Sure, Ma. No problem.”

When the door closes on the bedroom, Margaret gives me a nod. “I like her.”

It shouldn’t please me as much as it does that these women like my mother. Maybe I inherited a protective streak from my mother.

Re-emerging in jeans and sensible shoes, my mother and I follow the twins down the stairs to the ground floor. On my way past, I glance at the door across the hall from mine, but I haven’t heard Lily come back from her date. Earlier, I was just hauling a few broken-down boxes to the recycling bin in the basement when her sisters and friends came spilling out of the door and told me all about her upcoming evening with Rudy. I hadn’t even realized we’d be neighbors, but the thought pleases me. I’ll have to pry details of her date out of her tomorrow morning. Maybe I can bribe her with fresh carrot cake.

The ladies and I spill out onto the sidewalk to see half a dozen motorcycles parked up against the curb. The men are huddled near my building, two of them leaning against the

brick with one leg pulled up. A toothless man holds a cigarette and laughs at something one of the older men said.

I recognize Mac, Trina's partner. He's wearing a leather jacket, black jeans, and motorcycle boots, and he looks very, very sexy. When Trina told me he was a second-grade teacher, I thought she was pulling my leg. And when she told me he also did pottery and was almost famous because he was so good at it, I was sure she was making fun of me somehow. Then I found out it was all true and I just felt jealous of her—in the best possible way.

Beside him is the second of the younger men, and he looks similar enough to Mac that he could be related. A brother, maybe. Despite myself, I notice that he's tall, muscular, and he has very nice eyes that happen to be roaming over me from my feet up to my face.

I think I saw him at the community garden, but he certainly wasn't looking at me like *that*. Like I'm a special treat that he can't wait to devour.

I arch my brows at the pack of badass biker dudes waiting for the little old ladies from the hotel. "You all came here to see my mother?" Something warm slides through my chest at the thought that these women would come here with the sole intention of inviting my mother along for a motorcycle ride.

"I'm a slave to my woman's wishes," a salt-and-pepper (mostly salt) haired man says, making moon eyes at Margaret. That must be Hamish.

"You. Mac." Dorothy thrusts her finger at Trina's partner. "Give Prisha a helmet. She's riding with you. Nora, are you coming along? We're going to get ice cream."

For some reason, the thought of these six burly men riding with a contingent of elderly ladies at their backs going to get ice cream, of all things, makes me laugh. I start shaking my head—but before I can say anything, Dorothy's phone rings.

She makes a little "Oo!" sound and shuffles through her crossbody bag for her phone. Squinting at the screen, she turns

it toward me. “I haven’t got my glasses, dear. What does that say?”

“It says ‘Lily,’” I read.

“Well, what could Lily possibly want?” Dorothy swipes her finger across the screen, and Lily’s face appears. “Aren’t you supposed to be rubbing elbows with rich, snotty people?” Dorothy asks instead of greeting Lily like a normal person.

Lily is laughing. “Dor, you’ve got to see this.”

The camera flips to show total carnage. There’s broken glass all over the ground that workers are hurriedly sweeping up, and in the middle of the mess is Agnes, Dorothy’s sworn enemy. The small woman has her index finger in a younger man’s face, and she’s stringing together swear words and insults in a way that makes my eyebrows climb higher and higher with every word.

Lily’s voice sounds, but the camera stays pointed at the scene. “They were doing the champagne pour—you know, like a tower of glasses and they pour champagne so it flows down and fills every one?”

Dorothy snorts as the rest of us—burly motorcycle men and all—crowd around. “Wasteful, but yes, I understand.”

“Well, Rudy was standing behind me and someone bumped him, so he bumped me. Anyway, that happened.” Her hand appears in the screen as she points to the smashed glasses. There are bandages all over her arm and hand. “Rudy and I went to clean up”—did her voice sound strange when she said that?—“and we came back to see Agnes ripping her grand-nephew a new one. Apparently, she got him to admit that he bumped into Rudy on purpose because I wouldn’t dance with him.”

*“You should be ashamed of yourself, you, you, you cockroach!”* Agnes’s voice rises another octave, and her grandnephew cowers. *“We all put up with these silent auctions every year and being here is torture enough.”* She takes a step toward the man. *“You see those cuts you put on my nephew’s skin? You see them?”* She thrusts a finger off-screen.

*“Agnes, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”*

*“And then you lie to me!”* The terrifying, tiny old woman stomps her foot, and it looks like she’s about to charge like a bull.

“Oh,” Dorothy says with a Cheshire-cat grin on her face. “This is fantastic.”

“I know, right? I knew you’d enjoy it.” Lily sounds like she’s holding back a laugh.

“The Hag isn’t so bad when you aim her at someone else,” Dorothy replies sagely.

Margaret just rolls her eyes. I meet my mother’s gaze and shrug.

“Anyway, as soon as Rudy can make sure his grandmother isn’t going to murder Jared, we’ll be on our way back.” The camera flips around to reveal Lily’s broad smile and dancing eyes. “Just thought you’d like that.”

“I did, sweetheart,” Dorothy replies. “And so did everyone else.” She sweeps the camera at the assembled crowd of seniors and motorcycle riders, and we all wave.

Lily laughs. “I haven’t had this much fun in months. Years, maybe. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dorothy hangs up with that wide smile still clinging to her lips. She meets my eyes and arches her brows. “See? Aren’t you glad you moved here? Much more fun than stinky Reno.”

“You’ve never been to Reno, Dorothy,” Margaret cuts in. “How do you know it’s stinky? I’ve heard it’s lovely.”

“You know what’s lovely? Ice cream.” Dorothy marches toward one of the bikes and pulls a helmet on. “Nora, are you coming?”

My eyes dart to the crowd, to my mother, who has already acquired a helmet and is pulling it on, and I shake my head. “There’s a cake in the oven. Maybe some other time.”

For some reason, my eyes drift to the man who looks related to Mac. His eyes meet mine and linger for a moment,

until the roar of the first motorcycle snaps me out of my stupor. Clenching my fists to hide the trembling in my hands, I smile and nod at the departing motorcycles.

His is navy blue, I note, with subtle smoke swirling over the body in slightly lighter shades. A very pretty motorcycle. Masculine, yet unique.

Mac's probably-a-brother leaves last and I find myself tracing the blue swirls on his bike—until I snap my eyes up to his face and realize he caught me staring.

Giving him a dorky wave, I try to ignore the insistent thumping of my heart. He guns the engine, then takes off down the road after everyone else. I stand on the sidewalk until he's out of sight. Then I head back upstairs to wait for the cake to finish baking.

*Lily*

**A**fter Rudy made sure his grandmother wasn't going to commit homicide with a room full of witnesses, we snuck away and drove to our now-favorite fish-and-chips spot, both agreeing that we didn't feel like sticking around the yacht club for dinner. The food was great, and the company was better. When I kicked my heels off under the table, Rudy picked one up to inspect it. "I guess I can admit they look uncomfortable," he told me. "But they're hot as hell."

"If they look so great, maybe you should wear them," I'd shot back, then immediately clamped my mouth shut. That was exactly the type of comment my ex would have sneered at. He always thought I was too classless to understand *fashun*, which irked me. I understand it just fine—I'm just not that interested.

But Rudy just laughed at my quip and told me I had a point.

Now, as we drive back to Heart's Cove with nothing but the soft sounds of the radio filling the car, I let out a happy sigh.

Tonight was fun—more fun than I expected. But when I think of what happened in the bathroom, dread curls in my gut.

Since Rudy gave me that last kiss right before he opened the bathroom door, he hasn't touched me. Even when we left the restaurant and he lingered at my car door, he didn't lean down and kiss me even though it was obvious we both wanted it to happen.

And I know why.

It's because of the way I reacted in the bathroom. He sensed my stress when he touched me, and he backed off. But the problem, I realize with a start, is that I don't want him to back off.

I should just let him walk away. This is supposed to be casual, and since we're obviously not going to have no-strings-attached sex—judging by how much we enjoy each other's company—it should end now.

“Open the glove compartment,” Rudy says suddenly.

I frown, glancing at him.

His eyes are on the road, but I can tell his attention is on me. So, I press the button that has the glove compartment popping open. Inside, a book-shaped object is wrapped in gold paper.

“Happy belated birthday,” he says. “I only heard about it afterward, otherwise I would've called on Wednesday.”

“I was trying to pretend it wasn't happening,” I explain, even if my pulse jumps. “I keep thinking that if I pretend I haven't hit forty, it won't be true.”

Rudy's lips tilt as I turn the present over my hand. “What's wrong with being forty? Seems to me like it'd be the best decade of them all. Everyone's twenties are a mess. In your thirties you might find your footing and make some strides, but you might still wander and stumble. Your forties are when you know yourself and you know what you want. You should be happy that the messy years are behind you.”

Ha! Right. If only he knew. I have a feeling my messy years are very much ahead.

“Now how could a thirty-four-year-old man possibly have any idea what it's like to be a forty-year-old woman?” I arch a brow, then drop my gaze to the present again. Something tightens in my chest. “You didn't have to get me anything.”

“Open it.”



“You shouldn’t have done this,” I chide, and I mean it. All week I’ve been telling myself that my dinner with Rudy was just a bit of fun, that this evening at the charity auction was a favor to stick it to his cousin. I’ve dismissed the memory of the community garden, and how it felt to have Rudy’s hand squeezing mine. I’ve ignored the memory of our kiss, except when I’m alone in my bed at night with only my vibrator to keep me company.

I’m the one who said this was casual. No past, no future, no talk of relationships. Those were the rules.

People who are dating casually don’t get each other birthday presents.

Still, I pull at the bow to remove it and tear open the wrapping paper. A beautifully embossed hardcover book appears, and my breath catches.

“You told me you didn’t like fairy tales because they were unrealistic and fluffy,” Rudy says. “I thought *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* might be more your speed.”

Despite myself, a smile curls my lips. “Are you saying I’m dark and twisted?”

“Hmm,” Rudy says, his hand sliding from the steering wheel to the gearshift. I love his hands, broad and graceful with long fingers. He keeps his eyes on the road. “In the version by the Brothers Grimm, Cinderella’s evil stepsisters cut off their toes and heels with a knife to fit the shoe. The blood soaking their stockings is what makes the prince notice he hasn’t found his princess. In the end, the stepsisters get their eyes pecked out by pigeons and live the rest of their lives in blindness. Is that dark and twisted, or is it poetic justice?”

I can’t help it, I laugh. “What about Rapunzel?” I ask. “She doesn’t kill the witch by cutting off her hair and letting her fall to her death—the witch casts her out of the tower, then tricks the prince into coming up to the top of the tower so she can push him out the window. He ends up blind as well, as far as I remember, and nothing ever happens to the witch at all. All because Rapunzel’s father wanted to feed his pregnant wife

from the witch's garden. A cautionary tale about pregnancy cravings, maybe?"

Rudy's smile creases his cheeks. "But the prince finds Rapunzel, and when she cries on his face, he regains his sight." Rudy glances at me with a grin. "If that's not a happy ending, I don't know what is."

My lips twitch. "Sounds like the Grimm brothers had an obsession with blindness."

Rudy's laugh is warm and rich, and it feels like a blanket wrapped around my shoulders. He shrugs. "Maybe."

I open the book and let my fingers run over the thick pages, tracing the words. "This is beautiful. Thank you."

Rudy hums. "Grimms' fairy tales aren't so popular at story time, but I like them best of all. I found that edition a few years ago in a small bookshop in Boston when I was there on a vacation. Didn't know why I was so drawn to it, but when I learned it was your birthday this week, it felt..." He clamps his lips shut and shakes his head, snorting. "Never mind. Maybe I should stop reading so many fairy tales myself."

It felt what, I wonder? Like he'd bought that book years ago to give specifically to me?

My throat is suddenly tight. This is bad. This is very, very bad. It's been a bad idea from the moment I veered off course and entered the bookstore.

The car slows as Rudy takes an exit, and I fight to keep my breathing under control. When we roll into the Heart's Cove town limits, I know I can't push Rudy away without at least an explanation. He pulls up to my building and cuts the engine while my fingers are still tracing the swirls and floral patterns etched into the front cover of the book.

"Rudy," I start, then stop. The pause between us stretches.

"Walk with me." He arches his brows. "It's easier to walk and talk."

I huff, then nod. "Fine."

Like a true gentleman, Rudy opens my door for me and helps me out. My dress and skin are still sticky, but I hook my arm in his and let him lead me down Cove Boulevard. We walk in silence for a few moments until we turn into the new community garden. Doing a slow turn of the space, we pause near the new lattice. Rudy slides his hands over my hips and faces me.

“Look, Lily, you don’t have to say anything. I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable in the bathroom; that wasn’t my intention. I won’t push you to do anything you don’t want to do, but I have to be honest and say that I want to see you again. We don’t have to talk about the future and you don’t have to tell me anything about why you want to keep it casual.”

His words are soft, soothing. Something cracks inside me, some hard shell that had calcified around my heart sometime over the past months, years, decades. All the thoughts I had earlier melt away, and the last thing I want is for Rudy to walk away from me.

“You don’t have to tell me what was going through your mind when I touched you, and I’m truly sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I don’t—”

“I have cancer,” I blurt, surprised the words came so easily when I’ve barely been able to even think them.

Rudy’s hands tighten on my hips as I stare at his bowtie hanging undone on either side of his collar. I don’t look at Rudy’s face, but I hear the sharp intake of breath and feel the silence settle over us like a weight.

“You... Wait, what?”

I close my eyes. This time, it takes an effort to push the words past my lips. “Breast cancer. I found out about it nine weeks ago, give or take. Right after...” I stop myself. Right after I found out I was pregnant. But I can’t say that, can I? I should. I know I should. I should be completely honest with Rudy, but one bombshell might be enough for the night.

Plus, we're not supposed to be talking about the future. People dating casually don't talk about future plans. Even though I'm breaking that rule by telling him about the cancer, I can pretend that's just to explain my reaction in the bathroom when he touched my chest.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

I take a deep breath. "No one knows except my medical team. I came back here for treatment, but I've been too much of a coward to tell my family." I gulp, still letting my fingers run over his shoulders, avoiding his gaze. "I'm not saying this so you'll pity me, I'm saying it so you'll understand." I don't want to look at Rudy's face and see anything that might hurt my tender feelings, so I just stare at his chest and soldier on. "Ever since I got the diagnosis, it's been hard to look at my body—at my breasts—and see anything other than the cancer growing inside me. When you touched me, I remembered... I remembered everything. That's why I froze. It wasn't because of you."

There's a silence that seems to last forever, but it's probably only two or three seconds. Then Rudy's gentle voice says, "Lily, will you look at me?"

I shake my head.

"No? You won't look at me?"

"If I look at you and see pity, I'll break."

I hear him let out a huff of breath that kind of sounds like a laugh. "Okay." His hands slide up to my waist. "Well, everything I said is still true. I'll take things slow. I'll wait. I won't push you."

"Rudy, I'm going to *lose my breast*. They'll cut it off, because otherwise the cancer will spread and I will *die*. They can do a reconstruction, but at best I'll be scarred. I'll have to have chemo. It will be months—years, maybe—before I feel like myself again, and that's *if* I make it. What are you talking about, taking it slow? Not pushing me? You don't want to be with me at all! I have so much baggage, I should be running an airport. You should be running away from me." I snap my

head up to look at him, and to my shock, there's no pity on his face.

He looks...patient. He blinks at me, and I blink at him.

“When's your surgery? My work schedule is flexible. I could drive you to the hospital.”

“I...” I frown, then shake my head. “No. No, you won't drive me. This is not the time for me to be getting involved with a man. It's going to be hard enough on my family to deal with my treatment, I'm not going to ask you to take that on. If you want to have sex, fine. We can have sex tonight and be done with it. But I'm not going to date you and drag you into my shit. This is casual. I shouldn't even be telling you anything. I just...wanted to explain.”

He arches a brow. “Lily,” he says, “although I very much want to have sex with you, I'm not intending to ‘be done with it’ after we sleep together. I'm not sure tonight is the best time for it.”

Great. Now he doesn't even want to sleep with me! What the hell happened to casual? We were supposed to hook up after fish and chips, then never speak to each other again.

“You won't have sex with me? Why the hell not?” I spit the words.

I don't even know where this anger is coming from. I'm not mad at Rudy. I'm being an ass, and I hate myself for it, but I can't help it. All the terror and stress and tension in my body suddenly wants *out*, and Rudy happens to be the person in front of me.

But maybe it's more than that.

Maybe it's the fact that I told him, and he didn't react with fear or pity and false sympathy. It didn't seem to change his opinion of me at all, which is crazy. Insane. He should be pulling away from me just like my ex did. He should be turning his back on me and walking away, because that's infinitely easier than dealing with someone who's ill.

He doesn't owe me anything, and the last thing I want to do is drag him down with me.

“Are you insane?” I ask him, totally serious.

Laughter lights his eyes for a moment, but his lips don't twitch. “Not that I'm aware, why?”

“Because it doesn't seem to bother you that I'm sick.”

“You'll recover.” He says it with such surety, such conviction, that I suck in a breath.

That's my greatest fear, isn't it? I haven't been able to think about the tumor growing in my breast because I'm scared to death that I *won't* recover. I saw my dad get eaten up by a cancer of his own. I saw the way it ripped my mother to shreds, and how it took her a decade to recover the same laughter that filled her up before. I saw my family adjust and fuss over my dying dad and take the world on our shoulders because that's what we had to do.

I don't want to make them do that for me. Not if I'm just going to die at the end of it all.

The worst part is if it weren't for the baby, I'm not sure I would even have come back here. I had international health insurance and I was eligible for treatment in Milan. I could have stayed. I could have hidden my suffering and spared everyone from the feelings of guilt and powerlessness that come with caring for someone you love.

But it was the thought of my baby that brought me back here, that made me make sure I had people around me who would take care of my child if the worst were to happen to me.

And now there's Rudy. It would be so much easier if I didn't have these budding feelings for him—if I could just convince myself to keep him at arm's length.

I close my eyes and grip his shoulders, taking stock of my situation. Rudy knows about the cancer, but he doesn't know about the baby. Trina knows about the baby, but she doesn't know about the cancer. My mother and Candice know nothing. I have ten weeks, give or take a few, until my bump starts showing. I have two weeks until I enter my second trimester and am eligible for my mastectomy surgery.

Time is ticking. The best course of action is just to be honest with everyone. I should deal with the pity, with the fussing, with the burden that everyone will carry because of me. I'm not doing anyone any favors by hiding these things. Rudy deserves to know that we have no future—not with a baby that isn't his growing in my womb. My family deserves time to deal with this news.

“Let me walk you home,” Rudy says gently, and that's what he does.

As my thoughts whirl around me, Rudy is a steady presence at my side. We pause outside my door, and I almost manage to invite Rudy upstairs.

But if I invite him up, I'll have to tell him about the baby.

He must sense my hesitation, because he just tilts my chin up with the tip of his finger and presses his lips to mine so tenderly it makes my heart clench.

“I'll call you later this week,” he tells me.

“We're not supposed to care about each other like this,” I blurt.

His eyes crinkle at the corners, then his face grows serious. “I don't care about the cancer, Lily. I could help you with it.”

I shake my head. “I don't want that.”

He freezes for a moment, then relents. “I'll wait for you to call me, then.”

Stomach in my throat, I nod. We hold each other's gaze for a few moments, then I make my way upstairs to my apartment.

Alone.

*Rudy*

I stare at the IRS audit letter in my hands, then lift my gaze to my grandmother. “This letter is dated April 15, Grandma. Why are you only showing me this now?”

It’s been nearly a week since my great-aunt’s charity auction, and Lily hasn’t called. We’ve texted a few times, but she hasn’t been to the bookstore and we haven’t made plans to see each other. It shouldn’t bother me though, right? She has a lot of shit going on; she told me she wanted to be casual. People who date casually don’t see each other every day. This is normal.

The paper in my hand crinkles as I grip it tighter, trying to tamp down my frustration. I’m not mad at my grandmother, I just feel...unsettled.

“I forgot,” she huffs.

“But you conveniently remembered only a few days before the IRS agent is scheduled to get here?”

“I remembered in time, didn’t I?” My grandmother crosses her arms. “What’s the big deal? I always pay my taxes. I have all my records saved in the storeroom.”

An involuntary shiver courses through me. I’ve only opened the door to the storeroom a handful of times in all the years I’ve helped my grandmother. It’s a dark, dank room with boxes stacked to the ceiling, old tools, and various bits of furniture stuffed in so tight it’s almost impossible to open the door.



“This is a field audit,” I say, waving the letter. “They’re not just asking for a few documents, Grandma. They’re going to go through your tax return from last year with a fine-tooth comb.”

“And you’re going to help them.” My grandmother gives me a curt nod.

“I...” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I let out a long breath. “Grandma, I’m not an accountant. I have my own business to run—an important client wants to view half a dozen properties this week. I don’t have time to do this.”

Georgia Neves has been so demanding I’ve barely had time for anything else. We’ve already viewed a bunch of properties, and her list of wants and needs is getting longer every time.

“Well, make time.” My grandmother’s face is set in a hard glare, then her shoulders soften. “You know I can’t see half as well as I used to, Rudy. I need your help.”

I swallow past a lump in my throat, my stomach writhing with nerves. The IRS scares the hell out of me for no reason other than I know they could demand back taxes from my grandmother and ruin her, if their records show something different from ours.

But she’s asking for help, and my grandmother is nothing if not proud. The fact that she even admitted her eyesight is getting worse only hammers home the fact that she really, desperately needs me to help with this audit.

“I’m going to have to bring in a bookkeeper or an accountant to help, Grandma,” I finally say. “But I’ll pay for it. You don’t have to worry about it at all.”

My grandmother lets out a huff, then pats my cheek. “I knew I could count on you, Rudy.”

The bell above the door dingles, and Dorothy comes through. She stands just inside and looks down her nose at the stack of books.

My grandmother freezes beside me and lets out a low growl. “What are *you* doing here?”

Dorothy flicks a piece of lint off her shoulder and shrugs. “Haven’t seen you in over a week. As nice as it’s been to have a respite from you, I’ve been meaning to tell you I enjoyed your little outburst after the champagne tower incident. A bit savage, but entertaining.”

My grandmother studies Dorothy for a moment, then straightens. She lets out a little harrumph and shuffles to the front of the bookstore. She’s pleased. She wouldn’t admit it, obviously, but Dorothy just paid her the highest kind of compliment—wrapped up in an insult, of course.

“Did you hear about Victoria Cole?” Dorothy says in a sharp change of subject, thumbing through the nearest book.

“What, the messy divorce?” My grandmother makes her way behind the counter and sits up on the cushioned chair behind the till.

“She just took her ex-husband to court and got full custody of the kids. I was going to send a gift basket.” Dorothy’s voice is casual. “I was thinking she might enjoy some books, too.”

“She does love to read, and her little ones never miss Rudy’s story time.” My grandmother arches a brow, straightening a stack of papers next to the till.

Turning my head to hide my smile, I push the door marked “Staff Only” to make my way to the back room. My grandmother and Dorothy have an interesting relationship. Sometimes I think they enjoy taking out their pent-up aggression on each other, but they secretly enjoy each other’s company.

Alone in the back room, I stare at the door across from me marked “Storeroom,” and with a sigh, I march across the tight space and turn the knob.

The door moves about six inches before hitting the leg of an old chair. A wafting smell of must and mold billows out of the room and I groan, dropping my chin to my chest. I have all of six days to get these records organized. I need help.

The first call I make is to the accountant I use for my real estate business. There’s no answer, until a message clicks on

telling me that he's away for a month for vacation. I hang up the phone, knowing of one other tax professional who could help me.

But do I want to call her?

Lily and I left things open after the auction, but we haven't spoken. I want to see her again, obviously, but I just don't know...

Something tells me she's going to pull away if I push too hard. The thing is, though, I'm desperate to talk to her. I don't want to take things slowly. I want to be by her side, going to doctor's appointments, figuring out how to fight her cancer right there with her. This protectiveness is unfamiliar, but it blazes through me unabated. I want to be the man by her side. I want her to lean on *me*.

I haven't wanted a second date with a woman in years—but I want more than that with Lily. It makes no sense. Since I broke up with Tracey, I've made a point to avoid relationships. They're nothing but trouble and heartache. But now, the thought of going on without Lily by my side makes me want to put a fist through the wall.

But Lily was clear; she doesn't want anything serious with me.

Still, my grandmother needs my help.

Lily answers on the second ring. "Rudy," she says in my ear. "Weren't you supposed to wait for me to call?" There's a smile in her voice that makes me wonder if I should have picked up the phone days ago. Was she waiting for me to reach out to her?

"I'm calling you on behalf of my grandmother," I say, lips curling despite myself.

"Uh-oh," she says. "Do I need to skip town? Am I in danger?"

I chuckle. "No. She's being audited by the IRS, and she conveniently forgot to tell me about it for months. The agent is coming next week."

“A field audit,” she says, then whistles.

“Yeah.” I take a deep breath. “I called my accountant, but he’s on vacation. What’s your normal hourly rate for accounting work? I was wondering if maybe...”

“I’ll help you. Of course I’ll help you,” she interrupts. “I can even give you a family-and-friends-and-scary-grandmother discount. You want to start tonight? We can go through her tax return and get all her records organized. Typically they’ll only want to see the year they’re auditing, but they can ask for up to six years’ worth of records. As long as she’s filed her taxes every year and kept the records, it shouldn’t take too long.”

I stare at the dark maw of the storeroom, breathing in the dank air, and let out a huff. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

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LILY ARRIVES at the bookstore after I’ve flipped the sign on the door to “closed.” She’s wearing loose, peach-colored pants and a fitted white blouse. Her dark hair is tied up in a loose ponytail with tendrils falling out to frame her face. In the fading summer sun, she looks like a goddess on the bookstore doorstep.

“Hey,” I croak. Every second we spend together makes it harder to keep my distance.

“Hi.” She smiles and gestures to the door. “May I?”

We walk through the stacks to the back of the store, through the door marked “Staff Only” into the tight space at the back of the shop. I turn to the storeroom door and arch an eyebrow at her. “Are you ready?”

“Why am I suddenly nervous?”

I grin and open the door, letting it jam against the chair leg. Reaching over the mass of old furniture, I pull the string to turn on the single lightbulb in the center of the room.

Lily rears back and covers her nose and mouth with a hand. “Smells...interesting,” she says, her nose wrinkling under her fingers.

I laugh. “That’s one word for it.” I blow out a breath. “It’s not too late for you to back out.”

Lily drops her hand and shakes her head. “I’m here, aren’t I? Let’s get these things out. Did Agnes file her returns electronically?”

“Yeah, but that’s the only electronic thing about her system,” I say with a grin. I point to a few boxes lined near a wall behind me. “I’ve started removing some boxes of receipts, but I know she renovated this place three years ago. The storeroom became a dumping ground, and everything got shuffled around. Some of the boxes I’ve pulled out are receipts from 1983, and they were right beside the door. I have no idea where the more recent stuff is.”

“Probably buried at the very back under a mountain of rat poop,” Lily says with a wry grin. “No wonder you warned me it wouldn’t be so easy.”

I chuckle. “I was thinking we could haul this stuff to my house. I’ve got a spare bedroom that has no furniture in it, and we could use it to store the boxes. A staging area.”

Her eyes dart to mine, a flush sweeping over her cheeks. Then Lily nods. “Sure.”

It takes us the better part of an hour to load my car up with boxes. Then we load her car up until all that’s left in the storeroom are dust bunnies and broken furniture. I pull the cord to turn the light off, then we head out.

When we get to my place, I’m slightly embarrassed. I’m supposed to be a real estate professional, but I live in a fixer-upper that hasn’t ever been fixed up. Lily doesn’t seem to notice, just helps me haul boxes inside. We joke around, laugh, banter, and get to work.

“There are receipts from the eighties in this box right beside receipts from last year.” She waves a bright white receipt and a distinctly yellow one. “What’s up with that?”

“I’d have to ask my grandmother,” I say, lifting a water-damaged box to inspect the damage underneath. I huff. “She’d probably just growl and tell me to figure it out.”

Lily grins. We work until the sunlight has disappeared and turn on some lights. When Lily’s stomach growls loud enough for me to hear, I suggest we order pizza.

And that’s how I end up leaning against the counter in my kitchen, eating pizza beside Iliana Viceroy.

I jerk my chin at her vegetarian pizza. “You don’t like pepperoni?”

She swallows a bite. “I, um... I’m avoiding processed meat right now.”

“No drinking, no processed meat...you on a health kick?”

Her eyes slide away from mine and she ducks her head as if to avoid my gaze. “Something like that,” she says, wiping her hands on a paper napkin. “I need water. You want anything?”

I almost growl in pleasure when I watch her flick open a couple of cabinets until she finds the glasses. I like having Lily in my house, barefoot and helping herself to food and drinks like she lives here.

She leans against the counter and sips a glass of water while I crack open a beer from the fridge. I nod toward the hallway. “How long do you think the paperwork will take?”

Lily blows out a breath. “When’s the auditor coming?”

“Wednesday.”

She bunches her lips to the side. “We can probably sort through everything by then. We’ll just separate them by year and work on reconciling last year’s expenses in detail. I’ll clear my schedule for the weekend.”

I set my beer down and stalk toward her, placing my palms on the counter on either side of her. “You’re too good to be true, you know that?”

“Most of my accounting clients say that, actually.” Her grin is teasing, but there are shadows in her eyes.

“Lily,” I say, my voice not much more than a growl, “I’ve been waiting for you to call for a week.”

She shrugs. “I’ve been busy.”

“I saw you working in the community garden nearly every day,” I say.

Lily crosses her arms and gives me the sassiest look I’ve ever seen. “And what, that doesn’t count as work?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“No, *you* get to decide what counts as busy and what doesn’t. I didn’t call you—when, by the way, we decided this was a casual thing between us, so I have *no* obligation to shuffle my schedule for you—and now you get to decide how I spend my time—”

I silence her with a kiss, and immediately feel her soften. She curls her arms around my neck and pulls me close until I have her pinned against the counter. Nipping her bottom lip, I revel in the soft sighs she lets slip.

“Rudy,” she whispers.

My hands move to her hips, sliding under her shirt to her waist. “Yeah?” My lips find hers again, and I deepen the kiss until we have to come up for air.

“We should be working,” she says, brushing her lips along my jaw.

“Shh,” I mumble before kissing her neck.

She freezes and pulls away. “Did you just shush me?”

I grin against her skin, letting my hands curl around her back. “Quiet, Lily. I’m kissing you.”

“And now he tells me to be quiet!”

Laughing, I tug her close and slide my hands down to her ass. When I squeeze her close, she lets out a whimper, her body soft and malleable in my hands.

“You have some nerve, Rudy,” she says, but her voice is breathy and her hands cling to my shoulders.

The waistband of her pants is elastic, so I easily slide my hands down to her ass and groan at the feel of her bare skin against my palms. I knead her flesh and kiss her lips, loving the way she sighs and moans against my mouth. When I feel her hand tugging at my other arm, I let her guide it up her waist and over her breast.

Pulling away, I meet Lily’s gaze. Her eyes are dark, hooded. She bites her lip and lets her eyelids drift shut as I wrap my hand around her breast. I have one hand on her breast, the other curled around her ass, my hips squarely pressed against hers, and I have no doubt she can feel that I’m hard as rock.

There’s no scared rabbit here today. She arches her back into my touch, and I can hardly keep my hands from trembling as I undo the top few buttons of her blouse. Groaning at the sight of her bra, I pull the cup down and bring my lips to her breast.

When Lily’s fingers tangle into my hair, I scrape my teeth over her nipple, then lave my tongue over the pebbled peak. Her moan travels right through me and my body winds tighter. Sliding my hand around her hip to the front, I slip my fingers underneath her panties and groan.

She’s wet. Really, really fucking wet. Unable to resist, I push two fingers inside her and suck her nipple into my mouth, loving the way she gasps. Her hips roll against my touch as if she can’t help herself from wanting more. I’m losing my mind at the wet, hot feel of her wrapped around my fingers, knowing that it’ll feel like heaven when she’s sheathing my cock.

And my fucking doorbell rings.

Lily freezes. “You want to get that?” Her voice is breathy and so damn sexy it makes all the blood in my body rush between my legs.



“Nope.” I kiss her lips, palming her bare breast and groaning as she rocks her hips against my hand. Her body is perfect. She might lose her breast, but there are so many other parts of it to appreciate. That hollow in her waist. The way her ass swells past her hips. The graceful, long arms that wrap around me. Those lips and eyes.

The glorious, wet, hot space between her legs.

The doorbell rings again.

I groan.

Someone pounds on the door, and then I hear my grandmother’s voice. “Rudy! I know you’re in there!”

*Lily*

**T**here's no fear like the feeling of Agnes walking in on a topless me making out with her grandson. Or, horror of horrors, her walking in on me riding his fingers to orgasm. I shove away from him, scramble to button my blouse, and tamp down my hair, my heart hammering against my ribs.

For some reason, instead of staying in the kitchen and gathering myself, I follow Rudy down the hall to the front door. Don't ask me why. I have no idea. Maybe there's some tether attaching me to Rudy, and my tightly wound body just can't bear to be that far away from him. Rudy paints that charming smile on his face and opens the door once we're both decent. "Hey, Grandma."

"I found these ledgers at home. They have sales from when the computers go down." She hands him a stack of red-bound ledgers, then cuts her gaze to me. Her eyes travel down to my shirt, and I realize with horror that I misaligned my buttons. There's a gaping hole in the front of my blouse right at boob level.

Wonderful. I wonder how long it'll take for the whole town to hear about this.

I clear my throat and duck into the spare bedroom to grab my purse. "I should go," I say, reappearing with my arms crossed to hide my chest. "I'll be back in the morning to keep working," I tell the room at large, looking at no one.

"Lily, wait," Rudy starts, but I just shake my head.

“Bye!” I make my escape, and don’t take a full breath until I’m back outside my own apartment building. When my phone rings, I jump.

It’s Trina. Somehow, I manage to keep my voice steady as she invites me over for dessert, since the girls somehow congregated there this evening and they were missing me. Not wanting to go up to my lonely apartment, I tell her I’ll be there shortly. After a quick trip upstairs to get her freshly dry-cleaned velvet dress, I head across town to Trina’s place.

The lights are ablaze when I get to Trina’s house, and I enter just in time to say goodnight to Toby and Katie as Mac leads the kids upstairs. Trina, Candice, Fiona, Jen, Simone, and surprisingly, Nora, are sitting around the kitchen island sharing what looks like far too many bottles of wine.

They all cheer when I enter.

I drop my purse and the garment bag with Trina’s dress on the kitchen counter and face them all. “Agnes just nearly walked in on me making out with Rudy.”

If I thought their cheer was loud, it’s nothing compared to the squeals that follow my words. I bury my face in my hands until I’m pulled closer and told to explain.

The girls are in stitches by the end of my story.

“But why did you leave?” Simone says, outraged.

“Come on,” I reply, giving her an incredulous look. “Would you have stayed?”

“With Rudy? Hell yes!” Trina giggles right after yelling the words.

More laughter sounds. Mac appears at the mouth of the kitchen with arched brows. “Do I want to know what you ladies are talking about?”

“That depends,” Jen says just as Fiona interjects with, “Probably not.”

Grinning, Mac just crosses to Trina and plants a wet one right on her lips. “I’m going to the studio. Be back in a couple of hours.”

We all watch him walk away—it's a nice view—and then all attention returns to me. I jerk my chin to Trina's dress. "I think they got all the champagne out, but if not, I'll reimburse you for it."

Trina waves a hand. "If that dress died in service of getting you laid, it's a worthy sacrifice."

More cackles sound, and I just roll my eyes. I help myself to some sparkling water from the fridge and slide onto a barstool, then let the embers of embarrassment fade from my blood. I learn that Nora is an art director for a magazine in Reno, and has to drive back to Reno for what seems like the millionth time because her boss is demanding she attend a meeting.

"My boss said he was fine with me moving away as long as I did the work, but there always seems to be some fire that needs to be put out in the office. It's costing me a fortune in gas," Nora says, sipping her wine.

"Clearly, he was lying," Simone says. "You should put out some feelers. I can ask around for you too."

"That would be good," she says. "I love my job, but the drive is getting old."

By the time a few hours have gone by, the remnants of my evening with Rudy have faded. I say goodbye to the girls and make my way home, sinking into my bed with a sigh.

Now I just need to face Rudy tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, until this audit is over...and somehow do it without falling for him or embarrassing myself.

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A BROAD, bare chest greets me after I ring the doorbell. It glistens with sweat and heaves with deep breaths. Mute, I lift my gaze up to Rudy's face.

"You did that on purpose," I blurt.

His eyes crinkle, but his lips don't twitch. "Did what?"

“Answered the door without a shirt on.” I wave in his general direction. “You’re punishing me for running out last night.”

Instead of letting me inside, Rudy leans a forearm against the doorjamb and arches a brow. “I didn’t know the sight of me is so disgusting that you’d consider it punishment.”

My eyes travel back down to the droplets of sweat diving down between the muscles in his stomach. I try to think of something to say, but my body feels like it’ll spontaneously combust. Not so much punishment as torture.

Rudy takes a step back, his eyes glimmering. “You’re early,” he finally explains. “Caught me at the end of my workout.”

I check the time on my phone and realize he’s right. It’s eleven, and I told him I’d be here around noon. “Oops,” I say, even though I’m not exactly sorry.

“You want to get started while I get dressed?” He closes the door behind me, his body just inches from mine.

“Sure,” I squeak, then make my way to the spare bedroom.

A few moments later I hear the shower start running, and the blush on my cheeks deepens. I don’t know why, but the thought of Rudy upstairs...naked...with soapy water running all over him...

Blinking rapidly, I stare at the receipts clutched in my hands. I hadn’t even realized I’d picked any up. Screwing my eyes up, I try to read the dates, then give up and grab one of the ledgers Agnes dropped off last night.

I’m still blankly flipping through one of them when Rudy reappears with two coffees in hand. His hair is wet, and he’s wearing a T-shirt and jeans that sit low on his hips. He’s barefoot.

The mug is warm, but what strikes me most is the feel of Rudy’s fingers brushing mine when he hands it over. I nod my thanks, then turn to the boxes of paperwork. “We should start by sorting everything by year,” I say, which is a completely

useless comment because it's exactly what we were doing last night.

"Sure," Rudy replies, and we get to work.

We work late, and I leave before I do anything I'll regret, although I do indulge in a long, lingering kiss goodbye. Then I do the same the next day. Rudy sometimes has to take off for a couple of hours at a time to deal with things in his business, but I'm surprised to find I feel at home in his place. I resist the temptation to snoop, though. He usually gets back from viewings or meetings with clients looking tired and relieved to see me. Those smiles he gives me—like I'm a breath of fresh air—make something warm grow in my chest.

I try to ignore how good his presence makes me feel.

Pretty soon it's the weekend, and I realize I haven't worried about the baby or my illness for days. Since Rudy and I agreed to take Saturday off, I make my way to the Four Cups Café to meet my sisters for breakfast, feeling lighter than I have in months. We've almost finished all our work. I've reconciled everything from last year's tax, and there are just a few more boxes to sort through to make sure the past six years are in order.

It feels good, I realize, to accomplish something without worrying about what the future will bring.

*Rudy*

**G**eorgia Neves reaches into her purse and pulls out a velvet case, from which she removes a weighty silver pen. Her eyes flick to mine as she gives me a seductive grin. “I’m about to sign my life away, Rudy.”

“If I recall, you called it the property of your dreams.” I give her a professional smile, my hands clasped on the table in my office conference room. After an eternity of viewings and two days of hard negotiation with the sellers—all while doing my best to keep my hands on Lily while simultaneously wanting to spend every waking moment going through old receipts with her—Georgia’s offer on a coastal property ten minutes outside of Heart’s Cove was finally accepted.

“So I did,” she answers.

Pulling glasses out of a case, she props them on the end of her fine, aristocratic nose and starts reading the contract. She was one of those clients that demands time and attention way beyond the normal bounds of a job—but she bought a five-point-one-million-dollar property, so I can’t complain too much. I haven’t gotten a commission check as big as this one in many years. A few of my employees have shot me mock-dirty looks when Georgia insisted on dealing with me personally, but they know they’ll all be rewarded for a good year once the time for annual bonuses comes around.

I sit patiently. Georgia really is an attractive woman. Beautiful, tall, with luscious dark hair and Mediterranean features. She’s exactly the type of woman I would have brought to bed in the past—so why do I feel nothing for her?

Ever since Lily walked into the bookstore over a month ago, I've lost all interest in other women.

With a swoop of her expensive pen, Georgia signs on the dotted line. "Done," she proclaims.

"I'll get this over to the seller right away," I tell her, tucking the signed contract back into its manila folder.

"I expect a phone call to tell me about the good news in a few minutes, and then we can celebrate." She extends a hand for me to shake. It's soft and feminine, and it makes me think of Lily. How it felt to have her skin under my palm, to feel her soft body wrapped up in my arms.

I need to get that woman into my bed, and soon.

Blinking the thought away, I force a smile onto my lips. "Of course." I gesture to the door and let out a heavy sigh once Georgia is gone.

The sun is shining outside, so I shrug off my suit jacket and decide to walk across town to the other agent's offices. After that, I'll stop by Four Cups for lunch.

Maybe, in the dark recesses of my mind, I'm hoping Lily will be at her sister's café. I've seen her every day for the past three days, and the thought of not seeing her until Monday seems hard to bear.

It doesn't take long for me to stroll down Cove Boulevard and enter the seller's agent's offices. We take care of the paperwork, and within an hour I'm heading back out into the August sunshine. I take a deep breath of sweet, ocean-scented air before my feet take me down the tree-lined street.

Inside the Four Cups Café, I see Lily laughing broadly, her head leaning against her sister's shoulder. My chest tightens and I make for the door, but my phone rings.

"Got your text," Georgia croons in my ear. "Gosh, you work quickly."

"Signed and finalized," I say, eyes still on the scene inside the café. "I just have to make a copy of the contract and I'll send you the original."



Georgia hums. “What about delivering it in person? You promised to celebrate with me.”

My eyes pull away from the café and I stare at the pavement. “I...”

“No excuses. I just put nearly a hundred grand in your pocket, Rudy. The least you can do is share a bottle of champagne with me.”

Holding back a sigh, I force my voice to stay light as I say, “Sure.”

“Wonderful,” Georgia says. “I’m heading to the Edgeville Yacht Club. I just paid for a membership, and they have a wonderful seafood pasta dish. Lunch is on me, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Sounds great,” I lie, and throw one last glance to the women inside Four Cups. When I hang up, I release a breath and let my feet carry me back to the office.

One meal with Georgia to deliver the papers and discuss the logistics of payment and closing, and I’ll be free of her. I do the required paperwork in the office until I really can’t leave the woman waiting any longer, then hop in my car and head down the coast to Edgeville.

I’d much rather be taking Lily here—or better yet, skipping lunch altogether and dragging her to my bed—but I’m good at my job, and I’ll see this sale through.

By the time I make it to the yacht club, I’m resigned.

Georgia has changed into a light, airy dress that nips at her slim waist. Her carefully styled hair falls in waves down her back, and she has oversized sunglasses on as she sits at the best patio table in the entire bay. She smiles at me when she spots me striding across the restaurant floor toward her, then presents a cheek for me to kiss when I make it to the table.

Her hand curls around my neck as she brushes her lips against my cheek, and it takes all my self-control not to jerk away from her.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Neves, you’ve got a new home.” I put the folder with her contract on the table next to her, but she doesn’t even look at it.

“You’re the best realtor I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with, Rudy,” she says, tipping her sunglasses down to rake her eyes over my body.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I say.

She clicks her tongue. “Don’t ma’am me.” She pauses. “Unless that’s what you’re into.” A flirty laugh, and I have to resist the urge to get up and bolt.

Just an hour with her, enduring this heavy-handed flirting, and then I can leave. I’ll call Lily and ask her to coffee or dessert or dinner, or hell, I’ll dig through my grandmother’s boxes of old records and I’ll enjoy it more than this.

But the waiter arrives and Georgia orders a bottle of their most expensive champagne, so I sit back and do my best to make it through the lunch.

*Trina*

Lily looks green in the face at the sight of the eggs being served at the table next to ours.

I arch my brows. Morning sickness, maybe? Lily hasn't mentioned the baby at all since I showed her the boxes of baby things in my garage. "You good? Not in the mood for brunch food?"

Lips clamped shut, she shakes her head. "No."

"Me neither," Candice announces. "I want...tacos."

"Let's go, then," I say. "We can go to Cantina." Cantina is a little hole-in-the-wall Mexican place that is delicious, fast, and cheap. It gets pretty busy, though, and early afternoon on a Saturday it will definitely be hard to get a table.

Lily's already standing up and striding for the door. "I'm in!"

Candice frowns and glances at me. "I'm still trying to figure out what is up with her. Have you been able to get anything out of her? She's not acting like she used to. I wonder what happened. She hasn't even mentioned her next trip."

"That's true," I answer noncommittally.

"When's the last time you remember Iliana being at home without plans to leave again?" Candice arches her brows at me. "Not since she was a teen."

"Let's go get tacos," I answer.

My two sister and I head down the street and with a few deep breaths, Lily's shoulders lower. She gives me a tight

smile and shakes her head slightly, as if to indicate she doesn't want to talk about it.

"Blake wants tacos," Candice says, glancing up from her phone. "Should we get some for Mac too?"

"I'll ask him." I reach into my purse for my phone. "He's with the kids, so they might be ready for lunch too."

"What about Rudy?" Candice asks, a little glimmer in her eyes. "Lily?"

"Huh?" Lily stumbles on a crack in the pavement and my arm shoots out to steady her. She gives me a grateful look.

Candice presses on. "Maybe you should text Rudy and ask him if he wants tacos for lunch."

Lily rolls her eyes, and Candice laughs. I can't help but crack a smile. My sisters and I haven't lived in the same place for over twenty years. Being together feels...nice. Like Heart's Cove is becoming more and more of a home.

"You can't tell us you haven't been spending time with him," I tease. "We've seen you go to his house. Everyone's talking about it."

"Everyone as in who? Dorothy and Agnes?" Lily shoots back, then snorts. "Those two gossip about the damn squirrels living in the trees on Cove Boulevard."

"Mm," Candice answers. "I just think it'd be nice to ask if he wants some hot, tasty lunch brought to him."

"You know what? Fine. I'll send him a message." Lily stops in her tracks and makes a big show of pulling out her phone. She mashes the screen until her message is sent, then glares at Candice. "Happy?"

Our eldest sister grins. "Very."

"Have you spoken to Nora?" I ask Lily, deciding she needs a reprieve from our teasing.

"You two have become close," Candice adds.

Lily shrugs. "We're the newbies in town, and we're neighbors across the hall from each other." She smiles at us.

“And we’re the only ones who are single.”

“For now.” Candice grins.

Sadness flashes in Lily’s eyes, but she quickly hides it. “She’s heading back to Heart’s Cove tonight, I think. Her boss in Reno keeps calling her back even though he promised she’d be working remote.”

“Again?” Candice arches her brows.

“I keep meaning to talk to Lee,” I say, making a mental note to call Mac’s brother tonight. “He might have a job for her or know someone who needs her services.”

“Oh! We can introduce them at my housewarming party next weekend.” Candice beams, whirling to smile at the two of us. “Mom is in party-planning mode, and if we give her a mission to pair the two of them up, it’ll keep her out of trouble.”

“Keep her out of your hair, you mean,” Lily says with a grin.

I laugh. “Not a bad idea.”

As expected, Cantina is jammed. There’s a long line stretching down the block, and the three of us are thankfully standing in the shade. I pull out a bottle of water and offer it to my sisters before taking a sip. We chat about our week, about Candice’s new house, about everything and nothing.

Then someone gets in line behind us, and Lily freezes.

I turn to see a man who must be in his early thirties, at most. He looks surprised to see Lily, then his lips curl into a smug smirk. “Lily,” he says.

“Jared.” She nods.

“Rudy not with you?” He tilts his head.

She grunts. “Not today.”

“Oh, that’s right. He’s at the yacht club with...” Jared snaps his fingers. “I didn’t catch her name. Just saw him there with another woman when I went to pay my tab from last night.”

Lily's brows tug together, but she says nothing.

It's Candice who turns to Jared. "Rudy was on a date with another woman?"

"Candice," Lily says. "Please don't."

"No," my sister cuts in. "I want to know."

"I do too," I say, crossing my arms.

Lily just massages her forehead. "Forget it. This is Rudy's cousin—the asshole who bumped into us. He's probably just stirring shit up for no reason."

I stiffen at the same time Candice does—and Candice doesn't even know Lily's pregnant. She doesn't know this jerk could have hurt the baby by pushing her into that champagne tower.

Suddenly Jared doesn't seem so smug. He looks at his feet and shifts his weight, then lets his gaze crawl back up to Lily. "Listen, Lily..."

"Iliana," Candice cuts in. "You don't get to call her Lily."

Lily rolls her eyes, but there's a hint of a smile on her lips. I have a feeling she likes having us in her corner.

Jared lets out a sigh. "I didn't mean to bump into you."

"That's not what we heard," I say. The line shuffles forward, and we all step closer to the promise of tacos. Clearly, this conflict isn't stopping us from ordering food.

"It's true," Jared says, eyes turning to me. "My date was tugging on my arm wanting to dance when they were just about to do the champagne pour! I was just trying to get away from her and I stumbled into Rudy."

Candice snorts.

Lily lets out a sigh. "Fine. Thank you. It's okay, Jared. You're forgiven."

His shoulders drop. "Look—I was adopted, okay. And when Rudy and his ex broke up, and he never spoke to his stepdaughter again, I just... It bothered me, okay? A lot. I can

understand how he'd think I did it on purpose. We haven't exactly gotten along for the past few years. Everything comes so easy to him, and he just walked away from his ex and her kid, and there have been no repercussions. None. So I just... decided he was an asshole. He dates whoever he wants and then leaves them, and I hate watching him do it over and over." He finishes his little speech in a rush.

"What?" Lily asks, tilting her head. "What happened with his ex?"

Jared frowns, then shakes his head. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm not a total asshole, okay? He just gets under my skin."

"What's that about a stepdaughter?" I ask, leaning toward him.

The line moves forward again, and we all shuffle a few feet. I can smell the fresh tacos and my stomach grumbles.

"Nothing." He glances at the entrance to the restaurant, then shakes his head and walks away.

"Wow." Candice whistles. "He was so uncomfortable he actually sacrificed the best tacos in town to get away from us. Must be serious."

Lily's frowning after him, and I take a moment to study her before we move just inside the door, nearly at the counter where we can put in our order.

"I wonder who Rudy was having lunch with," I say quietly. "Are you guys official?"

Lily just snorts. "Please. I made sure he knew we were casual. We never said anything about not dating other people."

Candice and I exchange a glance. She bunches her lips to the side. "Still."

Lily straightens her shoulders. She's younger than the two of us, but she's always been more independent. Ever since she took off on her first trip to Peru, she hasn't stayed home for longer than a few months. She built her business by herself,

and flitted from country to country, relationship to relationship.

She always seemed to enjoy it more than any kind of stability.

Watching her chew her lip now, though, I wonder if she still feels the same way. Maybe she thought Rudy was different. Babies can change your outlook on life pretty radically—something I know from firsthand experience. Maybe Lily was hoping for something more with Rudy.

“He hurts you, and I’ll chop his balls off,” Candice announces, and then it’s time for us to order.



*Rudy*

I leave my lunch appointment with three new contact numbers for friends of Georgia's that would just *love* to relocate, according to her. She somehow also manages to tell—no, demand—that we meet up again for the handover of the keys, and we might as well make a meal of it, shouldn't we?

Back at my car, I sit behind the wheel and let out a long breath. That meal wasn't unpleasant, but it was tiring. I close my eyes for a beat, then start the engine.

Instead of driving to my place or my office or even Lily's place, I find myself in front of my grandmother's bookstore. All is quiet inside when I push the door open, and then I find myself face-to-face with my cousin.

"Jared," I say, half-startled. "I didn't know you could read." The words are automatic, a barb that always seems easy to reach for whenever my cousin's sneering face is near.

Jared puts three books on the counter and glances at me. He looks...tired. With a breath, he turns to face me. "Can we not do this?" he finally asks.

A frown tugs at my brow. "Do what?"

"I know it's my fault we don't get along. I... I'm sorry."

I blink. "Oh."

"That's it? Just 'oh'?"

My throat feels itchy, so I clear it. "Where is this coming from?"

“I was always jealous of you, you know,” he says, a palm leaning against the counter. “Everything comes so easy to you. Women, money, success. And you always just toss it away like it means nothing.”

A hot, prickly feeling spreads through my chest. “Excuse me?”

Jared closes his eyes. “Never mind.”

We both turn toward the stacks when my grandmother comes toddling down toward us. She glances at me, then Jared, then back at me, and starts punching the prices for Jared’s new books into her antiquated cash register. “You nearly done with the audit?” Grandma asks me without looking my way.

“Nearly,” I tell her. “Only a few loose ends to tie up now.”

She grunts, then tells Jared his total. I walk away as he pays for his new books, letting my feet carry me the few blocks toward Lily’s place. It’s not a conscious decision to go there, but at the back of my mind, I know I won’t be able to stay away.

My cousin’s words rattle around my brain. Is he right? I’ve never felt like things came easy to me—I always felt like I had to work for everything I have. My business didn’t fall into my lap; I built it. Women are attracted to me, sure, but I haven’t had a successful relationship in years. So where does he get the idea that I’ve got some kind of divine luck?

Before I can stop myself, I press the buzzer to Lily’s apartment. Her name is written in black ink on a little sticker next to the button. She lives in a four-story building made of brown brick that was probably built in the seventies. Balconies jut out of the building at regular intervals. The nearest one has a few old pots filled with dry dirt and dead plants.

“Yeah?” Lily’s voice says through the intercom speaker.

“It’s me,” I say. “Rudy.”

There’s a pause, and I wonder if I should have stayed away. Why am I here, anyway? We already decided to take the day off from working on my grandmother’s audit. I had no

plans to see her. I haven't even called her. She probably thinks it's weird for me to show up at her place.

It *is* weird for me to show up at her place, but I came here without even thinking, like I was drawn here by some external force.

Then the buzzer sounds and the door unlatches, and I push it to step through.

It smells musty inside. There are mailboxes lining one wall, with junk mail piled in the corner. An old elevator is to my left, but I choose to take the staircase directly in front of me. The stair treads are so worn down that they've been tarnished to a dull brown color in the middle.

It feels wrong. Not being here—but this being where Lily lives. She should be in some gorgeous log cabin nestled in the woods, or a house made of steel and glass perched on a cliff. She should be in an ashram in India or a shack on a beach somewhere. She should be living some glamorous, beautiful life.

Not in some dull, boxy apartment on the edge of the downtown of Heart's Cove.

*She should be with me.*

The thought clangs through me, and I pause on the second-floor landing, staring at the worn linoleum. Somewhere in the distance I hear a door open above me, and my feet start moving again. I make it to the fourth floor and realize I don't know Lily's apartment number. The buzzer outside just had black buttons beside the names. But there's a door propped open with a shoe wedged in the opening, and I recognize Lily's sneaker.

I knock on the door before pushing it open. "Hello?"

"In here," Lily calls out.

I step inside and pause.

Lily's apartment is a small one-bedroom space, with a tiny U-shaped kitchen that opens onto a medium-sized living room that only has a desk and a chair in the corner, with a laptop

sitting on the desk. There's an old sofa on the opposite wall. Through the bedroom doorway, I spy a tidy bedroom with a double bed. There are approximately seven thousand cushions and pillows on the bed. The only other pieces of furniture I can see are two barstools on the far side of the kitchen's peninsula counter.

The whole place is beige. Beige carpet, beige walls, beige linoleum in the kitchen, beige countertops, and slightly-darker-than-beige cabinets. The desk is brown.

Lily straightens up from the kitchen sink, yellow rubber gloves pulled over her hands. She wipes her brow with her bicep, the bandana on her head nudging back over her dark hair. "Hey," she says. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I should have called," I say. I smell the sharp, astringent scent of cleaning products and notice the mop and bucket propped next to the stove. The windows are open, and a vacuum is waiting to be used in the middle of the living room. Lily pulls off her gloves, drops them on the edge of the sink, and opens the old relic of a fridge (also beige), to pull out a jug of cold, filtered water.

She catches me scanning the room and grins. "I'm still working on decorating the place. Obviously."

"It's very..."

"Beige?" she supplies, then laughs. "I know. The owner used the words 'blank canvas' when I came by to sign the lease. It's temporary."

"Should you be cleaning so hard in your condition?" I hear myself say.

The hard iron mask that falls over Lily's features is the first hint I get that I said something wrong.

"My condition?" she answers carefully.

I shake my head. "I just mean... I didn't..."

Lily lets out a harsh breath that might be a laugh, and hands me a glass of cold water. "I have cancer, Rudy, but I'm not dead yet."

“I know.” My fingers wrap around the glass, barely brushing hers. I take a gulp while Lily stares at me. “What?”

“I’m waiting for you to tell me why you’re here,” she says, cocking a brow.

The discomfort that had been churning in my gut slows, and I find my lips curling. This is what I love about Lily. The sass. The attitude. The total and complete irreverence.

“I hadn’t really thought it through,” I admit.

“Thought what through? Showing up at my house uninvited?”

“Exactly,” I say, finishing the water and setting my glass on the counter. “One minute I was at the bookstore having the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had with my cousin, next minute I’m ringing your buzzer.”

Lily pauses, her eyes sliding away from me. She takes a sip of water and backs up to lean against the edge of the sink, her head tilting. “Your cousin?”

“He was buying books from my grandmother.”

“Does he live in Heart’s Cove?”

I shake my head. “No. Lives in Edgeville.”

“Huh,” she says, brow knotting. She sucks in a breath. “I ran into him too. At Cantina.”

“The taco place?”

“The one and only.” She meets my gaze, eyes narrowing. “He told me he saw you at the yacht club. Said you were on a date.”

“It wasn’t a date,” I answer automatically.

Lily turns her back to me. “None of my business.”

“It wasn’t a date,” I repeat.

“Even if it was, it still wouldn’t be any of my business.” She slides her gloves back on and starts scouring a pot again. “I told you I wanted things to be casual, and they are.”

I watch the way her shoulders bunch as she moves to scrub the pot soaking in sudsy water. She pauses when I slide my hands over her hips and bring my lips near her ear. “It wasn’t a date. It was a business lunch. I haven’t wanted to date anyone since the moment you walked into my grandmother’s bookstore.”

A shuddering breath passes through her, and I slide my arms all the way around. My hand slips under her shirt and I feel the warm skin of her stomach against my palm, and a deep feeling of *rightness* trills through me. I lean my chest against her back, then hook my chin over her shoulder.

This is where I want to be. This, right here, is why I rang her buzzer. Because I’ll never be able to feel calm unless my arms are wrapped around her.

I sweep my hand up from her stomach to her waist with slow, careful movements, as if she’s an animal that might spook.

Lily’s breaths turn shallow when my hands span around her ribs, so I ask, “Is this okay?”

She nods, her rubber-glove-covered hands leaning against the edge of the sink. Her body feels edgy until I sweep my thumb over her skin in a slow, steady circle. The urge to squeeze my arms around her and protect her from everything that hurts is so strong, I nearly crush her to my chest and keep her there.

“Rudy,” she starts, her voice so soft I hardly hear it. “You and I... It’s not a good idea.”

“I don’t care about the cancer,” I say, and I’m surprised to realize it’s true. I’m usually the first one to put distance between a woman and me. I have a bad habit of dating women who are emotionally unavailable—like, for example, Lily’s sister Candice—and backing away at the first sign of resistance.

An ex-fling once told me I was so afraid of commitment that I’d probably die alone in my house and no one would find the body for days. She was angry, obviously, but her words

stung because they rang of truth. I keep everyone at arm's length. I've done it since my last relationship fell apart and I lost the family I'd worked so hard to build.

So why do I feel like I need to be close to Lily? Why this urge to protect her from everything wrong in the world?

Closing my eyes against the onslaught of unfamiliar feelings, I widen my stance so my feet are on either side of Lily's. I inhale the smell of her shampoo, a floral scent with a familiar thread that can only be described as Lily. Settled by the scent of her, I open my eyes again.

"I have a proposition," I say, my lips moving against her ear.

She shivers as my breath skates over her skin. "Oh?"

"How about for the next twelve hours, we forget about the outside world? No past, no future. No talk of exes or cancer or anything else. We just stay with each other"—I inhale softly, my thumb still sweeping over her skin—"and see what happens."

Lily's lips tug ever so slightly, her body relaxing against mine. I nearly groan when she leans into me, the length of her pressed against me from shoulder to hip. She's wearing faded jeans and an old tee, and she's never looked better.

"Twelve hours," she repeats, her head tilting slightly to rest against my shoulder, her lips half an inch from mine. "I might be convinced to forget about everything for twelve hours."

I glance to the side, where the microwave proclaims the time to be just past four o'clock. "At 4:17 a.m. tomorrow morning, we rejoin the rest of the world." My left hand slides down from her rib to her hip, coming to rest in the hollow between her pelvis and her thigh. I can feel the heat of her there, and all other thoughts leave my head.

*Lily*

**R**udy's fingers are weaving some kind of spell on me. He has one arm across my stomach, with his hand tracing slow circles over the hollow of my waist. His other hand is flat against my jeans, fingertips inching closer to a very dangerous area.

He wants twelve hours, but I'd give him everything. He's dangerous. He makes me forget all the bad things that have happened.

He makes me hope.

The hand on my waist starts a slow, torturous exploration of my skin, fingertips sliding up my ribs to tease the side of my breast.

A sharp inhale sounds next to my ear as Rudy's hand cups the underside of my breast, his thumb sweeping over my already-peaked nipple. "You're not wearing a bra," he growls.

I let myself lean into him, into his touch. "I'm home alone on a Saturday afternoon," I say. His hand caresses my breast, fingers tweaking its peak, and my voice goes a bit breathless. "Of course I'm not wearing a bra."

A very masculine sound comes from Rudy's throat, and his other hand slides from my hip to the space between my thighs. Even over my jeans, the touch feels electric. I know he can feel the heat of my arousal through the layers of fabric, because he cups his hand around my core and pulls me hard against his body. I melt into him, reveling in his touch. His hands do something funny to my brain, my body, like



everything is firing at once. Maybe it's the way his hand moved—no hesitation, no pause. Just pure possession.

The hand on my breast sends tendrils of heat racing through my core, and the hand between my legs holds me tight to him. I close my eyes as he touches me softly, slowly, and force myself not to think about tomorrow.

The only thing that exists is Rudy's warm body behind me, the feel of the counter gripped in my gloved hands, the breathlessness squeezing my lungs, and those hands.

There's the hand that explores the places of my body that I haven't been able to look at in the mirror since my diagnosis. His fingers trace the outline of my nipple before tweaking it, teasing it, caressing it. His fingers wrap around my breast and knead before moving to give the other breast the same treatment.

I moan, head falling against his shoulder, and realize with a distant sort of haziness that I've started rocking my hips against his other hand. The heel of his palm presses against me just so as Rudy whispers soft encouragements in my ear, and the rasp of my underwear against my sensitized skin is almost too much.

"Rudy," I breathe.

His lips press over the pulse thundering in my neck. "You are so fucking hot," he groans, grinding his hand between my legs.

I let out a breathless laugh. I can feel the hardness of his arousal against my ass. It's not the most eloquent compliment anyone has ever paid me, but it might be the most genuine one. And damn it, it feels good to feel sexy. To feel wanted.

And it helps that need is curling tight in the pit of my stomach, that my skin feels hot and tight over my breasts, that my legs are shaking as I grind my hips against his touch.

Didn't take much for me to agree to twelve hours, did it? I just wish we'd done this sooner.

"Are you wet for me?" he asks, his voice low and sultry.

Another harsh laugh falls from my lips. “I’m surprised you can’t feel it through my jeans.”

There’s a sharp breath behind me, and Rudy’s spinning me around. His hand tears at my shirt and pulls it off over my head, and I realize with a laugh that I’m still wearing rubber gloves. They get tangled in the T-shirt and for an awkward moment, I’m pinned in a tangle of fabric and rubber. With a growl, Rudy pulls the shirt free.

I pant, rubber gloves resting on his shoulders, feeling deliciously exposed and loving every minute of it. I don’t remember the last time I was this turned on.

Instead of undressing me further, Rudy curls an arm around my back and angles my head toward him, then he kisses me.

Our kisses in the car, at the gala, and at his house were frantic and hot and full of need. This kiss is different. It’s consuming. He plasters my body to his and explores my mouth thoroughly, mercilessly, until I’m worried I won’t be able to hold myself up without his arm banded across my back.

I only realize I’ve twisted my fists into his hair when he gasps, eyes flashing, then nips at my bottom lip. “Your gloves are pulling at my hair,” he growls, and I can’t help it. I laugh.

“I’ve never made out with anyone while wearing rubber gloves,” I admit.

“I never thought I’d find it hot, but here we are.”

Rudy leans back, his hips still glued against mine, as his hands slide over my shoulders and down my arms. He finally tears his gaze away from mine to help me tug the rubber gloves off one hand, then the other. He tosses them aside and they land beside the sink with a wet slap.

“I’m not sure twelve hours will be enough for all the things I want to do,” he says.

The counter bites the back of my hips as I lean into it and arch my back.

And Rudy lets out a low, masculine growl.

His fingers find the zipper at the front of my jeans, and I can almost feel each of the zipper's teeth spread apart as he tugs it down. My hands seem to have a mind of their own, sliding over Rudy's arms and tracing the hard lines of his shoulders. I tug at the top few buttons of his crisp white shirt as he works to unzip my jeans, but stop when his lips descend on mine again.

We don't talk, but our bodies do. Desire rises in me so fast I feel dizzy. All the fear, the dread, the worry that I've felt over the past few months is burned away with white-hot lust. In the dark recesses of my mind, I wonder if my worry will come back with a vengeance in the light of morning tomorrow, but I'm too far gone to care.

I have breast cancer. I'm pregnant. And I'm going to sleep with Rudy.

All three of those things are true.

The zipper finally conquered, Rudy wastes no time in sliding his hand exactly where it was moments ago—minus a few layers of clothing. We both gasp hard when he does, his fingers exploring the wetness of my arousal.

“You weren't kidding.” Rudy's voice is full of smoke, his lips taking mine once more.

I moan into his kiss as his fingers move over me, finding that hard bud at the top of my sex to tease and pinch and touch.

“Stop me any time you need to,” Rudy says, his voice so full of gravel it's a wonder I can tell the words apart. He pulls away and looks down to where his hand disappears into my pants.

For a brief, biting moment, I think about what I'm doing. I realize I'm nearly naked with a man in my kitchen, pretending nothing else exists. As the cool air of my kitchen kisses my skin, I fight the urge to cross my arms over my chest.

This is my body, and it will change. This time next year, I'll have scars and stretch marks and puckered skin, and for the first time in seven weeks, the thought doesn't terrify me.

It's still my body.

My breast will be removed, but for a few weeks longer, it's still part of me.

Rudy's fingers do something a bit magical between my thighs. Heat floods low in my stomach as my legs tremble. I blink up to meet his gaze and catch the satisfied male smile tugging at his lips.

"So fucking hot," he repeats, then dips his head down to kiss me. The scrape of teeth against my bottom lip makes me gasp, just as Rudy uses the moment to slide a long, talented finger inside me.

I nearly lose my mind.

After the first time, I'd half-convinced myself I imagined how incredible it felt to have his fingers inside me. It couldn't possibly feel this good. But it did, and it does. Distantly, I wonder if this is a mistake—but how could it be, when nothing has ever felt so right?

His palm is angled expertly so it hits that bundle of nerves every time he pumps his fingers inside me. With trembling hands, I manage to unbutton most of Rudy's shirt and push it off his shoulders. I want to feel his skin against mine, but when I nearly have the damn thing off, Rudy slides his hand from my pants and catches my wrists with his. His eyes are dark, hooded. His lips are glistening from our kisses. There's a bulge in his pants that makes my heart skip a beat.

Even yesterday, the thought of standing in my kitchen, topless and with my jeans undone, with Rudy's eyes tracing every line of my body would have terrified me. Hell—even a couple of hours ago I would've run away screaming.

But right now, the only thing that terrifies me is that this moment might end. That I might have to live my life without Rudy's eyes on me making me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Are you okay?"

I blink. "What?"

“You have a habit of acting like a scared rabbit when I touch you. Just checking in.” His breaths are harsh and when I slide my hands over his chest, his muscles are rock hard—as if he’s holding himself back with every ounce of strength.

“I’m fine,” I answer with an arched brow. “Why so worried?”

His lips quirk. “When dealing with a scared rabbit, one needs to be careful.”

“One needs to start removing one’s clothing, otherwise the rabbit might grow teeth and bite.”

“I don’t mind biting,” he says, but he finishes undoing the button I’d gotten to. That’s as far as he gets, though, because Rudy buries his face in my neck as his hands glide over my skin to cup my breasts. I gasp at the gentle scrape of his teeth on my pulse point, mind reeling at the intensity of his touch.

And when his hands cup my breasts, thumbs teasing my pebbled nipples, I melt. Rudy leans down and takes one breast in his mouth, his other hand diving back down underneath my panties, and all I can do is lean against the counter and hang on for dear life.

I don’t remember the last time I was this turned on. I don’t know if I ever have been. My hands go wandering again, this time curling around Rudy’s neck and holding him to my breast. He growls in response, scraping his teeth over my stiffened peak.

It feels good. Better than good. It feels like *me*. Not some alien body that has betrayed me, not some husk that will wither and die before I’m ready. I’m still me. Turning forty didn’t turn me into a pumpkin, nor will cancer. Nor will childbirth.

I’m still me, and I always will be.

His fingers move faster inside me, reminding me that I want something more. Then his thumb circles my clit in just the right spot and—

I cry out, every muscle stiffening as the tension leaves my body in a rush. Rudy straightens up suddenly, then picks me

up and throws me over his shoulder. I yelp and laugh, delirious from my orgasm, as he marches toward the open bedroom door. Without warning, I'm flying through the air and landing on my bed. My head immediately falls between some of my throw pillows, and they're ripped away.

"So many damn pillows," Rudy growls. "Why? Why so many?" There's a sharp tug, and my jeans are pulled from my legs.

"I'm nesting," I say on a giggle, and am surprised to realize it's true.

"Too many," Rudy growls.

"Quiet, you. My throw pillows never did anything to you." I'm grinning when he sweeps the whole lot of them off the bed. My jeans fly over the pile of pillows and land with a soft thump. "Neither did my pants, for that matter."

Rudy gives me a light smack on the side of my rump in response, and I let out a yelping laugh.

I haven't had this much fun in ages.

Rudy toes off his shoes, eyes on my body. I might arch my back a little for his benefit, and I might stretch my arms in a way that shows off my curves. Sue me. I feel beautiful and sexy for the first time in far too long.

I turn on my side and prop myself on my elbow to watch Rudy fight his cuffs for a moment, until I swing my legs around and sit up to help.

It's oddly intimate. Rudy stands still, his belt buckle gleaming near my face, and presents his wrists to me one at a time to deal with. Once I've freed him of his cuffs, he starts on the rest of the shirt buttons while I attack the belt buckle. I finish first, and before Rudy has half the buttons off, I've pushed his pants, underwear and all, down to the ground.

My heart is in my throat as I see the hardness of his arousal so close to my mouth. I reach for it as my eyes flick up to meet his, but he catches my wrists and uses his weight to pin me back on the bed, hands clamped on either side of my head.

I laugh, surprised more than anything. “Hey! I was busy.” I can feel his erection pressed against the crook of my hip, and my voice comes out breathier than I’d intended.

Instead of answering, Rudy grabs me by the waist and manhandles me up the bed and onto the much-reduced pile of pillows. Another laugh escapes me. I can’t help it—I’m enjoying myself. There’s none of the awkwardness there was with Phil, my apparently married ex. I don’t have to try hard to be sexy for Rudy, because even braless in an old T-shirt and rubber gloves, he couldn’t keep his hands off me. Now that I’m nearly naked, it feels like he can barely control himself, and that turns me on more than anything.

And when Rudy kneels between my legs and tugs my panties off, I decide I *am* allowed to have unlimited fun for the next twelve hours. His hands slide up my thighs, thumbs brushing the softness between my legs. When he dips his head to taste me, my knees fall apart. I moan as he touches me, licks me, devours me, my hands once again reaching down to twist into his hair.

What turns me on most of all are the rough sounds coming from Rudy’s throat, as if he’s enjoying himself just as much as me. Heat curls in the pit of my stomach and the tightness of an impending orgasm starts to build. I arch my back, gasping, and Rudy takes that as an invitation to delve into me with his fingers.

This is probably wrong. Scratch that—this is definitely wrong. I’m pregnant with another man’s child, and even though that man walked out on me without looking back, I know I shouldn’t be doing this with Rudy without telling him the truth.

But...

Is it selfish to think I deserve to feel good? The past weeks have been a quagmire of doctors’ appointments, stress, and weighty secrets. Since my first dinner date with Rudy, those stresses have slowly been stripped away, and whatever happens when the clock strikes four o’clock tomorrow morning, I’m here now.

Rudy lifts his head, his lips glistening as he crawls up toward me. When he kisses me deeply, I taste myself on his mouth.

“Your mind wandered just then,” he says, tucking his head by my neck to kiss the soft skin below my ear. “What’s up?”

I close my eyes. Am I really that easy to read?

“I want you here with me when we do this, Lily,” he says, his voice barely more than a low growl. I feel the vibrations of it in my throat and find myself nodding.

“I’m here.”

“You’ll make me feel self-conscious about my skills in the bedroom if you’re so quick to be distracted.”

I roll my eyes as his hand starts a torturous journey south. “Wouldn’t want to hurt your poor, fragile ego, now would we?”

Rudy grins as his eyes flash, then I’m on my stomach before I can blink. He gives me a sharp smack on the ass that makes me yelp in surprise, then I stuff my face in the pillow and laugh again. “Hey!” I turn my head to look over my shoulder.

With his knees on either side of mine, still wearing his half-unbuttoned shirt, Rudy looks undone and wild and beautiful. He grins at me, smoothing his hand over my curves to soothe the sting of his smack. “You deserve that for being a brat.”

“A brat!” I cry, hiding my laugh with mock-outrage. I don’t remember ever laughing this much while being intimate with a man. “Do you get off on calling a forty-year-old woman a brat?”

In response, Rudy prods me with something that proves that yes, he does indeed get off on that.

I giggle again, twisting around beneath him.

His palms land on the bed on either side of me and he dips his head to kiss me softly. “I love hearing you laugh,” he says.



Turning around completely, I pull him down for a deeper kiss. We fumble to arrange our legs so his hips are cradled against mine, then Rudy is reaching over the side of the bed for his pants. I scrape my fingers through his hair as he pulls out his wallet, revealing a condom from one of the compartments.

I arch a brow. “Don’t you know you’re not supposed to keep condoms in your wallet? It can wear them down and tear them.”

Not that I can get pregnant tonight—that ship has sailed.

Rudy sits up to kneel between my spread legs, tearing the wrapper open with practiced ease. His eyes flick to mine. “Don’t worry, Lily. I only put it in there a few days ago.” A faint blush sweeps over his cheeks. “The night of the gala.”

“So sure you’d score, huh?” I curl an arm behind my head. “That’s a bit presumptuous of you.”

“I’m a man who likes to hope for the best,” he responds, and I watch as he rolls the latex over his shaft. It’s erotic, watching him do this. Watching him touch himself, knowing that he’ll be inside me in mere moments.

But Rudy doesn’t seem to be in a hurry. Turning his attention to his shirt, he takes his time to open the last of the buttons, then lets the shirt slide off his broad shoulders.

His body is magnificent. I’d feel self-conscious if he wasn’t looking at me like he felt the same way about me. One of his palms slides over my thigh, gently spreading it wider. It continues over my hip, his thumb brushing my stomach before reaching up for my breast.

I’m like any other woman. I’ve had insecurities about my body, my stomach, the extra softness in parts of me that aren’t as thin as they were in my twenties. I’m extra insecure about all the ways my body is about to change in the not-too-distant future. But when Rudy touches me, he lets out a rough noise that tells me he likes those parts of me. I watch his other hand wrap around his cock, and he guides himself inside me.

For a few beautiful moments, we say nothing. His eyes move from between my legs to meet my gaze, and I feel a sizzling connection form itself between us. He moves over me, his elbows near my shoulders, and I tilt my hips to accept more of him.

My breath catches.

Slowly, inexorably, Rudy pushes inside me until he's seated between my knees, bottoming out inside me. His lips brush over my neck, my jaw, my cheek. "You okay?" His voice is harsh, as if he's holding himself back with every ounce of control.

I wiggle my hips a bit, smiling at the noise it elicits from him. "I'm good," I answer. "Really good."

It doesn't take long for me to come once more. A few deep thrusts from Rudy, and I'm already on the edge. A dirty word or two whispered in my ear, a rough palm gripping my body so hard it feels like he can't help himself. The hardness of his muscles beneath my palms. The way he sits up and lifts my legs onto his shoulders to get just that little bit deeper inside me. And when he angles his body so he can reach between us to touch me just the way I like, I explode.

When he stiffens on top of me and his movements get jerky, I wonder if it's the feeling of my own orgasm that sends him over the edge. The thought of him enjoying my pleasure that much makes another wave of ecstasy wash over me, and I wrap my arms and legs around him to keep him close.

Panting, we collapse in a heap on the bed, and I open my eyes to stare at the ceiling. My arms are wrapped around his shoulders, hands pulling him close.

"Mm," he says, face buried in the crook of my neck. "I'm sorry. I couldn't last. I'll hold out next time."

I laugh. "I didn't exactly hold out very long either."

He tilts his head and kisses my neck, and for the first time in a long, long while, I feel totally at peace.

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WE ORDER takeout for dinner and have sex three more times. I fall asleep sometime around one o'clock in the morning, wrapped up in Rudy's arms, wishing we'd said twenty-four hours instead of twelve.

*Rudy*

I left Lily in bed this morning, then ducked out to grab the fixings for breakfast. When I got back, she was still snoring lightly, the bedsheet crumpled around her waist and her dark hair splayed over the pillows.

I could get used to sights like that.

Instead, I got to work making bacon and eggs. It's when I pull bacon out from under the broiler that I hear footsteps behind me.

"Morning," I say, putting the baking sheet on a trivet. "I made coffee if you want some." I nod to the gurgling coffee machine in the corner of the kitchen.

Lily has a silky bathrobe wrapped around her body. It's light pink with fluffy white clouds dotted all over it. Her dark brows tug together as she takes in the kitchen, then she puts a hand to her stomach.

"Oh no," she mumbles, then shuffle-sprints toward the bathroom.

"Lily? Hey!" I follow, but only fast enough for the bathroom door to slam in my face. From the other side, I hear the lovely sounds of her throwing up into the toilet. Leaning against the frame with my forehead on the door, I wait a few moments before rapping my knuckles on the door. "Lily? You okay?"

The toilet flushes and the sink starts running for a second. Then, I hear an electric toothbrush whirring. I wait by the door until the sounds stop.

When she finally opens it, Lily looks...well, she looks like she just puked.

Curling my arm around her shoulders, I pull her close. "You feel sick?"

She nods, head buried against my chest. "I'm sorry. I'm sure the bacon's delicious."

"Go back to bed," I tell her. "Can you manage some eggs?"

She freezes, a hand climbing up to her stomach.

I huff. "No eggs, then. A piece of toast?"

A slow breath slips through her lips, and Lily nods. "Yeah. Toast would be good."

"Butter?"

She nods. "And a little sprinkle of salt."

I tilt my head, then nod. I've never tried salt on buttered toast. Kissing the top of her head, I guide her back to the bedroom and get her settled. When I get back to the kitchen, I'm too worried about how she's feeling to care about the food. The smell of the bacon is obviously what got to her. I find a container and pop the pieces inside, then wrap up all the grease-covered foil I'd used to line the baking sheet. Smelly things disposed of, I leave the beaten eggs beside the stove and start slicing some of the fresh French bread I bought this morning.

It's when I'm waiting for the toaster to do its thing that I realize I like this—taking care of her. Glancing over my shoulder toward the bedroom, that same, unfamiliar feeling or rightness comes over me. This is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I want more of this. Not that I want Lily to be puking every morning, but I want to be the one there to take care of her.

Then a chill walks down my spine, because I remember the last time I felt the need to take care of someone like this. It

ended with me alone, wallowing in my own misery. Do I really want to go through that again?

When I bring Lily a plate with buttered toast and a cup of peppermint tea, she rubs her eyes with the heels of her hands and gives me a shy smile. “I’m sorry about that, Rudy. Thank you for cooking breakfast.”

“Don’t apologize.” I wait until she’s taken a bite of the toast, chewed, and swallowed before speaking again. “You think it was the takeout last night? I feel fine, but I didn’t have any of the soup.”

She shakes her head. “Just a bit of nausea. Doesn’t feel like food poisoning.” She opens her mouth, then closes it again, choosing instead to take another bite of toast. There’s something she’s not telling me.

I frown. “You sure? What else would it be?” I reach over to touch her forehead, which feels a bit clammy but not hot.

“I’m fine, Rudy.”

I sit on the edge of the bed until she nods at the door. “I’ll go eat out there. You should have bacon and eggs since you went to all that effort. I didn’t even know I had bacon and eggs in the fridge.”

I huff a laugh. “You didn’t. I went to the store, but I’m not going to eat anything that has you running to put your head in the toilet.” I arch a brow but get up anyway. Lily and I make the bed. She places all the throw pillows just so, which makes me smile and convinces me that she isn’t that sick.

Some tightness between my shoulder blades eases, which makes me wonder just how far under my skin Lily’s gotten. It’s only been a few weeks—and only one night together. How far gone will I be after another night?

When we’re back in the living room/kitchen area, Lily slides onto one of the barstools and nods to the stove. “Eat, Rudy. You need the calories after everything we did last night.”

“Says the woman who just threw up first thing in the morning.”

“Yeah, well, it happens.” She doesn’t meet my eyes, but finishes her toast. Maybe she’s right; it was just a bit of nausea. If she’s eating and she cared enough about her pillows, it can’t be that bad.

By the time the eggs are done and my coffee is poured, Lily has finished her toast and tea. I eat quickly, perched on the barstool next to hers, keeping one foot on the rung of Lily’s barstool and one hand on her thigh. I can’t help it. Any time this woman is near me, I feel like I need to touch her. Her presence calms me, centers me.

“So it really doesn’t bother you that I have breast cancer?” Lily asks out of the blue. “That I’ll have to get a mastectomy?”

I glance at Lily, then at the time, then back at Lily.

She grins. “We missed the twelve-hour mark, so I’m allowed to ask.”

Huffing, I finish my bite to give myself time to think. Once I’ve swallowed, I shrug. “No, doesn’t bother me.”

“I’m going to lose my breast, Rudy.”

“As magnificent as I think your breasts are, there are lots of other things about you I enjoy just as much, if not more.” I grin.

Lily’s eyes are sad.

I take a sip of coffee, then say, “How are you feeling?”

“Terrified.”

“That’s understandable.”

She lets out a snort. “Yeah. Doesn’t make it any easier.”

“So your treatment...you said something about chemo?”

Lily nods. “I get a mastectomy, and they do a breast reconstruction in the same operation. Then I need some chemo to follow up on the surgery.”

“One of my employees had breast cancer,” I say, getting up to refill my mug. “She said her doctors did everything they

could to save the breast tissue. Did radiation, and she was grateful she didn't need to do any chemo."

Lily nods. "Yeah. I have...separate medical issues that mean I'm not eligible for radiation or hormone therapy, or even breast-conserving surgery. They have to take the whole thing." She cups her boob and pouts.

"That sucks," I say, sliding back onto the barstool. "But hey—at least there's a second one." I reach down and lay a kiss on top of her breast to emphasize the point.

I laugh when Lily punches my arm. She can't keep the scowl on her face too long, though, and just shakes her head at me.

I tuck a strand of hair behind Lily's ear. "You look beautiful in the morning."

Lily's cheeks flush, and she nods to the bathroom. Her voice is quiet, almost shy when she speaks. "I feel like I need a shower. Would you like to join?"

Suddenly, my throat is tight. A gorgeous woman just invited me to shower with her. I nod. "Yeah," I manage to answer. "I would."



*Lily*

**A**fter Rudy and I have—*ahem*—showered, I stand under the stream of water and let him run my loofah over my back. He lays a soft kiss on my shoulder as a rumble passes through his chest. Strong arms wrap around my waist as he pulls me close, something hard nudging at the small of my back.

“You’re insatiable.” A laugh escapes my lips along with the words, and I lean into his warmth.

“Only with you.”

His words make my breath catch. So it isn’t just me who feels this way—like there’s something between us that’s different, special. I’ve never actually enjoyed showering with anyone else. It’s usually awkward and inefficient, and I don’t care what anyone says—the lubrication situation downstairs during shower sex makes the whole thing vaguely uncomfortable. But with Rudy, it’s intimate and special and yes, *fun*. Just like everything else with him.

I turn around in his arms and let the water run over my hair.

He smiles, dipping down to kiss my lips. “I have a confession,” he says softly, hands sliding to rest on my ass.

“Mm?” I answer, tracing patterns on his wet skin. “What’s that?”

“I never wanted this to end after twelve hours.” When I open my mouth to answer, he puts a finger on my lips. “Don’t, Lily. Don’t tell me that you have too much baggage, that you

don't need my help, that you don't want to burden me. I know you feel this between us. I want to see where it goes.”

My chest hurts.

I should laugh, really. For nearly a year, I dated a man who was literally married to another woman. He promised me everything and gave me nothing. He strung me along, and I clung on like a fool. It was only when I told him about the baby that he finally made a choice—and he didn't choose me. Less than a year isn't much to waste on a man, but it still makes me hesitant to jump in again.

Now, mere weeks later, I'm standing under the stream of a hot shower with another man—a better man—telling me he wants to choose me despite my baggage.

The problem is, he doesn't know the half of it.

Can I really trust him to stay by my side when he finds out about the baby?

I guess there's only one way to find out. Before I can stop myself, I let my mouth run away with me. “Jared said something else.”

Rudy freezes, a hard wall of muscle in front of me. “Oh?”

“Something about a stepkid.” Even I can hear the odd note in my voice, but I just close my eyes and tilt my head into the stream of the shower to hide it. When I straighten up again and meet Rudy's eyes, I've regained control over my own body.

Rudy hesitates, then lets out a huff. “A girl,” he finally says. There's a pause, and he pushes a strand of wet hair off my forehead. “I had an ex with a daughter, and it...didn't work out. If you think breast cancer is baggage, you have no idea of the complications that come with dating a woman with a kid.”

And just like that, my hope crumbles to dust. With great effort, I unwind the tightness in my muscles and busy myself running a washcloth over his pectoral muscles. “You didn't like the girl?” I'm proud of how neutral my voice sounds, even if my pulse is pounding.

“I loved her,” Rudy says, his voice distant. “Thought I could be the best stepdad ever.”

Hope blooms inside me. He *wanted* to be a stepdad. He didn’t care that the kid wasn’t his blood. Maybe... Maybe he wouldn’t care about my baby being another man’s, either. “But...?”

He shrugs. “We broke up. She refused to let me see her kid, even though I was the only father she’d known for over half her life.” There’s a bitterness in his voice that I’ve never heard before.

I keep my eyes on the washcloth, letting the fingers of my other hand drift through its wake of suds. “What happened?”

Rudy watches me for a moment, then lets out a humorless huff. “You know, I’ve never told anyone about my past, but when you look at me like that, it makes me want to share it all with you.”

Is it normal for my chest to ache like this? I force my expression to remain neutral. “Oh?”

Rudy spins us around so he’s under the water. The soap rinses off his body, and his hands move to make slow sweeps over my skin. “I understand, you know. She was the girl’s mom, and I was just an ex-boyfriend. I had no legal or biological ties to her daughter. Logically, I know I had no right to be her father. But...” He shakes his head. “I love kids. I mean, doing the bookstore’s story time is sometimes the highlight of my week. I’m just not sure I could go through that again. Felt like it was my daughter I lost.”

The water is turning colder, but neither of us makes a move to shut it off. “It hurt you,” I say a little uselessly.

Rudy blinks, his eyes focusing on me. “Yeah. After that, I decided no stepkids. It’s not worth the pain.”

There’s nothing inside me. My heart has stopped beating. My blood has stopped pumping. I’m just...empty. The water from the shower hits my skin like a thousand icy needles. Shivering, I shove my head under the spray to hide the moisture in my eyes.

Rudy might want kids, but he doesn't want stepkids. I heard the hardness in his voice, the surety. Once I tell him about the baby, he'll be gone.

But didn't I always know that?

It was stupid of me to go on a date with him after our initial dinner. When I felt the chemistry of our kiss, I should have known it would be more than physical between us. It was never going to be just scratching an itch. I lied to myself about keeping things casual, and I knew this would end in disaster.

There had always been this tiny kernel of hope, though. A dim, flickering flame that I kept alive in the darkest parts of my soul, thinking I'd found my white knight. Thinking I could be saved.

Maybe I really am living in one of the Grimm brothers' stories. I sure as hell am blind.

I stare at the tile in the shower, then reach over to shut the water off. Neither of us moves to get out, since the shower stall is still warm and steamy. A cocoon.

Rudy keeps his hands on my hips, our bodies close. "It was for the best, you know. After we broke up is when I started the brokerage and went from a realtor to a business owner. I wouldn't have half of what I have if I'd been part of their family. I'm not mad at her for taking the kid." As if he suddenly realizes what he's saying and who he's talking to, Rudy jerks away from me and shakes his head. He drops his hands from my hips. "I've made a good life now," he tells me, the words coming out hoarse. "Tracey did me a favor. I realized after that happened that I never wanted kids. Not even my own. They're fun to be around, and I'm sure if I had siblings I'd make a great uncle, but fatherhood just isn't for me. It's too much of a burden to bear."

Throat tight, I nod. "At least now you know." It comes out as a croak.

Maybe what I mean is, at least now *I* know.

I should have told him about the baby when he asked me out for dinner that first time. Now the words stick to my

throat, and all I can think is that I'm naked in the shower, exposed, vulnerable. I need to wrap myself in armor before I can tell him. I haven't even told my family, for crying out loud.

So, instead of being responsible, telling him the truth, I just give him a stiff nod. "Well"—I suck in a sharp breath—"I'm sorry you went through that."

Rudy opens the glass partition and a billow of steam exits the shower stall. He grabs a towel and hands it back to me. "What about you? Kids would hamper your travels around the world, no?"

I wrap it around my chest, feeling slightly more protected. Still, I force a wry grin. "Not much traveling happening these days."

My world feels off-kilter, but what did I expect? I shouldn't be dating anyone when I'm staring down the double barrel of cancer and a new baby.

I've always known I can't pursue a relationship with Rudy. Now I know for sure.

I've been a fool, clinging to the first man who gives me attention. I'm going through the hardest time of my life, facing things that terrify me down to my marrow. Rudy rode in on his damn white horse, and every fiber of me wants to cling to him and let him save me.

How utterly pathetic.

Rudy is a good man, and he deserves a woman who won't drag him down into the mud. He deserves a woman who can give him a childfree life. He deserves a future free of surgery and chemo and caring for someone he barely knows.

He deserves someone better than me.

As I sort through my tangled feelings, trying to find the right words, Rudy kisses me. He curls his hand around the back of my head and tilts my head to meet my lips. I cling to his wet shoulders, too weak to push him away.

When we pull apart, Rudy stares into my eyes and opens his mouth—and I know I need to stop him. I need to tell him about the baby, and I need to do it right now. This can't go on a single minute longer, because it's wrong. I'm lying to him now, and I need to tell him the truth. He deserves that.

I open my mouth to tell him—and someone knocks on my door.

“Lily,” Nora’s voice calls out. “Open the door!”

“Coming!” I answer, then turn to wrap a second towel around my head. I glance at Rudy, who has an eyebrow arched and a smile tugging at his lips.

“We’re not done talking,” he informs me. “You’re supposed to open up to me about the cancer and why you’re so terrified of letting me help.”

“Uh-huh.” I speed-dry myself off as Nora knocks on the door again. “I was in the shower,” I call out. “Just throwing on some clothes. One second.”

The knocking subsides as I tug on some sweatpants and my silky bathrobe. I open the door to see Nora standing on my doorstep with a foil-covered plate.

“I brought you my mother’s carrot cake. She insisted on me picking her up when I drove back from Reno last night, and I’m pretty sure she just used the cake as an excuse to come back. As I’m sure you remember from last time, it’s delicious, and it’s most definitely a bribe so that you’ll tell me about what’s been going on with”—her eyes widen at something over my shoulder—“Rudy.”

She’s already thrust the plate into my hands, so I’m holding it when I turn around to see Rudy standing in the bathroom doorway in a cloud of steam, my fluffy pink towel wrapped around his slim hips. Water runs down the carved lines of his stomach and chest. He holds the towel closed near his crotch, but it doesn’t hide the line of pale hair traveling from his navel down beneath the towel.

Every dark emotion that had been gripping my body just... melts away. For a moment, I forget why, exactly, I’m not

supposed to want him.

“Hey, Nora,” he says casually, as if he doesn’t look like some kind of female fantasy come to life. “Did you say carrot cake?”

She squeaks, then clears her throat. “Yeah. Ma’s recipe. Lily can vouch for it. It’s delicious.”

“Yum,” he says.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Nora replies.

I throw her a sharp glance, and she grins at me.

The plate in my hand moves when Rudy takes it from me. He lifts the foil and lets out a little noise. “This smells amazing. Cream cheese frosting?” He dips a finger into the frosting and brings it to his lips.

Nora and I might as well be watching a tennis match, our eyes moving in sync from the plate up to his mouth. Then I meet Rudy’s laughing eyes just as he wraps the tip of his finger with his lush lips. I scowl. He’s doing this on purpose.

“You know it!” Nora says brightly, blinking away her stupor. She makes a beeline for my kitchen and pulls out the drawer holding my utensils. “Cream cheese is a breakfast food, right?”

I laugh and accept a fork. Thankfully, the smell of carrot cake doesn’t set my stomach off. I’ve been lucky with the morning sickness so far, and I don’t want it to start now that I’m almost done with my first trimester. Puking with Rudy on the other side of the door was embarrassing enough.

Finding out our relationship was doomed made me feel just as bad.

Carrot cake will fix that, right?

Rudy disappears for a moment and returns wearing his pants and nothing else. It looks almost as obscene as the towel, but at least there aren’t a thousand droplets of water glittering in the early morning sun for me to stare at.

The three of us stand around the kitchen counter and dig into the cake. It tastes divine, just like the last one did.

“You know, I’m not usually a fan of nuts in cake, but these walnuts definitely add something,” Rudy notes.

I pause. “You don’t like nuts in cake? What about brownies?”

He wrinkles his nose. “No way. Nuts are a great way to ruin an otherwise good brownie.”

Nora snorts. “Next thing, you’ll say you prefer cakey brownies over fudgy ones. You’re probably one of those freaks that likes the edge pieces.”

Rudy takes a bite of cake and tilts his head from side to side. “Well...”

I make an outraged sound, and he just laughs. His arm curls around my shoulders to tug me close, and Nora’s brows climb upward. Unease tightens my stomach. I really shouldn’t be enjoying his touch as much as I am.

“You think your mother came back to Heart’s Cove in the hope she’d go on another motorcycle ride?” I ask Nora as I scrape a bit of frosting off the plate.

My friend laughs. “I wouldn’t be surprised. She asked me about Dorothy’s new bike on the drive over.”

“Careful,” I say. “Next thing you know, your mother will be moving to Heart’s Cove and falling in love with someone.”

Nora grins. “That wouldn’t be so bad. Fallon seems to be enjoying her company. They’ve been planning to cook together most nights. He said he regretted never learning any Indian dishes growing up, and Mom took that as an invitation to have a whole week-long masterclass with him.” She takes another forkful of cake, then pauses. “You know, that day she went for a ride... There was another man there, riding a motorcycle.” Her eyes are glued to the lump of cake on her fork. “He looked like he might be related to Mac.” Her words are casual—almost too much so. “Do you know who that was?”



I glance at her, but she doesn't meet my eye. Maybe Candice's plan to pair the two of them up isn't so far off base...?

"That's Lee," Rudy replies, scraping a bit of frosting off the plate with his finger. I miss the next few words because my brain short-circuits at the sight of him licking it clean. He's definitely doing it on purpose. "...and I can introduce you if you want."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Nora rushes to say. "I was just wondering, is all. They look so similar." I arch a brow, but Nora just grabs the now-empty plate. "I better go."

"Want to grab lunch this week?" I ask almost desperately. I like Nora a lot, and the thought of talking to her about my predicament with Rudy appeals a whole lot more than spilling my guts to the Heart's Cove Rumor Machine, a.k.a. my family.

Nora pouts. "Can't. I have to drive to Reno tomorrow morning—boss wants me in the office in the afternoon."

"Again? Didn't you just get back? I thought you said you'd be working from home permanently." I put the used forks in the dishwasher, then glance over my shoulder.

Nora huffs. "That's what he promised. So far, he's asked me to come back every week for useless meetings. I'm looking for something new—either a local job or a fully remote position."

Rudy's hand slips over my hip as I straighten up, the touch sending heat blooming over my skin. "Well, drive safe, and let me know when you get back to town."

"Should be back by the end of the week," Nora says brightly. "I'll be at Candice's housewarming next weekend."

I smile. "Good."

Nora nods, then waves goodbye.

I watch her go until the door closes behind her, then glance at Rudy. The carrot cake turns to stone in my stomach as I think of what I need to tell him.

His arms encircle me, and despite my best intentions, I find myself melting into his embrace. I'll break it off with him—I will. He deserves better than someone who's broken and complicated.

Just...in a bit. Once I'm able to pull myself away from his arms.

*Lily*

When Rudy gets ready to leave, his last kiss lingers on my lips. “I know we said our fun ends after twelve hours,” he tells me, “but I’m not sure I’m ready for it to be over.”

I take a deep breath. “Rudy...”

“I know. I know. You have a lot going on and you don’t want to start a relationship.”

I give him a tired smile. “Exactly.” Sort of.

“Just...think about it, yeah?”

“I need time.” I close my eyes for a beat. “There’s a lot going on, and I don’t want to cling onto you because it feels good to have someone to lean on.”

His finger drifts over my cheek. “I don’t mind you leaning on me.”

Damn it. This feels really good, and he’s saying all the right things. I’ve been alone for so long. When Phil left after I told him I intended to keep and raise my baby no matter what he thought, I was freaking out but I was ready to be a single mom. I’ve lived an adventurous, varied life, and I was ready to move on to the next chapter.

Then I got my diagnosis.

And now...Rudy is making me think of all the things I’ll miss.

But he doesn’t want to be a stepdad, so this is all a moot point, isn’t it?

“Let me be there for you, Lily.” His voice is soft, and something weird happens in my body. My chest spasms and softens at the same time. Half of my brain screams at me to throw my arms around his neck and say, *Yes! Yes, I’ll let you make everything better!* and the other half just wants to crawl into a hole and never come out.

I huff. “Easy to say after last night. What about when I’m puking my guts out from chemo? When my breast gets cut off and I only have one nipple?”

“To be fair,” he starts, eyes glimmering, “you were puking your guts up this morning too.”

I punch him in the arm, which draws a deep, tender laugh from him that warms me down to my toes.

“Fine,” Rudy says, leaning in for another quick press of his lips. “I’ll back off. Just...don’t write me off so quickly.”

I force a smile and resist the urge to put my hand on my stomach. The cancer is one thing—the baby is quite another.

I’ll just tell him right now. It’s the right thing to do. He’ll find out within a couple of months one way or another, and it’ll be easy. All I have to do is open my mouth and say two little words. *I’m pregnant.* That’s it.

But I must be weak, because my lips stay sealed until the door closes behind him. I’m enjoying his affection too much to throw it away. It could be the last time he looks at me like it means something.

Footsteps echo in the stairwell outside my door, and when I hear the exterior door close behind him, I let out a long breath.

I’m in trouble.

I really like him—and I know without a shadow of a doubt that I can’t have him. Once he’s out of my apartment and the press of his presence is gone from my skin, my head clears. It’s like a veil lifting from my eyes, and I can see just how stupidly I’ve acted.

The man has a hard rule against dating women with kids, and I'm having a kid. Why the hell am I wasting his time? Why the hell am I wasting *my* time?

I'll tell him about the baby next time we go out. If we go out.

God, I want to go out with him again.

Groaning, I scrub my face, then square my shoulders. I just need to do what I do best—push all my problems to one side and ignore them and get ready for the day. It's Sunday, which would usually be a day off for me, but I'm feeling strung out and stressed, and the only thing I can think to do instead of pacing my apartment or tearing my hair out is work.

Going over to Rudy's house to finish up the audit is obviously out of the question.

Dressed, hair dried, and skin moisturized, I sit down at the small desk in the living room when my gaze catches on a little square of cardboard sticking out of my purse.

Dr. Melissa Gardner's name stares back at me in big, black, bold letters. I run my fingers over the slight indent of the text and blow out a sigh.

Nerves tighten every muscle in my body, but I force myself to open my laptop and type in her name. Her website is sleek, and there's a big button right there on the front page that says, *BOOK NOW*.

Twenty-four hours ago, I probably would have closed the website and looked at a spreadsheet instead. I'm not sure what's changed. Maybe it's the conversation I had with Rudy—hearing about his past and knowing we can't be together. Not with a baby growing in my womb. I can't lie to myself any longer and pretend I'll be swept up in a fairy tale.

My life has always been more like the Brothers Grimm's stories, anyway. At least I still have my eyesight.

No, I'm on my own, and that's okay. I've traveled the world and created a business for myself. I've stood on my own two feet since I was a teenager. This is just another bump in the road.

Squaring my shoulders, I click the big orange button on Dr. Gardner's website and start typing in my information. I'm alone, but I'll survive. Maybe Dr. Gardner can give me advice on telling my family. She can tease out the tangled knot of emotion inside me and help me come up with a plan.

A plan that doesn't include clinging to the first available man who gives me a second look.

By the time I've confirmed my appointment for this coming Tuesday, my shoulders relax, and a real smile drifts over my lips.

Then someone bangs on the door.

"I know you're in there," Trina's voice calls out. "You can't hide from us forever, Lily!"

Us?

The worn carpet scratches against my bare feet as I make my way to the front door. When I pull it open, an avalanche of female energy nearly knocks me back.

Simone's red hair is tied up in a messy bun. She grabs me by the shoulders and grins in my face. "We're here for a rescue."

"A rescue?" I frown.

My sister Trina comes rushing past me as Candice beams from the doorway. Simone drops her hands from my shoulders and huffs. "Don't pretend you weren't working, Lily." She thrusts an arm toward my laptop which, thankfully, is no longer showing the therapist's website. "It's Sunday! You can't stay cooped up in here forever."

What was I just saying about being on my own and surviving? Maybe I'm not so alone, after all.

I close the door behind them. "You guys ever hear of calling ahead?"

"We did," Candice says, picking my phone up from the counter and turning it toward me. I have seven messages and eleven missed calls...all from the past ten minutes.

I purse my lips to hide my smile. Despite myself, that ball of emotion in my stomach starts to unwind. “What’s this about?”

“Did you talk to Rudy yet? Was he on a date?” Trina leans against my kitchen counter and arches her brows at me. “You never called us back after lunch yesterday.”

“Do I need to get my garden shears?” Candice asks, then makes a snipping motion with her fingers.

My lips twitch. “It was a business lunch.”

“See?” Simone says, throwing her hands out. “I told you Rudy wouldn’t do that. That man is looking for love.”

“That makes one of us,” I grumble.

Candice arches a brow while Trina’s eyes narrow. I avoid both sisters’ gazes. Feeling cooped up in my tiny apartment all of a sudden, I ask the girls if they want to walk and talk. We end up power walking the tree-lined streets of Heart’s Cove for the better part of an hour while I do my best to field their questions. Somehow, I manage to avoid mentioning that Rudy slept over last night. These women *really* like to gossip, and that is a grenade I don’t want exploding in my face.

We end up near the new community garden, where Dorothy looks up from one of the flower beds. “So?” she calls out. “Was it a date?” Then she picks up *actual* garden shears and closes them with violent enthusiasm.

“Business lunch!” Simone calls out. “I told you not to worry about him.”

“Good.” Dorothy nods, putting her shears down.

“You guys told Dorothy about Rudy’s lunch?” I ask. The four of us have drifted into the garden, and Dorothy is thrusting gardening gloves into our hands. “When? Why?”

“Shh,” Candice says, patting my arm. “We’re just looking out for you.”

“With a grandmother like Agnes, you can never be too sure. Rudy must have taken after his father’s side,” Dorothy says, pulling a few intrepid weeds from the rich, dark earth.

“Dorothy, is that a new dress? It’s beautiful,” Trina cuts in, and I get an urge to kiss her for changing the subject. Then I notice that my glamorous middle sister isn’t sweating in the midsummer sun. She’s glistening while I wipe another fat droplet of sweat off my brow. Then I feel less like kissing her and more like asking her why the heck she won the genetic lottery.

Surrounded by my friends and family, I end up spending a few minutes with the sun warming my back, weeding and raking and mulching and doing a thousand little things to keep this garden pristine. I have to admit, it’s better than sitting at my computer staring at a spreadsheet.

As I stand up and stretch my back, I meet Trina’s eyes. She gives me a smile and a nod, and it feels like an injection of strength.

I don’t need Rudy, or any man. His attention is nice, but I can do this without him. I *have* to do this without him—and I will.

Once Dorothy dismisses us from our gardening duties, the four of us continue down the street toward the café. The tables outside the Four Cups Café are full of people, with two dogs lapping at bowls of water and a baby in a stroller cooing at her mother.

That will be me soon.

My hearts squeezes and Trina must notice because she grabs my hand where no one can see it. The touch settles me, and once again I feel the support of these women propping me up.

“Candice, are you ready for your housewarming?” I ask her, just to say something. I gently pull my hand away from Trina’s, and she lets it drop.

“Mom ordered seventeen cases of wine,” Candice says with a flat stare. “*Cases*. Don’t even ask me why. I’ll be drinking chardonnay until I’m sixty.”

Laughing, I open the Four Cups Café door. Fiona is standing behind the till with her stepdaughter Clancy and the



regular barista, Sven. The three of them are in matching pink T-shirts with glittery *Heart's Cove Hotties* written on the front. Sven's shirt has the sleeves ripped off, and his colorful tattoos climb up his arms like vines. Something softens in my heart at the sight of them behind the till, and I'm not sure why. Maybe this place is feeling a bit more like home every day.

Fiona's eyes cut to me, then Simone. "So? Was he on a date?"

"You are all insatiable," I mock-grumble, then let Candice pull a chair out for me as Fiona bustles over to get the gossip.

As it turns out, I don't get any work done that day at all.

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RUDY and I finish preparing for the audit late Monday afternoon. When I make up an excuse about having to get some work done, he gives me a soft, tender kiss that sets my blood on fire, then tells me he'll see me soon.

It makes me feel like dirt. I don't deserve him, and the longer I string him along, the worse it'll be when I tell him about the baby. Resolving to ask my new therapist about it, I leave Rudy's house with the taste of his lips lingering on mine.

Tuesday comes around faster than I can blink, and I find myself sitting in a brown cushioned chair in Dr. Gardner's waiting room. My fingers worry at the strap of my purse. There are magazines stacked in the corner, and the middle of the waiting room is dominated by various toys and children's books. The walls have faded posters about pregnancy, postpartum depression and anxiety, and pictures of happy women holding happy babies.

It's all a bit too real, but before I can jump up and run away, my name is called.

A woman about my age—maybe a bit younger—stands at the mouth of a hallway holding a clipboard. When I look up, she smiles and gestures down the hall. Stomach in my throat, I follow. Her expertly highlighted hair is twisted into a neat bun

at the nape of her neck, right above the collar of her pale pink silk blouse. The material is tucked into straight-leg brown pants, giving her a soft, professional look.

“I’m Dr. Gardner,” she tells me, gesturing to an open door. I step inside a comfortably furnished room. There are four soft-looking chairs angled toward each other. On the opposite wall is a desk with a computer chair tucked in. The screen is dark.

“Take a seat,” the doctor tells me, and I choose the closest chair. I put my purse down on the seat next to me. Dr. Gardner takes the chair opposite, crossing one leg over the other. Her eyes skim my file for a moment, then rise to meet my gaze. “So,” she starts.

“So,” I repeat.

“What brought you here?” Her voice is neutral, but kind. Her tortoise-shell glasses have a slight cat-eye shape, and they emphasize her brilliant hazel eyes. She’s a very beautiful woman, elegant yet approachable.

“My doctor recommended you,” I hear myself saying.

Dr. Gardner nods, waiting for me to go on.

“I…” I clear my throat. “I’m pregnant, and I…have breast cancer.” The words come out slowly, their jagged edges ripping at my throat. But I get them out, and I realize it’s the second time I’ve told the truth—and the first time I’ve told someone both secrets.

“I see that you’re going to get a mastectomy,” Dr. Gardner says, her hand on my file, eyes on me. “And you’ll be getting chemotherapy once the surgery is done.”

“Is that safe for the baby?” I blurt, my hand sliding over my stomach.

Dr. Gardner nods. “It is. Does that worry you?”

All of a sudden the dam bursts, and I can’t stop the words from coming. I tell her how terrified I feel about the surgery, the safety of my baby, what will happen during the birth, if I’ll even survive long enough to see my baby grow up. I tell her

how alone and isolated I feel, but that I'm even more terrified of telling anyone what's going on.

With gentle, open-ended questions, Dr. Gardner coaxes the truth from me. She guides me to the hard ball of feelings that's sat like a weight in my chest for weeks.

It's painful, saying these things out loud. When tears start leaking from my eyes, Dr. Gardner pushes a box of tissues across the coffee table toward me. We do a breathing exercise that softens the knife-edge of my terror, and I slowly regain control over my own body.

By the time our hour is up, I feel exhausted, but for the first time in a long time, I don't feel alone. I don't feel like some freak of nature going through this horribly complicated medical drama. Many other women have been through what I've been through, I'm told. I'm not doomed. My baby isn't doomed.

But it still scares me to death.

"I can see you at the same time next week, if that works for you?" Dr. Gardner says from the chair at her desk, her computer lit up with an appointment calendar.

I nod. "Sure."

When I walk out of her office a few minutes later and tilt my head up to the blue sky, I feel...lighter. Still terrified, of course, but ever so slightly less alone.

Then I go home and sleep for three hours to recover. When I wake up in time for dinner, I feel a tiny step closer to opening up to my family and friends about what's going on. A little worm of doubt has wiggled inside me, whispering that my silence is hurting them—and me. I know I'll be better off once everyone knows the truth.

Realizing that and acting on it, though, are two very different things.

*Nora*

Candice's new house is incredible. The fourteen-acre property has over a mile of coastline, and the architects did an amazing job with the design. It's a single-story building with so much glass, it almost disappears into the surrounding forest. Large, leafy trees line the winding drive before opening up to reveal the house. I have no idea how the landscapers got such large trees planted, but I suppose I don't have movie-star funds to make that kind of magic happen.

The house itself is just as beautiful. My mouth hangs open as I'm ushered inside and welcomed like an old friend.

"It's smaller than I expected from a movie star," Simone says before popping a corn chip in her mouth. She crunches down, then walks out onto the patio that extends so far it feels like it floats above the ocean below. The drop to the water is steep, with a narrow strip of sand to catch the lapping waves.

"I had no idea you thought so little of me," Blake responds, the grin apparent in his voice. "You don't think movie stars can do subtle?"

Simone just gives him a *look*. Before she can sass him, Wes drops his arm on Simone's shoulders and whispers something in her ear. Judging by Simone's blush, it's probably best that the rest of us can't hear.

I tear my eyes away from them. Last time a man whispered something in my ear like that, I was so wrapped up in loving him that I forgot about myself. Now I keep my distance. Mostly.

“It’s gorgeous, Blake,” I say, letting my eyes drift over the deep cherry hardwood, the tasteful navy furnishings, the elegant finishes. It’s luxurious, but not ostentatious. The place feels like it’s always existed on the property.

“The yoga studio should be done in two weeks,” Candice cuts in smoothly, handing me a glass of wine. She pours another and gives it to Fiona, who has joined us on the patio. “I’m going to do an inaugural class with just us girls.”

The way she says it makes me think I’m included in the “just us girls,” which sends something warm gliding through my chest.

It’s only been a couple of months since I showed up in this town, and already it feels more like home than Reno did. As soon as the thought pops into my head, I hear the familiar sound of my phone’s ringtone. “Sorry,” I mumble, then shuffle back to the couch to hunt through my purse. I should have put it on silent before I got here.

When I see my boss’s name on the screen, my shoulders tighten.

“Everything okay, Nora?” Margaret asks, dressed in an elegant cream pantsuit with a cowl-neck silk camisole underneath. She’s arranging hors d’oeuvres on the tables dotted around the living room, but her eyes are on me. “You look a bit ill.”

“Boss,” I explain, waving my phone as I ignore the call.

“Is he expecting you back in Reno *again*?” Fiona asks from the balcony. “You just got back a couple of days ago.”

“Terrible bosses will not be spoken of in this house!” a voice says from the entryway, and Trina appears, trailed by her two kids. “I’m making that a rule.”

Candice laughs. “I can get behind that.” She greets her sister with a hug, and the two of them restart the partial tour of the house that I’ve already gotten. I hear Candice tell her sister about the kitchen with large gas range, the home office, the gorgeous view from the spare bedroom. After greeting the

kids, I give Mac a smile, then freeze in shock when he puts his arms around me in a hug.

“Good to see you, Nora,” he says, as if we’re best friends. Then he moves to Simone and Fiona and gives them the same treatment before shaking hands with Wes and Grant.

Yep. I’m one of “us girls.” When did that happen?

My eyes drift to the door again, and I almost open my mouth to ask Mac whether his brother is coming or not. Just in time, I realize I haven’t officially met Lee, and it would be monumentally weird for me to ask about him. Instead, I busy myself helping Margaret and Dorothy put out food and offer drinks to people.

“I’m supposed to be the host here,” Candice chides, then laughs as she tosses a cherry tomato in her mouth.

“Oh, hush,” Dorothy responds before topping up her wine. “Let us help.”

A crash sounds from the kitchen, and everyone stops talking. After a pause, Jen’s voice floats through the room. “We’re okay! But, uh...Candice, you might need to replace a few plates.”

“What happened?” Candice calls back as she moves toward the kitchen. It’s around a corner. The house isn’t quite open plan. The kitchen is attached to a casual dining room, but the balcony opens onto this bigger formal living room which is clearly designed for entertaining. That’s where we are, all heads turned in the direction of the kitchen.

“Um,” Jen answers, a bit more quietly, “Fallon was... clumsy.”

I look up and meet Simone’s eyes, who has a grin playing over her lips. “Clumsy, huh,” she says quietly. “Maybe they need a chaperone in there.”

“Eww,” I answer. I may be a grown woman, but I don’t need to think about my big brother doing things a chaperone wouldn’t approve of.

Fiona just laughs at my reaction. The doorbell rings and Margaret says she'll get it, so Fiona glances toward the entrance. "I wonder when Lily will get here."

"Maybe she's coming over with Rudy. He was at her place last weekend when I stopped in, so I assume they've been spending weekends together," I answer, inspecting the fancy-looking hors d'oeuvres on the plate in front of me.

Another, more curious silence settles over the women in the room, and all eyes turn to me. Even Candice reappears from the kitchen and looks at me with keen interest in her gaze.

"My sister was with Rudy last weekend?" She tilts her head at me. "They were at Lily's place?"

"Did he sleep over?" Simone asks, taking a step toward me. "Wait. This was the morning after he had his business lunch with that other woman?"

"Oh my goodness," Fiona says, grabbing a bottle of wine to top us all up. "They hooked up? What time did you go over? Did it look like anything happened? I can't believe she didn't say anything! We spent all day together... That little hussy!"

"I'm going to kill her," Candice says. "She held out on us."

"Um..." I cringe. "I probably shouldn't have said anything."

"Oh, stop." Simone waves a hand. "Now spill."

"You want me to stop or spill? Seems contradictory."

"Stop stalling," Candice says, gripping my wrist as her eyes dance. "Tell us everything! You've been sitting on this news for a whole week!"

I laugh, then shrug. "I went over with a piece of cake, and we ate it. That's it." Sort of. Biting my lip, I glance over my shoulder at the door, then turn back to the women gathered around me. When I speak, my voice is low. "Rudy was just getting out of the shower when I arrived. He was wearing nothing but a towel. Lily's hair was wet too."

A high-pitched squeal rings out from every female mouth in the room, right before an avalanche of questions comes my way. Laughing, I throw my hands up. “I’ve said too much.”

“Oh, no way, Nora,” Fiona huffs. “You’re not leaving us hanging like that.”

“She’s new,” Simone says in a conciliatory tone, patting Fiona’s arm. “She hasn’t learned the rules yet.”

“The rules?” I ask.

“Gossip must be shared at the earliest opportunity,” Candice says solemnly. “Especially when it pertains to one of us girls.”

I’m starting to like the sound of “us girls” more and more each time I hear it. It makes me feel like I’ve found a place where I can settle, and I haven’t felt that way in a long time.

The doorbell rings again, and a shiver of anticipation runs through all my new friends. I can almost feel them bursting with questions about the new pairing. But when Blake moves to open the door, it’s not Lily and Rudy who step through.

It’s Lee—and his eyes land straight on me.



*Lily*

When I enter Candice's living room, I'm immediately mobbed by a horde of women.

"So, we hear that Rudy looks good in a fluffy pink towel," Simone says, cutting straight to the important stuff, as usual. "Would you agree?"

Nora arches her brows at me. "I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"Oh, quiet, you," Simone says, waving a hand in Nora's general direction. "We'll deal with you holding back on breaking-news-worthy gossip in a minute. First, Lily has to talk. How big is his dong?"

"Excuse me?" My eyes bug.

Fiona cackles. "Don't mind her. She asks everyone that."

"And do people actually answer?" I stare at Simone, who just shrugs. "Don't you all have something better to do than gossip about me?"

"Lily," Candice huffs, "you didn't even *mention* Rudy sleeping over. You kept it a secret, which means..." Her voice drifts off as she wiggles her eyebrows.

*Which means things are serious, she's saying.*

When in doubt, play dumb. "Which means what?"

"Would you look what the cat dragged in!" My mother's voice carries from the entryway in the way that only a mother's voice can. Briefly, I wonder if I'll gain that ability within the next few months.

My mother's full name is Charlotte Anne Viceroy, but everyone calls her Lottie. I don't think my mother has been a Charlotte since the minute she was born. Too rambunctious, never demure. Today, she's dressed in neon-pink pants and a polka-dot top. Her glasses and lipstick match her pants, and it looks like she just got her pixie hair cut today. It sticks up in funky silver spikes.

Spreading her arms, my mother enters the living room. "Candice, it's gorgeous."

"You saw it this morning, Mom," Candice says with a wry smile. "You helped me set up the patio furniture."

"Yes, but I was saying that for everyone else's benefit." She turns at a scuffing sound in the hallway, and my throat tightens at the sight of Rudy and his grandmother arm-in-arm.

I haven't seen Rudy since Monday, and somehow, I'd forgotten how good he looks. He's wearing navy pants and a fitted white shirt. The top few buttons are undone, and the shirt clings to every hard muscle slabbed over his frame. He looks like a magazine advertisement. He looks like sex. He looks like my dream man.

Meeting my gaze, his eyes heat. He looks me up and down, taking in the airy summer dress I'm wearing before his eyes soften on mine. Those lush, kissable lip tilt into a smile that I know is meant just for me.

I want to bulldoze everyone as I run and fling myself into his arms. I want to pull him into a broom closet, flip my skirt up, and beg him to screw me. I want to feel his arms wrapped around my body. I want to growl at any other woman who comes close to him so she knows he belongs to me.

*Uh oh.*

Those are *not* good feelings. Those are not the type of feelings one gets when one is about to drop a bombshell on a budding relationship.

My mother hooks her arm into Rudy's free one and gives his bicep a squeeze. "Isn't he just gorgeous?" She looks at me. "Isn't he, Lily?"

*Oh no.*

Somehow, my mother knows. She knows about last weekend, about everything. She might not know she knows, but she *knows*.

I squeeze my eyes. That doesn't even make sense. I need a drink.

No, I don't. I'm pregnant. And I have cancer. And I'm in a room full of people and no one knows the full truth but me. They all think I'm free to date Rudy and give them things to gossip about, but how will they react when I tell them what's really going on?

How will *Rudy* react when I tell him what's going on?

I turn my back on the new arrivals and stride to the nearest door. I'm startled to find it's a storage closet, then my brain helpfully provides images of me and Rudy together in a dark closet with my skirt bunched around my waist.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

"Bathroom is down the hall, Lily," Candice says, her voice strangely muted.

"Thanks." I find the bathroom behind the next door I open, and lock myself inside. Flipping the toilet cover down, I sit and bury my face in my hands.

Last weekend was a mistake. A very fun, very pleasurable mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. The sight of Rudy makes me want to forget about all my issues, but my issues aren't going away. I'm already in my second trimester, and I have a doctor's appointment early next week where I'll schedule my mastectomy. Within a month or so, I'll have a baby bump.

I. Cannot. Date. Rudy.

Ever.

Especially not now.

But the thought of him standing there, being a doting-grandson-cum-male-model as he led his grandmother into

Candice's house makes my body heat. I'm sitting on a toilet, horny as hell, feeling like world is ending.

This has got to be hormone related. My feelings are not normal. Everything just feels so...*big*. Big emotions, pulling me apart limb from limb. How the hell am I going to go back out there and face them all?

I don't know how long I sit there, but it's long enough for a knock to sound on the door and make me jump. My butt has gone numb.

"I'll be out in a minute!"

"It's me," Rudy's deep voice says from the other side of the door. "Will you let me in?"

Glancing at myself in the mirror, I'm glad to see I only look a little frazzled. Apparently, the hurricane of worry and stress and lust within me has stayed right where it should be—buried deep inside. I unlock the door and open it, and Rudy enters without hesitation.

The powder room is a good size, but it still feels too cramped for two people. I back up until my legs hit the closed toilet, keeping my eyes averted. The door closes. Rudy hooks his hand around my waist and pulls me close. Catching myself against his chest, I let out a shuddering breath.

"Iliana."

Not many people use my full name. The sound of it on Rudy's lips makes something twist and tighten in my gut. I'm not sure if it's lust or dread.

"Talk to me." His voice is patient, but his eyes are searching.

When I say nothing, he spreads his hand over my jaw and neck. Tilting my head up, he kisses me long and deep. He tastes like sunshine and sex, feels like silk sliding over my sensitized skin.

My panties are drenched. Damn it.

Rudy's kiss is unyielding. He kisses me like he's trying to tell me something—or maybe like he saw it in my face outside

how much I wanted him. When his hand slides down my ass and dips under the hem of my dress, I let out a moan.

There's a tiny Iliana on my shoulder gripping my ear and screaming, "STOP RIGHT NOW, YOU IDIOT," but she's surprisingly easy to ignore as Rudy's hand climbs up the back of my thigh. His touch is pure heat and desire as he palms my ass and tugs me closer.

We could have sex right now. Candice would fucking kill me for desecrating her bathroom, of course, but Rudy and I could do it. My body is practically begging me to let him in, and that voice in my ear is getting softer and softer as the seconds tick by.

"You've been avoiding me," Rudy says, the words sounding ripped from his throat. Desire rides his voice like a low growl, and he drops his lips to my jaw. "All week, I've been needing you." He nips at my bottom lip. "I don't think you understand what I feel for you, Lily."

I blink, his words snapping me back to the present. I stiffen in his arms, and Rudy backs his head up to meet my eyes.

"The scared rabbit is back," he says, but he doesn't remove that palm from my ass—and damn it, but I like it there.

But I suck in a breath, and the fog clears from my vision. Rudy said he feels something for me. Rudy *feels* something for me. We've blown past the barriers of casual sex right into Feelings Land, which is nothing less than an unmitigated disaster.

And it's all my fault.

"I can't do this," I say, my voice raw.

There's a pause. Then, "Do what?" He moves his hand to smooth my dress back down, then replaces his hand on top of it right where it was before, smoothing over the curves of my rear.

I wish his touch didn't scramble my brain so badly. I can only manage one word in response to his question. "Us."

Rudy goes very still.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shake my head. “There’s too much going on, and I need to focus on what I’m going to do. I can’t deal with the gossip and the questions and feeling like I’m out of control every time I’m around you.”

“I make you feel out of control?” The quiet in his voice doesn’t fool me. He’s not calm. Not even a little bit. The absolute stone-hardness of his body is anything but relaxed.

I snort, still not meeting his eyes. “You make me feel like nothing else matters, Rudy, but that’s the problem. Other things *do* matter. It’s all well and good to say you’ll drive me to my surgery, but what happens then? What happens when I have one breast? What happens when I have to go through chemo for weeks and my hair starts falling out? What happens when I’m throwing up all the time and I have no energy to do...what we did last Saturday?”

*What happens when you find out I’m pregnant with another man’s child?*

“You think I’m going to walk away because you won’t want to have sex with me?” He sounds...hurt. “Lily, I’m not a fucking animal.”

I shake my head. This is it. This is when I tell him about the baby and put this relationship to bed. He doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into, and the kindest thing for me to do is lay all my cards on the table and show him that things between us will never work. We’ve been dating for what, a month?

This relationship won’t survive cancer, never mind a baby that isn’t his.

But when the thought crosses my mind, my stomach tightens into a knot. Rudy looks so sincere right now. So patient and kind and caring.

What if I told him about the baby, and he broke his cardinal rule? What if he stayed?

I heard his voice when he talked about the child he treated as his own. No matter what he says, he wanted kids. That wound may be old, but it hasn’t healed.

But if he promised me the world and then left me the same way my ex did, it would hurt so much worse. Leaving Phil was easy, because at the end of the day, I didn't need him. The problems heaped onto my plate were so much bigger, so much more important than a breakup with a man who lied and never truly cared about me.

Rudy is different. If I let him in and he left me...it would break me.

I can't give him that chance.

Instead, I straighten my shoulders and try to clear the pain from my face. "Rudy, I don't want this. I had fun with you, but I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm not going to date you."

He stares into my eyes for a moment, and it takes all my willpower to hold his gaze. It feels important, though, like I need to prove to him that I mean it. That by meeting his eyes, he'll know I'm serious.

It breaks my heart when I realize I'm right. His shoulders drop as his lips pinch, and he gives me a sharp nod. The hardness in his body remains, but he backs away from me. His eyes grow hard. "Fine. If that's what you want."

"It is," I answer, more to convince myself than to convince him.

When he flinches, I regret my words. All I can do is nod before I slip past him.

Once outside the bathroom, my mother is the first one to notice something's wrong. I mumble a few words about not feeling well, and she lets me go. Agnes is the next to accost me, and she tells me all went well with the audit. She says something about saving her thousands in back taxes, but the words sound all fuzzy. I can't focus. I just nod.

Candice walks me to the door and tries to meet my gaze, but I just wave her off. I'm already inside my car when Trina comes rushing out to knock on my window.

As soon as it lowers, she leans into the car. "You good?"

“Just feeling a bit under the weather,” I tell her, and it’s mostly the truth.

She searches my face for a moment, then nods. “You need me to come with you to any doctors’ appointments? My schedule is flexible. I’ll make time.”

I start shaking my head, then pause. These past few weeks have felt good to have people around, to be able to lean on my family. So, instead of refusing, I nod at my sister. “Yeah. I’ll let you know.”

As my sister watches me for a moment, I try not to squirm. Then gives me a sharp jerk of her chin. “Good. Get some sleep.”

When I back the car out of its parking space and get on the road that heads home, I let out a long sigh of relief.

I did the right thing. Even if Rudy had convinced himself he wanted to pursue something with me, he would’ve regretted it. I saved us both a mountain of heartache.

I’m better off without him—and he’s definitely better off without me.



*Rudy*

**I**t shouldn't bother me. It *shouldn't*.

I've known the woman, what, a few weeks? Before that, I met her once at a Thanksgiving dinner years ago? Why do I care that she broke things off? We went on a couple of dates. Spent one night together. Big deal.

I should be thanking her for breaking things off. She did me a favor.

My fingers drum on my steering wheel as I make my way back to town, taking a circuitous route home—and I realize with a start that my path will take me past Lily's house.

Am I a stalker now? What the hell am I doing?

Shaking my head, I turn off on the next cross street and head straight home.

The housewarming party was fine. It would have been fun if I didn't have acid boiling in my stomach. I must have done a decent job of faking it after Lily left, though, because no one said anything to me about it. Not even my grandmother.

When I make it home, the old house feels drafty and cold. I keep the lights off and toss my shoes on the mat by the door, then pad toward the back of the house. When I pass my office, I see my laptop on my desk. Too wound up to do anything else, I power up my computer and decide to do some work.

There's an email waiting for me when I turn the laptop on. It's from Georgia Neves, who wants to introduce me to a friend of hers who's interested in buying a property in Heart's

Cove. She's a shameless flirt, even over email. She insists on introducing us in person, preferably over a meal. Her treat.

Having interacted with Georgia a lot over the past couple of weeks, I know she flirts out of some sort of habit. She's mentioned her divorce a few times and isn't quite able to hide the pain in her eyes when she does. I don't think she's actually interested in me. She just uses sex and flirtation as a defense mechanism.

The email shouldn't make me feel bitter. It should make me want to return her flirtation, should make me want to fall into bed with her, because I need to shore up my defenses as much as she does—but all I want to do is find Lily and let me clear those shadows from her gaze. I have this undeniable urge to protect Lily from whatever's bothering her. I want to be the knight in shining armor for her dark and twisted fairy tale.

It's only when I've been sitting in front of a blank screen for the better part of an hour that I give up on work. I leave the email unanswered, marking it on my to-do list for Monday. I rub my stinging eyes and let out a sigh, tipping my head back to stare at the ceiling.

Lily got under my skin. Somehow, between fish and chips and a crushed champagne fountain, Lily burrowed into a part of me that hasn't been touched in a long time.

After my ex left me and took the daughter I thought of as my own, I shut a part of myself away. I vowed to never let someone hurt me the way she did. I told myself to live in the moment, to live for me. What use is it giving my all to someone, only to have it thrown back in my face?

How could I be so stupid to let that happen again with Lily?

I replay all our conversations as I lean back in my office chair, propping my feet on the desk and folding my hands over my stomach. There's got to be a way around this. This sick feeling in my stomach won't go away, and I can't convince myself that leaving Lily alone is a good thing. We got along. We clicked. We *had* something. When did things change? When did she decide she didn't want me?

She's terrified of the cancer. Understandable. She pushed me away because she doesn't think I'm up for it—or she doesn't want to burden me with caring for her. That's understandable too.

It's also fucking incorrect. Caring for her wouldn't be a burden; it'd be a privilege.

I stare at a spot on the wall, seeing nothing.

There's something else. There was a moment in the shower, when I told her I didn't want kids. I frown, staring at a cobweb in the corner of the room. She...wants kids? Maybe she never met someone she wanted to have kids with, and she feels like she's running out of time? And the cancer complicates everything?

Grunting, I drop my feet from the desk to the floor.

If we'd been dating longer—even as little as a couple of months—it would be different. Maybe then I'd have a chance at proving to her that I care. Maybe then, if I showed up at her door and begged her not to push me away, it'd be less “psycho stalker” and more “worthy partner.”

So what are my options?

I can respect Lily's decision and back off. Let her deal with her own demons and keep my distance. The thought makes me ill. I want to be beside her. If I could pick up a weapon and fight her cancer in her place, I would. But what right do I have? We weren't even officially together. From the start, she was clear that she didn't want anything serious.

Alternatively, I can try to convince her that I don't care about the illness, and she's worth the effort and heartache and care that it'll take to get through it together.

If she wants kids, I...

I squeeze my eyes shut. I feel like I lost a daughter already, and that pain hasn't faded in the years that have passed. If Lily wanted kids, would I be willing to open that part of my heart to her?

I don't think I can. A breath leaves my lips and my mouth tastes sour. If Lily wants children, I'm not sure I'm ready to be the man for her. Years ago, I decided I wouldn't be a father. Nothing has changed.

The phone rings. I glance at the screen and see Lee's name.

When I put it to my ear, he doesn't even wait to hear my voice. "I'm outside," he says. "Taking you out to the Grove."

Huffing, I agree and hang up to grab my shoes. Lee's father owns the Grove. Hamish doesn't drink, and claims he bought the bar years ago so he'd have an excuse to hang out with his buddies without having to get drunk. If you ask me, it sounds like a recipe for disaster and relapse, but to each their own. Sometime over the past year or so, it's not just his buddies that sit in the old dive bar full of grizzly, wannabe bikers. Candice and all her friends regularly have girls' nights there, and even the older generation make regular visits.

It helps that Margaret, one of the twins who owns the hotel, has Hamish wrapped around her little finger. I never thought I'd see the old man in love until I saw the way he treats Margaret.

Maybe there's hope for us all.

Lee is sitting on his big, gleaming Harley Davidson motorcycle outside. I jerk my head to my car. "I'll take my car."

With a nod, Lee starts the engine and pulls out of my driveway, then waits for me to follow. The parking lot is mostly empty, which makes sense, because the only days it's full is when there's a girls' night going on. I pull into an oil-stained parking space and get out, locking the car behind me.

Lee meets me at the door, the soft leather of his jacket creaking as he pulls it open. "You looked like you needed a drink when you left Blake and Candice's."

I snort. "That obvious?"

Lee just grins and enters the bar behind me.

Three regulars who are as much fixtures as the stools they sit on glance up as we enter. Recognizing the two of us, they turn back to their drinks without so much as a greeting. I follow Lee to the bar and take a seat, accepting the beer that's placed in front of me.

I brace myself for Lee to ask me about Iliana, but he jerks his head at the television. "You catch the game?"

Not being a huge fan of baseball, I shrug. "Nah."

We slide into easy conversation, talking about nothing at all. Certainly not my love life—or lack thereof. It's not until a long while later that Lee clears his throat and says, "You know Fallon's sister?"

"What about her?" The basket of fries I ordered a few minutes ago slides across the bar as the bartender nods at me. I bite one in half and exhale when it nearly burns the skin off the roof of my mouth.

When I finally look at Lee again, he just shrugs. "She seems nice."

I blink. I've been so caught up in my own life that I never even noticed Lee talking to Nora. Did they talk? Is this why he asked me here? Not about Iliana at all, but about his own issues?

Grinning, I lean back in my stool and pop another too-hot fry in my mouth. "Yeah," I say. "She does."

"I heard she met up with you last weekend. Something about you looking good in nothing but a towel?"

I can't help it. I laugh. Clapping Lee on the shoulder, I shove him until he scowls. "You jealous?"

"Fuck off." He bites into one of my fries and has the same reaction at the temperature of them, breathing out aggressively to stop his mouth from burning.

"I was at Lily's place," I finally say to put Lee out of his misery. "Nora brought some cake over. I think she was surprised I was there and was coming over to gossip with Lily about me."

My mouth twists. Not much to gossip about anymore.

Lee's shoulders relax ever so slightly. If I hadn't been paying attention, I would've missed it.

Behind him, the door to the bar opens, and Hamish appears with Margaret on his arm. Her twin, Dorothy, trails behind them while my grandmother brings up the rear.

"Rudy!" Dorothy exclaims, gliding over to me. "You came here and didn't even invite us to join!"

"Oh, leave him be," my grandmother grumbles. "Why would he want to spend time with an old cow like you?"

"Go find a bridge to guard, troll," Dorothy replies, keeping a bright smile on her face and her eyes on me. "Did you enjoy the housewarming, Rudy?"

"It was great, Dorothy," I reply. "You ladies want a drink? It's on me."

"On the house," Hamish corrects, ducking behind the bar to get us all a round.

"Hey, Hamish," the bartender says from the other end. "We got a booking for one of the rooms." He jerks his head toward a door that leads to the three tiny rooms on the second floor above the bar. To my knowledge, bookings are exceedingly rare. Only a few guests per year have stayed in them since the Cedar Grove opened over a decade ago—but Lee might have been exaggerating when he told me that. All I know is a booking is rare enough to be unusual.

Hamish still lets out a whoop. "How long are they staying?"

"Guy named Phil," the bartender says, clicking something on the computer behind the bar to pull up the booking system on the screen. "He's booked a week. Gets here next month—early September."

Hamish glances over his shoulder, then nods. "I'll get the cleaners to prepare the room."

"Let's celebrate!" Dorothy exclaims. "Shots! From one hotelier to another."

“Dorothy, you’re an old woman,” her sister groans. “Don’t you think you should have stopped drinking shots fifty years ago?”

“She only pretends to drink them,” my grandmother cuts in. “Gets everyone else drunk and takes pictures for blackmail.”

“That was *one time*, Agnes,” Dorothy replies with a roll of her eyes. “It happened in the eighties, for crying out loud. I would’ve thought you’d let it go by now.”

I rap my knuckles on the bar and slide off my stool. “I’m out,” I say. “I can’t keep up with you ladies when you get going.”

“Don’t think we won’t corner you and ask you what’s going on with Lily,” Dorothy says, pointing a finger at me. “We’ll let you off easy tonight, but the interrogation is coming.”

I force a grin. “Can’t wait,” I lie.

When I step back outside, I suck in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I love this town, but sometimes its residents can be overbearing. I understand why Lily chose to travel the world for so long—and why she might not want to tie herself to a place like this—or a man like me. Maybe it’s better for me to be unattached too. I might be the one who needs to take off on an international adventure to escape the weight of this town, the gossip, the lack of privacy. It’s better to be unattached. I’ve known that for a long time.

But no matter how many times I tell myself she did us both a favor by breaking things off, it doesn’t help the fact that I don’t believe my own lies.

*Lily*

**M**y second trimester trundles on without me noticing. I have more energy than I did before, and I end up throwing myself into my work. For two weeks, I keep to myself, finding a few new clients from local businesses who need help with their accounts, plus a few other remote clients that should keep me busy until tax time comes around.

I don't think about Rudy. Mostly.

It's the middle of August, and I'm once again in my obstetrician's office listening to a prognosis that doesn't sound too good.

My oncologist is here too.

"We'd like to schedule your surgery as soon as possible, Iliana." My oncologist, Dr. Gilmore, is a distinguished-looking man in his early fifties. He's done many mastectomies and is confident he can treat me while I'm pregnant. "Normally, with your type of cancer, I'd recommend a breast-conserving surgery. The tumor is still small, and there are no signs it has metastasized. However, BCS would require us to give you radiation as an adjuvant treatment post-surgery, which isn't safe for the baby."

I nod. They've told me this before, but by the patient tone in Dr. Gilmore's voice, I know he doesn't mind re-explaining it.

"There are some chemotherapy drugs that are safe for the fetus," he continues. "So what I would recommend is that we perform the mastectomy and follow up with chemotherapy."



Although it's safe for the baby in terms of development, there is a very small risk of early delivery.”

Dr. Alder, my obstetrician, says something to agree with Dr. Gilmore. They both rattle off more information than I can absorb about safety of procedures and outcomes and prognoses. I can feel my anxiety ratcheting higher.

“Can we wait until after the baby is born?” I ask, my voice smaller than I'd intended. “I know you said chemo is safe for the fetus, but it just... It makes me uncomfortable.”

Dr. Gilmore purses his lips. “Iliana, if we wait, there's a risk the cancer could metastasize—it could spread. The absolute best way to treat this is to remove it as soon as possible. Survival rates for your type of cancer drop dramatically when intervention is delayed. Taking into account the progress of your tumor since you've been under our care, leaving adjuvant therapy until after you give birth is a risk I strongly, strongly advise you not to take.”

I know he's right. Despite my grumbling, I've read all the pamphlets. I've been going to see Dr. Gardner every week, and the terror choking me has receded with every passing day. I know the doctors have my best interests at heart, and my hesitations come from a place of irrational fear.

I can't put this off any longer; I need to just face my demons and move on with my life. Plus, after the surgery, after the chemotherapy, I'll finally get to meet my baby—if that's not a reward for staring down cancer and surgery, I don't know what is.

But when the doctors book my surgery for two weeks from now, it takes all my self-control to keep my face steady. Inside, I'm panicking. I still haven't told anyone. I've been holed up in my apartment working, eating, and sleeping, only leaving to go exercise or do groceries. My sister Trina has stopped by a few times, but my mother and Candice seem busy with her new house. Nora's called me regularly, but she's been shuffling over and back to Reno all the time and we haven't had time to catch up.

That's probably mostly my fault, though.

Now, my reprieve is ending. No matter how much I want to carry this burden on my own, I know my family would never forgive me if I went into surgery without telling them. I've had a few weeks to prepare with my therapist, I've done the breathing exercises and the journaling and all the homework she's given me. I broke up with Rudy and I'm determined to face these things from a place of strength.

The final thing I need to do is tell my family.

I'll do it today.

Decision made, appointment over, I thank the doctors, stop at reception for payment and my next booking, then leave the office. Once I'm in my car, I sit for a few moments before grabbing my phone.

"Hello, stranger," Trina says when she answers my call. I can hear the hiss of an espresso machine and the chatter of a few people, and I know she's at the Four Cups Café.

"Hey, Trina," I say. "What's up?"

There's shuffling, and the background noises die down. "Lily! Where are you? We're all at Four Cups. Mom was just saying we should go break down your door for a welfare check, because she hasn't seen you in nearly two weeks." Her voice drops. "You okay?"

"I..." I pause. I don't want to lie. "Do you think you could get everyone up to the library? I need to tell you all what's going on, and I don't want to do it more than once."

There's a slight pause, then Trina lets out a breath. "Yep. Of course. We'll all be up there in ten minutes. Is that good?"

My heartbeat picks up, but I force myself to nod. Then I remember Trina can't see me. "Yeah," I say. "That's good. I'll see you there."

"I'm proud of you, Lily," my sister tells me, her voice oddly muted as if she's tamping down a wave of emotion. "It'll feel good to tell everyone about the baby."

I almost laugh. She doesn't even know the half of it. Instead of blurting it out over the phone, I tell her goodbye and

hang up, then lean against the headrest and close my eyes.

I want to call Rudy. How crazy is that? We haven't talked to each other since the housewarming party, when I told him I wasn't interested in pursuing anything with him. He respected my decision and hasn't tried to rekindle anything between us, which makes me feel good and awful at the same time.

So why do I have this urge to call him to stand next to me when I tell my family what's been going on? Why do I want to feel his palm against mine and draw on his strength when I face my uncertain future?

Shaking my head, I brush the thought away. This right here—this need to lean on Rudy—is the whole reason I broke it off with him. How can I trust my feelings when they could just as easily be neediness? I don't care about Rudy, I'm just using him for his strength and support.

That's not fair to him. It's not fair to me.

I need to face this on my own.

Turning the car on, I back out of my parking space and make my way to the Four Cups Café. I park down the road and take a deep breath, then start the long walk to the library.

It's not really a long walk, but it feels like I'm about to face the gallows. When I pass the new community garden, Dorothy glances up from a garden bed. She's got a wide-brim straw hat on, and she gives me a wave and a big smile. "Gorgeous Lily! Come help me lift this tree into the hole."

The garden is taking shape beautifully. It seems like thousands of plants have been added, benches have been installed, and a beautiful mural has been painted on the brick wall lining one side of the property. There are big handmade pots that I know were donated by Mac. I recognize his style, the sweeping glazing and dramatic shapes that are all his own. The garden feels like a tiny, beautiful world that encompasses all of what Heart's Cove really is. Home, community, family, and growth.

And I live here now, right alongside everyone else.

Angling toward the older woman, I force a smile onto my lips. Dorothy tells me about Hamish's guest, who will arrive in a few weeks, then jokes about him being the hotel's new competition. Then she cackles, as if it's a huge joke. She waves at the small tree with its root ball still wrapped in burlap. "Lift that up so I can cut the burlap away," she tells me.

Obliging, I grab the trunk and lift it up. Distantly, I wonder if she'd ask me this if she knew about the pregnancy. Will everyone treat me like I need to be wrapped in bubble wrap? Will they understand that I just want to be treated normally?

Dorothy prepares the roots and then directs me to the hole in the ground. I place the tree in and keep it straight while she shovels some dirt around it to keep it in place.

"Any chance you could help me plant a few more?" She nods to the half-dozen saplings leaning against the wall.

"I'm supposed to meet my family at Four Cups," I say apologetically. "I'm already late."

"Fine," Dorothy says with a put-upon sigh. Then she grins. "Maybe I can call young Rudy to help me."

I force a smile. I know she's trying to be nice, but the sound of Rudy's name just makes my stomach tighten. I excuse myself and wave goodbye, then continue on my way to the café.

I wish things were simple. I wish I could enjoy the gentle teasing from Dorothy and the rest of the ladies in town, and that the worst thing in my life was a bit of embarrassment about a budding—and failed—relationship.

Instead, I have to face down my family and tell them all my darkest fears, all the while knowing I have no right to want Rudy at all.

Palms slick with sweat don't dry when I wipe them on my pants. My heart beats an unsteady drum in my chest, and it's all I can do to put one foot in front of another. When I make it to the café, I peek inside and note that my sister isn't inside. She must have succeeded in herding everyone upstairs.

With trembling hands, I push the red door open and make my way up to the library. The chatter of many voices floats down the stairs, cranking my nerves a little tighter. When I open the door, all eyes land on me and the voices die.

“Lily,” my mother says after a moment of heavy silence. “What’s all this about? Are you okay?”

“Mom,” Trina admonishes. “Let her walk in the door, at least. You promised you’d let her speak.”

Lottie ignores her completely, moving to wrap her arms around me. She pins my arms to my sides as she hugs me tight, and even though my mother is four inches shorter than me, her embrace still makes me feel like a little girl. I nearly break down and cry right then and there.

Instead, I pull myself together and back away, squeezing my mother’s arm as I straighten up.

That’s when I notice that it isn’t just my sisters in the room. Fiona, Simone, Nora, and Jen are there, too. I almost turn right back around, but a deep breath steadies my nerves. They’re my friends now, and if I tell everyone at once, it’s one less explanation I have to make.

My mother shoves me closer to one of the couches and forces me to sit down. She waves her hand until everyone else is seated. Candice is beside me and Fiona is in the armchair to my left. Jen leans against the counter of the small kitchenette next to Nora, and Simone perches on the arm of Fiona’s chair. My mother takes the seat on the other side of me and grips my hand while Trina pulls out an office chair and sits across from us.

Silence settles over us like a heavy blanket. I need to say something. I spent the whole drive here thinking of how I would tell them what’s going on, but the words seem to die in my throat.

The seconds drag on a little too long because my mother finally huffs. “What is it, Lily? Are you pregnant?”

“Mom!” Trina cuts in, widening her eyes at Lottie.

Our mother shrugs. “What? Look at her face.” She thrusts her index finger at my cheek. “She looks like she’s about to puke, and don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’re not drinking,” she says, turning to me. “You forget that I gave birth to all three of you. I know a pregnant woman when I see one. What are you, twelve weeks along?”

“Fifteen,” I answer meekly.

Everyone sucks in a breath, except my mother, who rolls her eyes. “Well, there you go. Will you pick up the phone and call me once in a while now that that’s out of the way? You fly halfway around the world to come to Heart’s Cove and then you ignore us all. Makes no sense.”

“Mom, give her a break,” Candice cuts in, patting my knee. “Pregnancy is overwhelming.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I wish I hadn’t gotten rid of all my baby stuff,” Candice says.

“I’ve got a garage full of it,” Trina cuts in. “I already told her she was welcome to it.”

“You *knew*?” Mom looks outraged.

“Uh-oh,” Simone mumbles, voicing what everyone else is thinking.

Mute, I sit in my seat, head whipping from one person to the next. I’ve lost control of the conversation.

“I found out a few weeks ago,” Trina answers with a wave her hand. “I found out by accident.”

“A few *weeks* ago?” my mother screeches.

“And you didn’t tell anyone?” Candice is the one who looks upset now.

“It wasn’t my secret to tell!” Trina stands, picking up a mug from the coffee table and bringing it over to the sink. Jen shuffles out of the way. Nora gives me a sympathetic arch of her brows.

“How are you doing, hon?” Fiona leans forward to rest her elbows on her knees. “I’ve never been pregnant, but I’ll help in any way I can.”

“Me neither, and same,” Simone agrees with a nod. “Candice, you know how to do prenatal yoga, right? Maybe we can have regular sessions until the baby gets here.”

“That’s a good idea,” Candice says with a nod. “The studio is getting a final coat of paint today, but we could start in a couple days, once the smell of paint clears out.”

“Do you have a nursery?” Simone asks. “We could help prepare your apartment for the baby.” She tilts her head. “Are you going to stay in that apartment? You don’t think you should get something a bit bigger?”

“Babies don’t need much room,” Trina says. “The apartment will be fine for the first year at least, and it’ll be one less stress for Lily to worry about. The last thing she needs to be doing right now is moving all her stuff again.”

“True,” Simone says. “We should have a baby shower! Jen, you could make baby-themed cupcakes. Do we know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

As if they’ve remembered I’m here, all eyes turn to me. My head is spinning from the conversation, and I feel a weird mix of gratitude that I have such a support system, and sheer terror at what I need to tell them. “Not yet,” I start slowly, then clear my throat. “I, ah... There’s something else.”

My mother’s eyes narrow. Candice’s hand reappears on my knee. Silence crashes over the room, and I have to close my eyes.

I told Rudy. I should be able to say the words once more without puking all over myself.

The thought of Rudy’s reaction centers me, and I take a deep breath. “I have breast cancer,” I say in the silence. When no one answers, I open my eyes and keep going. “I was diagnosed a couple of weeks after the doctor confirmed I was pregnant. I’m getting surgery in two weeks. A mastectomy.” I point to my left boob. “They need to take the whole thing

because radiation isn't safe for the baby, which I would need to have if they weren't removing the entire breast."

Everyone is frozen. My mother makes a little squeaky noise, and I don't have the courage to look at her. If I do, I might cry.

A deep breath buoys my courage. "I'll have at least one round of chemotherapy, which will be once a week for six weeks following my surgery. It's safe for the baby, but there's a small risk of me giving birth early. My medical team assures me that everything is safe and it's likely I'll make a full recovery, but I, uh"—I gulp—"I'm just telling you because I don't know how my treatment will affect me. I might need some help over the next few months."

To my surprise, the first person to react is Simone. Exuberant, brash Simone, who always has a quip and a sarcastic remark. She jumps off the arm of Fiona's chair and leans over me, planting a big kiss on my cheek. "You are so brave," she says quietly, both hands on either side of my face. "Thank you for trusting us with this."

Candice's hand is clenched over my knee. I meet Trina's eyes across the room and see them filled with tears. Oh no. She's going to start me off.

Gathering my strength, I look at my mother. "Mom," I say gently when I see her stricken face, "I'll be fine."

She snaps out of whatever stupor was holding her and gives me a sharp nod. "I know. Of course you will, honey." Her smile is fierce and more than a little forced. "You *will* be fine."

I have a feeling she's saying it to convince herself more than me, but I manage to nod before the first of my tears spills over my cheek. From there, the library turns into waterworks central. Every single one of us turns into a blubbering mess. Even Jen, who I don't know very well, has wet cheeks as she passes tissues around the room. I'm smothered in hugs and kisses and promises to help.

And...a weight lifts off my shoulders.



I was terrified that I'd be burdening them, that my fear and illness would drag them down with me. Instead, as we try in vain to dry our eyes, a strange, beautiful sort of lightness fills the room. For the first time—maybe in my whole life—I realize that friendship has a touch of magic to it. My soul feels lighter than it has in a long time.

Opening up to these women wasn't a mistake. I've been shutting myself away for fear of dragging them all down, but I hadn't considered that it could actually bring us closer together.

What if I'd trusted Rudy the same way I've trusted them? What if I was wrong, thinking he would've eventually walked away? What if there *are* people who will stick by you through thick and thin?

The father of my child walked away, but that doesn't mean everyone else will. What if I don't have to live the rest of my life alone?

"Well, look on the bright side," Simone says, plucking another tissue from the box Jen thrusts at her. She dabs her eyes before giving me a watery smile. "At least you'll have an excuse to get a boob job."

"Simone," Candice chides, but her lips twitch.

"She's got a point, honey," my mother says, shrugging, and for the first time in many, many weeks, I find myself laughing about my future and my fears. "Once you have kids, it's all downhill from there. Literally."

"Actually, they're doing a reconstruction in the same operation as the mastectomy," I say.

"Any chance they'll plump up the other one while they're at it?" Simone grins. "I know I'd be asking for it."

A few agreeing grunts sound in the room, and I let out another laugh. Leaning back against the couch, I meet my mother's gaze.

She pats my knee, her eyes still shining. "You'll be fine, honey."

This time, it sounds like she believes it.

*Rudy*

**G**eorgia has her arm hooked into the crook of my elbow from the time we leave my office to the time we reach her car. She jingles the keys to her new home and gives me a coy smile. “I won’t be able to use this excuse to talk to you anymore.”

Despite myself, I let out a laugh. At least she’s upfront about it. “I hope you didn’t buy a five-million-dollar property just as an excuse to talk to me.”

“If I did, it would be worth it.” Smooth words from a woman who doesn’t mean them. She clicks the fob in her other hand to unlock the Mercedes SUV behind her, then gives me a look. “I bought champagne to celebrate my first time stepping through the doors to this house. It would be a shame to drink it all by myself.”

I’m a professional. I’ve never slept with a client, and I have no desire to sleep with Georgia. I open my mouth to reject her as diplomatically as I can when a door opens behind me and women come spilling out.

“Rudy!” Lottie calls out behind me. “Long time no see. Have you been hiding along with Lily all this time?”

I turn to see the older woman exiting the door that leads to the library above Four Cups. Beside her is Lily, and the sight of her takes my breath away.

For the past couple of weeks, I’ve thrown myself into my work and given her space. I wanted to respect her wishes and show her I care what she says—and sometime in the past few weeks, I convinced myself it was the right decision. We

shouldn't be together. I don't need to care for someone with cancer, not when I've made it my mission to keep my relationships short and casual.

But she tucks a strand of dark hair behind her ear and blinks those bright eyes at me, and all I want to do is fall to my knees in front of her.

"Lily," I choke out.

She inhales sharply, and that's when I notice the redness of the tip of her nose, and the wetness gathered on her lashes.

"Have you been crying?" I take a step toward her. Just like that, the past few weeks disappear from my mind. I can't walk away from her. I can't leave her be. All I want to do is tug her close and wipe those tears from her face.

"We were all crying," Lottie announces. "Absolutely ridiculous. Bunch of blubbering messes, every one of us. Weren't we?" She turns to Candice, who snorts and nods.

"Went through an entire box of Kleenex," Simone says. "Literally the whole box."

"Absurd," Nora adds.

"Are you okay?" I ask Lily, not once taking my eyes off her. There are lines around her eyes that weren't there before, but her shoulders are relaxed.

"Oh, I'm just peachy," she responds, and for some reason, everyone bursts out laughing. Even Lily's lips twitch and twitch until she's leaning on one of her sisters and laughing along with them. I look at the group of women, frowning. I don't understand what's so funny...

And then the penny drops. I look at all the faces of her closest friends and family, and I realize she told them what's going on. "They know?" I ask softly.

Lily's eyes widen slightly. She straightens off her sister's shoulder and gives me a single, sharp nod.

Then Lottie makes a noise and throws her hands up. "Hold on. Wait, wait, wait." She whirls on Lily. "Rudy knew too? You told *Rudy* before you told me? Your own mother, Lily?"

“Mom,” Lily starts, eyes flicking from me to Lottie and back again.

“I’m hurt. Shocked. Offended!” Lottie thrusts a finger in the air. “My own daughter won’t confide in me! My own baby daughter goes *weeks* without telling me that she’s—”

“*Mom.*” Lily’s voice is hard. “Please. Not here.”

Lottie takes a deep breath and drops her hand. “Fine.” She glances at me, then over my shoulder. “And who are you?”

With a start, I realize Georgia is still standing behind me. She takes a step forward and slides a hand over my forearm. Lily’s eyes zero in on the touch, but there’s no space for me to pull away. I try to gently move my hand, and Georgia drops the touch. It’s one of those moments where I think she acted out of habit without thinking. Fell back on her defenses and used the fact that she’s an attractive woman to build up her strength.

“I’m Georgia Neves. I just bought a property, and Rudy and I were about to celebrate.”

“Celebrate?” Candice asks, eyes narrowing.

Anger is a blade slicing across my chest. They’re mad at *me*? After Lily pushed me away and ignored me for weeks, they’re treating me like I’m some kind of asshole for doing my *job*?

“Yeah,” I hear myself saying. “We were just heading out to her new place.”

“Just the two of you?” Fiona asks, tilting her head. She frowns, then glances at Lily.

My chest feels hot at the look that passes over every woman’s face. Do they not realize that *Lily* broke up with *me*? That I told her I actually *wanted* to be by her side, and she turned around and pushed me away? That she was the one who insisted we keep things casual?

And now they’re looking at me like I’m a piece of shit?

Please.

The edges of my vision go red. Yes, I know they're thinking I'm going to sleep with Georgia and hell, maybe I will. Who the fuck are they to make me feel like I shouldn't? Lily and I were never an item. She made that perfectly clear. I was the fool who clung to the hope that something could happen between us. I was the idiot who followed her around like a pathetic puppy in need of affection.

"We better get going if we're going to catch the sunset," Georgia helpfully supplies.

Lily's face is blank, and she gives me a pinched smile. "Well, have fun. Should be a nice one tonight."

"I'm sure it will be," I hear myself say, and I turn to Georgia. "Shall we?"

"Would you like to drive, or should I?" She dangles her fob between two manicured fingers.

I grab the key. "I'll drive."

When I walk around the car and get behind the wheel, I don't look at the group of women still standing on the sidewalk.

*Fiona*

Grant is in the kitchen when I get home. He has his back to me and calls out a hello without looking, his eyes on whatever he's chopping on the cutting board in front of him. I say nothing as I make a beeline toward him and wrap my arms around his waist, shoving my face into his back. I inhale the scent of him and let his chuckle sink into my bones.

"Everything okay?"

"Lily's pregnant," I say, my voice muffled in his T-shirt.

He spins around, leaning against the counter and pulling me close. "Oh," he says softly, wrapping his arms around me and resting his head against the top of mine. "Are we happy about this news?"

"Yes," I say. "But she also has cancer."

He blows out a breath. "Damn."

"*And* we saw Rudy, and he was just about to hook up with a client of his who just closed on a house."

Grant freezes against me, and I glance up to see him frowning. "That doesn't sound like Rudy," he notes. "He dates a lot of women, but he's serious about his business. Doesn't mix the two."

"Trust me," I say. "I saw it with my own eyes."

He leans down to press a soft kiss on my lips. "Were he and Lily together?"

I chew my bottom lip. "No."

"So why are you mad at him?"

I huff. “He and Lily were supposed to end up happy together. I asked her if he ran away when he found out about the cancer, but she said she’s the one who broke it off. I don’t know. I just don’t believe it.”

Grant kisses me again and leans his forehead against mine. “What kind of cancer is it?”

“Breast,” I tell him. “She’ll lose her breast and have to get chemo, all while being pregnant. I don’t even want to think about how hard that’ll be.”

“What can I do to help?”

The words are soft, but they warm me all the way to my toes. This is why I fell in love with Grant. He’s such a strong, steady presence in my life. The past few years have been so full of joy that if I had tried to imagine this life when I was married to my ex-husband, I wouldn’t have thought it was possible. My past feels like a distant story that happened to someone else.

Glancing at the diamond ring glittering on my finger, I snuggle into Grant’s chest and let out a sigh. “I don’t know. Just hug me.”

He chuckles, then presses a kiss to the top of my head. “That, I can do.” His hands sweep over my back before moving lower. “And maybe we can ask Miss Fifi if she needs some company later.”

I freeze, pull away, and stare up at him. Horror floods every inch of me. “Miss Fifi,” I whisper, remembering that mortifying conversation I had with Simone about my own freaking vagina. Grant walked in on us talking about it, and I just about exploded from embarrassment. “You *knew*? You knew what we were talking about?”

Grant’s lips twitch. “She’s not so shy anymore, is she?” His hands slide around to my front and I yelp, laughing. I bat his hands away until he wraps me up in a hug and pulls me tight to his chest. “Don’t push me away,” he growls, pressing a kiss to the corner of my lips. “I’ve become quite fond of Miss Fifi.”



“You’re unbelievable.”

“Would you say Miss Fifi is having more fun than she had in college, or less? Just for reference.” His hands slide over my curves again and squeeze.

I bark out a laugh. “Stop it.”

Pausing, Grant pulls away and gives me one of the crinkly-eyed smiles I love so much. “Never.”

*Lily*

**T**he girls split up shortly after Rudy drives away, and I end up having dinner at Trina's house. My mother attempts to drive me home, but I insist on walking, telling her in no uncertain terms that no matter what's going on with me physically, I will not be coddled.

That's how I end up walking home and stopping in the community garden. Dorothy has gone home, and I have the place to myself. It's become a bit of an oasis for me, like all the hours of community and joy poured into the soil here now soak into my skin. As I sit on one of the benches and stare up at the night sky, I let out a long breath.

Today was hard, but it was also wonderful.

Well, it was wonderful until I saw Rudy driving away with another woman, but what did I expect? I told him I didn't want to be with him. I can't exactly blame him for moving on. That's what I wanted, isn't it?

Still, if he were in front of me right now, I might punch him right in his stupid, handsome face.

"Lily?" Rudy's voice sounds behind me.

I turn to see him at the entrance to the garden. As soon as my gaze lands on his broad, masculine features, the urge to punch him is replaced with an urge to kiss him. I close my eyes. Maybe I should book an extra appointment with Dr. Gardner this week, because I think I need professional help.

"What are you doing here on your own?" Rudy's footsteps move closer.

I open my eyes to see him standing next to my bench. He nods to the open seat next to me, and I shrug. He sits, and every inch of me wants to melt into his warmth. Instead, I lean on the arm of the bench to put more space between us.

Silence settles over us, but it's not uncomfortable. It's never uncomfortable with Rudy. Even though he was with another woman earlier, I still can't quite ignore the desire to lean my head on his shoulder and inhale the scent of his skin. Being wrapped up in his arms feels like home, and how many homes have I had in my life? How many times have I felt as content when I was drifting from country to country with all my possessions in two suitcases?

Not many.

"You told your family about your diagnosis today?" he finally asks. His voice settles over my skin like velvet, and my shoulders relax despite myself.

I really shouldn't enjoy his company as much as I do. I can't be with him. Sitting beside him and talking to him is just a gentle form of torture.

I nod. "Yeah." A soft breeze ruffles the leaves in the new trees around us, bringing the scent of the summer night. It's not quite chilly outside, but not quite warm. Rudy's legs spread wide as he slouches down slightly on the bench, his arm stretching out across the back toward me. I can feel the heat of his leg next to mine, and it chases the night away.

"How did they take it?" His fingers stretch out, resting half an inch from my shoulder. I could lean into his touch with barely a movement right now.

But I don't need a knight in shining armor.

And Rudy doesn't want kids.

And no matter what he says, he won't want to carry me on his shoulders for the remainder of my treatment.

"They were great. I should have done it weeks ago." I give him a tight smile. "I'm not very good at asking for help, though."

“I noticed,” he deadpans.

I snort, body softening toward him, then freeze. I can’t do this—I can’t fall into the comfortable, intimate conversation that’s so easy when Rudy’s around. So, I force myself to ask, “How was your date?”

Even though I’m not looking at him, I can feel Rudy’s eyes on me. “Lily,” he says quietly. “That was business.”

I nod. “Business. Right. I also have sunset champagne with my business associates. Just out of curiosity, is that the same woman you had a business lunch with before?” My eyes are trained on the tree directly across from me. It’s the one Dorothy and I planted together, and I’m pretty sure it’s a little crooked.

Rudy lets out a bitter snort. “So, what, now I can’t talk to anyone? I can’t do my job? You broke up with me, Lily. Actually, it wasn’t even a breakup, because you insisted on never having anything with me in the first place. Why are you mad at me right now?”

My heart pounds, but no words come. He’s right, of course. I pushed him away. I’ve done nothing but push him away when he made promise after promise to me. He said he’d take on my illness, that he wanted to be with me so badly he’d brave the cancer alongside me.

How the hell could I possibly believe that? The last time I trusted a man, it turned out he had a whole other family complete with wife and kids waiting for him at home. But a few weeks after that happens, I’m supposed to believe the perfect man truly exists? Please. I may have made my share of bad decisions in my life, but I’m not a complete idiot.

I turn my head to meet his gaze, and I see nothing but hard steel in his eyes. Ice pours down my spine, and I know this is the end of whatever existed between us. This is my chance. When he’s mad—buoyed by his anger—I can tell him about the baby and show him that he doesn’t really want me at all. I’ll put the final nail in the coffin of our romance. I’m having a baby, and that’s exactly the thing that will push him away. He’ll walk away from me, and we’ll both be better off.

“Rudy, I’m—”

“I’m not doing this.” He stands up. His fingers just avoid brushing my shoulder as he moves. “I saw you here and I thought we could talk, understand each other, but you’re convinced you’d rather be alone. This isn’t worth it.”

His back is a broad shadow as he stalks away from me, pausing at the entrance to the garden. Glancing over his shoulder, Rudy’s features look carved from marble in the moonlight. His hair is so pale it looks like spun silver, but his eyes are black as night.

“For the record,” he growls, “nothing happened with Georgia. I handed her the keys to her new home, had half a glass of champagne, and I left.” His eyes are hard when he lifts them to meet mine, and I see nothing of the Rudy I know in his gaze. “I left because I was thinking of you. I see now that was a mistake.”

Mute, I sit there until he’s out of sight. I sit until the air raises goosebumps over my skin, and the chill of the night settles into my bones. I sit until I have the strength to drag myself up to my feet again, knowing something changed forever tonight.

It was inevitable, really, but it still sends pain spearing through my chest. I did this. I pushed him away, I withheld the truth and dragged our relationship on much longer than I should have. Any pain I feel is my own fault.

My legs feel like lead as I heave myself from the garden to my apartment building. Body numb, I fumble with my purse and manage to get the key fob pressed up against the sensor to unlock the building door. By the time I make it up to my apartment, I’m barely able to stand on my own. My body feels like it’s breaking down.

One look at the pillow-covered bed is enough to turn my stomach. That’s where Rudy and I made love. It’s where I had one last night where I felt like a woman. For those few hours, I was more than my pregnancy, more than my illness.

That's over now too. The next few months—years, even—will most likely strip away all the things I thought I knew about myself

I sleep on the couch that night. The bed reminds me too much of Rudy.

*Candice*

**M**y new yoga studio is big enough for about ten people. The back wall is lined with mirrors and a small dais where my own yoga mat is laid out. I light a few candles and put on my favorite yoga playlist, then let out a long breath.

Someone clears their throat behind me. I turn to see Blake leaning against the wall next to the door, a small smile playing over his lips. “Happy with how the studio turned out?”

“Blake,” I answer, crossing the hardwood floors toward him. He wraps his strong arms around my body and pulls me tight to him. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for, Candy Cane.”

I pull away and pinch the underside of his arm until he yelps, laughing. “You know I hate that nickname.”

“Your mother says it all the time!” He rubs the back of his arm.

“Those things are not mutually exclusive.”

Blake just laughs, then ducks down to kiss me. I part my lips and am about to get lost in his kiss when the sound of an engine coming down the driveway makes us pull apart. Blake lets out a sigh. “Guess we’ll have to pick this up after your class.”

“I’ll come find you,” I say with a smile, and I watch him walk away until he disappears into our beautiful new house. Turning to see the first arrival, I’m surprised to see Nora.

She smiles. “Hey. Am I early? I hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Right on time. Everyone else is late.” I step aside to let her walk inside, then grin when she lets out a whistle.

“Blake didn’t hold back, did he? This place looks sleek.”

“Wait until you see the shower and bathroom. It looks like a luxury resort.” I walk across the space and open the door to the shower, all gleaming stone and fancy finishes.

As someone who lived in the same house for the better part of twenty years, with mostly hand-me-down furniture and old memories, moving somewhere new has been interesting. After my house burned down, my daughter Allie and I moved to a small rental in town, but this new house with Blake feels more...permanent. It’s the start of something beautiful.

“You certainly landed on your feet,” Simone says from the doorway, brows arching high as she takes in the space.

“Says the woman with a coastal property that she calls her own woodland fairy tale,” Fiona quips, gently shoving Simone inside so she can enter.

Jen arrives next, looking a bit flushed. “Sorry I’m late. Fallon and I were planning the autumn menu for the café. I lost track of time.”

Simone’s eyes narrow. “Girl, you have sex hair.”

Jen’s eyes widen as she pats her bird’s nest down. Her cheeks flush, and I can’t help the belly laugh that tumbles out of me. I’ve known Jen a long time, and seeing her with Fallon is something special. She’s never been so relaxed. The other day, she burned a batch of cranberry-orange muffins and *laughed*. Jennifer Newbank *laughed* about messing up her baking. Unheard of.

There’s a bit of bustling as everyone removes their shoes and lays their yoga mats on the ground. As everyone talks and laughs while we wait for Trina and Lily, I grin. This is a far cry from the normal yoga classes I teach, where people relax and lie down to meditate for the minutes before the class—but I know trying to get these women to stop chatting and giggling



would be near impossible. I wouldn't want to silence them, anyway.

Trina and Lily arrive together, and I immediately know something is wrong. Lily has dark smudges under her eyes, and her steps are labored. Immediately, my plan for a vigorous session to get everyone sweaty goes out the window.

"Let's all get bolsters and blocks from the shelf by the wall," I say. "We're going to do an easy Yin yoga class today."

Lily lets out a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I was worried you'd work us until we collapsed. I almost didn't come."

"I had to threaten her with calling Mom to keep her company before she agreed to join me," Trina says, grabbing a couple of bolsters from the stack on the shelf.

Smiling, I steal one last glance at my little sister, and head to the front of the class. First, yoga. After that, we can talk.

*Lily*

It's funny how time can be fast and slow at once. My days feel torturously sluggish, like every task is an effort. I do yoga with Candice and I keep myself busy with work, but my thoughts always drift back to Rudy. The hours tick by, and I know in the depths of my heart that if our situation had been different, we could have had something great.

But at the same time, the days whip past so fast I can hardly keep track. It's not until Candice is helping me into her car to drive me to the hospital for my surgery that reality comes crashing down.

"Did you pack an extra pair of underwear?" Candice asks, grabbing my bag to put it in the back seat.

I huff. "I pretty much only packed granny panties and socks."

She nods, satisfied, then slides behind the wheel. "Mom and Trina will meet us there."

"You guys don't need to come. I'll be wheeled into surgery this afternoon and probably home tomorrow or the next day. It's no big deal."

Candice turns the car on before facing me. "Okay. Listen. You're my sister, and I love you, and you're getting a major surgery. It is a big deal, and we're going to be there whether you like it or not."

I blow out a breath. "Fine."

"Thank you' also works," Candice says with a grin.

I jump when someone bangs on the window next to me. It's Jen, and she holds up a paper bag. "Made you some snacks for tomorrow," she says, her voice muffled. I roll the window down and she repeats herself. "I know you can't eat today, but I made some things in case the hospital food is gross. It'll all keep at room temperature for the day. Fallon's making your dinner tomorrow."

"He is?"

Jen nods. "Yeah. We'll either bring it by your place or take it to the hospital, if you're still there for another night." She shoves the paper bag through the window, then nods. "Good luck."

I watch her stride diagonally across the street toward Four Cups, her white chef's uniform smeared with various types of batter. She has a floury handprint on her butt, which looks very large and very male.

I hold the bag of treats on my lap and feel a suspicious prickling in the back of my eyelids. Candice smiles at me and pats my knee. "Let's get you to the hospital, yeah?"

"Yeah," I croak.

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I'VE NEVER HAD general anesthesia before. I've actually never had any kind of surgery at all. But the nurses are kind, and the doctor explains everything in detail, and before I know it, my mother and sisters are saying goodbye and an orderly is wheeling me down to the operating room. He's an older man with tattoos snaking all the way up his arms, his long, gray hair tied in a ponytail at the back of his head. He tells me a story about his granddaughter taking her first steps this morning. For some reason, the story calms me. By the time he wheels me to the ward right outside the operating room, I'm ready.

This cancer will be cut away, and then it'll be me and my baby against the world. I slide a hand over my stomach and stare at the tiled ceiling, feeling a rush of warmth and love fill

me up. I can do this. This first hurdle is terrifying, but within just a few short hours, I'll be on my way to recovery. My baby needs me healthy and happy.

It's while I'm lying there, waiting to be wheeled into the OR, that I really think about my baby for the first time in my pregnancy. I'd thought about the baby before, obviously, but it had always seemed like this hazy future that I could get to if I crossed a deadly minefield.

But in those few minutes when time stops and all I can do is wait for surgery, I realize that I'm going to be a mother. I'm going to have a tiny human with tiny little fingernails and soft, soft skin, and they'll be relying on me for everything. I'll get to watch my baby grow and learn and explore the world.

Suddenly, the cancer seems surmountable. Surgery, then chemo, then the reward is a child I get to call my own. Why have I been worried about my ex turning his back on me? Why have I been thinking about Rudy and a budding romance that went nowhere?

The biggest change in my life will happen in a matter of months, and it's going to be *great*. I'll be like that orderly soon—seeing a child of my own take their first steps and telling anyone that will listen about it.

A team of nurses approaches, and a sense of calm settles over me. This is just a challenge I have to get through for my baby. It's just a test of my strength that I need to pass in order to get the reward of a full and happy life. For the first time since I found out about the baby, I realize what a gift this really is. Not just the baby, but the fight against this disease, too. My priorities are being muscled into place and I can finally *see* what's important to me.

It's not some guy. Not my ex, not Rudy, not anyone. What matters is my kid. My recovery. My family.

I'm moved, prepped, and put under. Then I blink, and I'm awake again, with a nurse behind me welcoming me back to the real world.

For some reason, the first thing I ask her is if my teeth are okay. In the pre-surgery briefing, they told me there was a risk of damage to the veneers I have on my two front teeth during intubation and extubation, and my anesthesia-addled brain decided that was the most important thing to verify.

Forget what I said about priorities. Apparently, mine are all out of whack.

The nurse smiles. “Your teeth are fine. The surgery went well. The baby is healthy. We’re going to bring you up to your room in a few minutes and the doctor will come see you there. Just relax. You did great.” She pats my arm, checks the various bits of equipment near my head, then walks away.

---

I WAKE up again in my room to a blurry shape sitting in the chair next to me.

“Rudy?” I rasp, then blink a few times to see Candice standing up from the chair.

“Hey,” she whispers, patting my leg. “What did you say?”

I gulp past painful dryness in my throat and shake my head once. “Nothing. Hey.”

“Your surgery lasted just under three hours,” she says. “Mom and Trina had to go back to town to pick up the kids from daycare. They’re dropping them off with Mac, but they’ll both be back soon with some more supplies. Doc said you’d probably be here more than a day. Mom went through your bag and decided you hadn’t packed properly.” My sister winces. “She went back for fresh toiletries and more comfortable clothes for you. She wasn’t sorry about snooping.”

I huff. “No worries.” My lids are heavy, and the last thing I know is Candice is readjusting the blanket over my waist and patting my leg before I doze off.

*Rudy*

I sit on my brand-new hardwood floor and lean back against my aching arms. In the past few weeks, I've repainted the entire downstairs level of my house and installed all-new flooring. My fixer-upper is finally getting fixed up. Today, I just finished installing the last of the baseboards and re-hung the freshly painted doors. I glance around the room and let out a sigh.

This is where Lily and I worked on my grandmother's paperwork. Down the hall, where new kitchen cabinets are about to be installed, is where we kissed right before Grandma interrupted us and spooked Lily.

Instead of smiling, the memory makes me feel bitter. I've spent the last couple of weeks burying myself in work and renovations. I've taken on three new clients personally and pushed my sales team hard. Then evenings and weekends, I've worked on the house.

Last weekend, Lee came over to help me paint and I'm pretty sure he was just checking if I was still alive. I refused his offer to buy me a drink at the Grove and watched him drive away on his bike with a sigh of relief. It's been good to be alone.

My stomach growls, and when I peel myself off the floor and shuffle to the kitchen, I realize my fridge is completely empty. The pantry isn't any better, unless I want to open a dusty can of chickpeas that came with the house.

Grabbing my keys, I head into town to grab some dinner. I park near the Heart's Cove Hotel and walk toward a little Thai

place just diagonally across from the Four Cups Café. When I get closer, I glance across the street at the dark windows of the café and wonder how Lily's doing, then kick myself for even caring.

Our evening in the garden still lingers at the forefront of my memory. Lily wants nothing to do with me, and I shouldn't even be thinking about her anymore.

I pause when the café door bursts open. Out of the Four Cups Café come spilling most of the members of Lily's family. Before I can stop myself, my feet carry me closer.

"I've got the food," Trina says. "Jen says she already gave her a few things, but I grabbed more. Mom, did you get Iliana's overnight bag? You said she forgot her toothbrush?"

"Who do you think I am?" Lottie huffs, then thrusts an arm toward a waiting vehicle. "It's all packed and ready to go. You must have forgotten that I'm your mother, Katrina, and that I'm more than capable of caring for my daughters."

Trina seems content ignoring her mother as she glances at her phone. "Candice just texted me," she says. "Lily woke up a couple of minutes ago. The surgery went well."

I stumble on a crack in the pavement. That was today? Lily's getting her mastectomy *right now*? I frown, hurrying forward. It hasn't been that long since the housewarming...has it? I keep telling myself that Lily was right to push me away, that it's better for us to go our separate ways.

But this acid burning in my stomach disagrees.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Lottie throws herself at the passenger door and clambers inside.

I cross the street in time to help Trina with the boxes of food she's hauling into the trunk of her car. She looks up when I grab one end of the box before it tips over and gives me a relieved smile. "Rudy, hi! Thank you. I almost lost the sandwiches there."

"You feeding a football team?"

She grins, but the edges of it are tired. “No, just the visitors that will be stopping in to see Lily.” Trina glances at the box and bites her lip. “We may have gone overboard.”

My throat is tight, but I manage to respond. “She got her mastectomy today?”

She studies me for a moment, then nods. “Yeah. It went well.”

My throat feels raw, and I only manage to nod. “That’s good. She was nervous about it, I think.”

“She actually *talked* to you about how she felt?” Lottie’s head pops up above the roof of the car. “Am I *always* the last to hear about these things? First she tells Trina, then you know how she’s feeling—I’m starting to think Lily is trying to keep me in the dark about everything. Next thing, I’ll find out she’s already married or maybe she’s decided to become a nun!”

Trina plants her hands on her hips. “Mom, you saw her when she told us. She was terrified that we’d have a bad reaction to the news. It doesn’t exactly take a rocket scientist to figure out she was scared. Rudy just happens to be more perceptive than your average Neanderthal. Yesterday, she admitted to me that she couldn’t stop thinking about the months before Dad died, and that’s why she was nervous to tell us. She didn’t want to burden us with the news.”

“I know, I know.” Lottie huffs. “Silly girl.”

I frown, remembering Lottie’s words—she said Trina knew about the cancer. I could have sworn Lily told me she hadn’t said anything to her family...but maybe she misspoke, or maybe she told Trina about the cancer after she told me.

It’s not my business. Either way, Lily broke it off with me, and it’s for the best.

“I’d better get going,” Trina says, squeezing my arm.

I step aside and let her get in her car, standing on the sidewalk to watch them go.

I feel...useless. And guilty.

Why do I feel guilty?



The car engine turns over...and dies. Trina tries it again, and even through the car door I can hear Lottie's voice barking out instructions. When the car fails to start a third time, I bend over and knock on the window.

It rolls down and Lottie turns toward me. "You got jumper cables?"

I shake my head. "No, but I have a car."

"Good enough. Katrina, get out. Rudy is driving us to the hospital."

I straighten up and take a step back as Lottie exits her daughter's car. "Give me a couple minutes—I'll get the car and be right back. It's parked just down the road."

"Screw that," Lottie says. "We'll come with you, then we can drive straight to the hospital."

And that's how I end up carrying a box of sandwiches, muffins, and treats under one arm with Lottie and Trina in tow. Trina is carrying a small overnight bag that must have Lily's stuff in it.

I should have done more for Iliana. Even now, seeing the help she's getting from her family makes me feel like I've failed her. I walked away when I should have stayed.

We hurry to my vehicle, and when it starts without any issues, Trina breathes a sigh of relief from the back seat.

Once we're on our way, Lottie leans over to pat my thigh. "Whatever happened between you and Lily? I was sure you two would end up together."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. "It didn't work out."

"She pushed you away because of the cancer?" Trina asks.

When I glance at her in the rearview mirror, her head is leaning against the window. I nod. "Yeah. How did you know?"

Trina lets out a bitter snort. "That's our Lily. I used to think she was jet-setting around the world all the time because she

was afraid of being a burden on anyone. Needing help with the cancer—and everything else—is probably her worst nightmare.”

Everything else? What does that mean?

Lottie grunts in agreement. “You can say that again. When your father died, she couldn’t wait to run away to Peru. She called it wanderlust, but I knew what it was—she just didn’t want us to see her pain. She’s always been that way. Private. Your father was the same way. Damn near had to tie him to the bed to get him to rest and accept my help when he could barely make it to the bathroom on his own.”

“Maybe we’ll get away without tying her down,” Trina answers. “At least she let us drive her to the hospital this morning.”

I keep my eyes on the road as a lump forms in my throat, and I just keep repeating the truth to myself: Lily pushed me away. She broke up with me. We split up, and it was for the best.

So why do I feel sick?

*Rudy*

“**A**re you sure you don’t want to come up? I’m sure Lily would be glad to see you when she wakes up again.” Lottie leans on the window opening to speak to me from outside the car. Katrina is already through the sliding glass doors and at the reception desk inside.

I shake my head. “I’ll give her a few days. I’m probably the last person she wants to see when she’s laid up in a hospital bed.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Lottie gives me a wink, then totters after her daughter.

I’m in a drop-off zone, so I don’t give myself any time to dawdle. I get back on the road and head to the office. When I pull into my parking space, my stomach grumbles. I never did get any dinner. The thought of sitting by myself and eating while I stew about the fact that Lily is in surgery and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it doesn’t exactly appeal to me, though, so I find myself heading to the Grove.

The bar is located in a strip mall just outside the Heart’s Cove town limits. It’s nestled between a barber shop and a now-vacant store that has been a Chinese restaurant, a nail salon, a pharmacy, and a weird vacuum repair shop—all in the last couple of years. I guess the few motorcycles that are permanent fixtures outside the Grove scare away the scant customers.

The Grove isn’t exactly a biker bar, but it’s a convenient stop on a nice drive, and Hamish and his sons have ridden motorcycles for as long as I can remember. As such, it’s

become more of a biker-friendly bar. I park across from the four bikes parked outside and comb my fingers through my hair, a weight in the pit of my gut.

When I walk inside, I'm greeted by a dim interior that smells of stale beer and musk. Motorcycle memorabilia hangs on the walls, along with old photos and a few fizzing neon beer signs. Along the right side of the long, narrow room are some old vinyl booths upholstered in green, with the bar taking up almost the entire left wall. A few tables are dotted in between, but right now—as they are most weekdays—the tables and chairs are mostly stacked along the back wall.

Lee works the bar for his father a few times a week. I have no idea why. He either enjoys the company of grouchy old bikers or he has a soft spot for his father that he works hard to hide. It's not for money—Lee makes enough of that on his own. I don't even know if Hamish pays his son for the hours he works here. When I enter the old dive bar, Lee glances up and gives me a chin jerk.

There's a guy I don't recognize sitting at the bar, and I take a seat two stools from him. It's not exactly unusual to see new people here, but this guy looks different. He's wearing a shirt and suit pants, and both items look custom tailored. Shiny black shoes are hooked over the rung of his barstool, an odd contrast of old and new.

Glancing from him to the grubby old regulars whose faces are mostly scruff and wrinkles, I arch a brow at Lee.

“What're you having?” he asks, eyes twinkling. Clearly, he's curious about the new arrival.

“Beer,” I answer. Lee gives me my usual drink and I take a long drink. It's bitter, cold, and frothy, and it makes something tight in my gut relax.

I'm not usually one to self-medicate. I like a social drink once in a while, but I've never been the type of guy to turn to alcohol to numb my problems.

Today, though, I feel like I could get lost in the bottle. I can't stop thinking of that hospital, of Lily there on her own. I

should be beside her. I should be the one who was carrying her overnight bag, who made sure she had enough to eat. That's *my* responsibility.

I blink and take another gulp of beer because I know that's a lie. Lily was never my responsibility. Even when I was buried inside her, not an inch of space between her skin and mine, she kept me at arm's length. I wonder how long it'll take for her to take off on another international trip, once her treatment is done? How long until she's gone forever?

No matter what Lee says to me whenever he leans against the bar across from me, my mind drifts to the hospital bed where Lily is lying. I wonder if she's awake. If she's in pain. If there's a damn thing I could do to make her life any easier.

Then I remember her face when she told me she didn't want me, and I finish the rest of my beer. Lee pours me another.

"Rough day?" the suit sitting at the bar asks, leaning both arms against the sticky wooden surface. He nods to the empty glass Lee takes away as he replaces it with a full one.

I nod. "Yeah. You?"

He grunts. "Rough couple of months."

I huff. I can relate. It feels like ever since Lily arrived in town, my world has been thrown off-kilter. I've never felt this kind of burning need before. It's not sex. It's the need to care for someone. I could call Georgia Neves and have her on her back within the hour. I could call any number of booty calls to scratch an itch—but I don't want to. I want to be sitting in a chair next to Lily's bed, holding her hand and listening to her breathe.

What the fuck is up with that?

"Woman?" The man beside me nods to the now-half-empty pint glass in front of me. I hadn't even realized I'd drunk any of it.

I arch a brow.

He snorts. “The only time a man downs a drink as fast as you did just now is because he’s thinking of a woman.” He lifts his empty glass and arches his brows meaningfully.

I grunt. “You too?”

“She’s fucking gorgeous,” he says. “And she wants nothing to do with me.”

My next sip of beer goes down easy, and I nod. “I know the feeling.”

“Phil,” the man says as he extends a hand. “I’m staying here for a week.” He points to a stairwell, and I nod, remembering the day I heard about the booking. “Trying to win her back.”

“Rudy,” I answer. We shake, and Phil moves one stool closer, so there’s only one seat between us. I’d rather drink alone—even Lee has stopped trying to talk to me—but I say nothing. Maybe this guy needs to get something off his chest.

“I used to like that she was independent, you know?” Phil lifts his glass to ask for another. Lee nods, pouring out the golden liquid with expert movements. Phil waits for his drink, then takes a long sip before continuing. “I thought it was a good thing that she wasn’t needy.”

A bitter smile tugs at my lips. “It’s all good until you realize you *want* her to need you.”

“Fucking exactly.” He shakes his head. His fingers play with the damp coaster under his beer. “She’s carrying my kid, you know.”

I arch my brows. “Rough.”

“I fucked up, though. Made her think I didn’t want it. My ex-wife—the woman I was with before her...” He shakes his head. “It’s complicated, but I’m here now. She’s not answering her phone, though.” He glances over at me. “What about you?”

“Not talking to me either,” I admit. “She’s sick, and she’s convinced she wants to deal with it alone.”

“Shit,” the man says, sympathy written in his eyes. “She won’t let you help?”

“I’m completely powerless,” I admit.

“Screw that,” Phil grunts. “You should go to her. She might tell you she doesn’t want your help, but she sure as hell won’t refuse it if you give it without asking.”

My brows arch. “I’m not so sure. This woman...she’s something else.”

Phil lets out a bitter laugh. “Sounds like my woman. Mind of her own. I told her I couldn’t do a relationship, but she fucking sucked me in. Next thing I knew, I was traveling hours out of my way just to get a taste of her.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “I had the opposite experience. She told me she only wanted casual sex, and I was the idiot who wanted more.”

Phil shakes his head, then calls for a few shots.

Lee pours them, then pours one for himself. “You two are pathetic, you know that?”

I laugh, and it feels almost foreign as it leaves my lips. When was the last time I laughed? The three of us take our shots, the alcohol burning on the way down. I grimace. Sambuca. I shake my head and huff at Lee. “I know how pathetic I am. Don’t need reminding.”

“Why don’t you just go find these women and tell them exactly what you just told each other?” Lee leans against the bar, glancing at each of us in turn. His arms are crossed over his broad chest, brows arched. “What the hell are you waiting for?”

Phil slams a hand down on the bar. “You’re right. I’m going to go find her. She’s got to answer her phone at some point. I’ll see her tonight. I *need* to see her tonight.”

I blink, nodding. “Same. Fuck this. I’m not drinking on my own when I could be beside her,” I say, sliding off my stool. “I gotta take a leak.”

By the time I return to the main bar, Phil has disappeared and Lee is cleaning up his glass. He gives me a grim smile and nods to the door up to the rooms above. “Your new best friend went to go harass his girl until she tells him where she is.”

Groaning, I slide back onto my barstool. “I can’t go see Lily tonight. I’ll go tomorrow.”

“I think you should.” Lee leans against the bar across from me. I’ve known him most of my life. We met in ninth grade on the first day of high school. We were two scrawny kids in the same homeroom who fought over the hottest girl in our year. Chastity Jackson did not live up to her name, and neither her two-week relationship with Lee nor her two-day relationship with me ran the distance. Obviously. My friendship with Lee, though, has been just about the only constant in my life.

“You do?” I ask honestly, wanting to hear what my friend has to say. “I mean, I know Philly-boy wanted to go claim his woman, but the truth is, Lily told me to back off. I’m thinking maybe the right thing to do is listen to her.”

“You’ve been moping around for weeks, and she’s laid up in a hospital bed recovering from major surgery. Even if she told you to stay away, you have to go see her. You don’t have to go profess your undying love, but you need to show your face, Rudy.” He shakes his head. “Don’t be a fucking idiot. She’ll remember if you don’t come see her.”

“She might throw me out,” I note.

“Yeah, and then you’ll be exactly where you are now. What have you got to lose?”

“When did you turn into an expert on women?” I snip. “Last time I checked, Drea left your ass at the altar. You haven’t exactly lived happily ever after.”

Lee’s eyes grow shuttered. “Maybe I don’t want you making the same mistakes I did.”

Sighing, I close my eyes. “Sorry. That was uncalled for.”

“Just...” Lee combs a hand through his hair. “Just get out of here, get some sleep, and bring Lily some flowers in the morning. Trust me.”



My best friend sounds tired, but there's a ring of truth to his words. Even if Lily wants nothing to do with me, I can't just let her slip through my fingers. I can bring her a bunch of flowers and show her I still care.

I nod. "Yeah. I'll go in the morning."

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AND I DO. The next morning, I wake up in my brand-new bed (including bed frame) and inhale a cup of coffee and some toast before jumping in my car and heading for the hospital. I consider calling Lily's phone to make sure it's okay for me to come visit, but decide against it. What's that old saying about it being better to ask forgiveness than permission? I can't afford to have her tell me not to come.

I *need* to see her. I need to make sure she's okay. I need to touch her skin and hold her hand and tell her that I'm there for her, even if she doesn't want me to be. If she pushes me away, I'll leave. But if there's a slim, infinitesimal chance that she actually wants me to be in that room beside her, and I can't afford to let it pass me by.

I stop in at the local florist to grab a bunch of flowers, then tear out onto the freeway like my life depends on it. When I arrive at the hospital, visiting hours are just starting. The nurse at the front desk gives me Lily's room number and directions around the huge, sprawling hospital complex. By the time I make it to the oncology ward, sweat is dripping down my spine and soaking the underarms of my shirt. It's not warm in the hospital, but my nerves are wound so tight my movements are jerky and uncoordinated.

I'm regretting the impulsivity of coming here. I'm thinking maybe Lily will throw me out, and that will actually feel much, much worse than I felt last night.

But just as I'm about to lose my nerve, I see her room number. The hospital has plain beige hallways with clean tile floors, and the fluorescent light in front of Lily's door is

flickering gently. I pause, glancing at the name written next to her door, and blow out a breath.

Even if she throws me out, at least I'm here. At least she knows I'm not afraid to come to the hospital to stay with her. Her illness doesn't scare me.

I knock gently, then push the door open. My chest seizes.

Lily looks like hell, and she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She's pale, lying back on her bed dressed in a hospital gown with an IV sticking out from the back of her hand. Her dark hair is splayed over the pillow, her face free of makeup. Something tight unknots in my chest.

I can't believe I actually considered turning away. My feet carry me to the bedside, and Lily's eyes widen.

"Rudy." She grips the blankets and tugs them up slightly before patting her hair.

I realize the flowers I brought are hanging limply in my hand. I thrust them up and toward her, which makes her rear back. I pull them back to my chest. "Sorry. I brought you these." Then I thrust them toward her again.

Lily's lips twitch. "You mind putting them on the table?"

I look around for a vase, then feel stupid for bringing flowers to a hospital room without anywhere to put them. Giving up, I just lay them flat on the little table on wheels next to Lily's bed.

She gestures to a chair. "Sit, if you have time."

"I've got time," I tell her, my throat tight. I've got all the time in the world. I pull the chair close to her side and put my hand on the bed, half an inch from hers.

Her fingers extend slightly, barely brushing the side of my palm. I feel that touch in my entire body. My cock twitches, which is entirely inappropriate but there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

“Tired,” she answers. “But okay. The doctor said the surgery went well. They’re waiting on tests to see if they got all the cancer cells. Had to take my nipple, but the reconstruction went okay. I have what they call a breast expander, and I’ll have to come back and get it pumped full of saline every few weeks before they can put an implant in.” She snorts, then closes her eyes. “Sorry. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. I’m sure you don’t want to hear about my mutant boobs.”

“I love your mutant boobs,” I blurt out, which makes her laugh. It’s a hoarse, tired sound, but it unfurls the tight knot in my chest.

“Well, that’s good.” Her eyes soften. “Thanks for coming,” she whispers. “And thanks for the flowers.”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t want to see me.”

“Well, I’m sure I look terrible and I’ll probably be embarrassed about it later, but right now I’m glad.” Her eyes are soft as they search mine.

“You look beautiful,” I tell her, shifting my hand to cover hers. Deep, undeniable contentment suffuses my body at the touch, as if all I’ve ever needed was to have my palm laid over hers. This is right. This is exactly where I should be.

She smiles sadly. “I’m sorry I pushed you away, Rudy. I just needed to get through this, and I felt like I might not have the strength if I was distracted by a man.”

“I’m here,” I say softly. “I want to be here. I don’t want to be a distraction, Lily. I want to add to your strength.”

Her breath catches, and I wonder if this is it. All it took was me showing up with a bunch of flowers she hasn’t even looked at, and I’m about to win her back. Sure, the past few weeks have been shitty without her, but I’d go through it a hundred times over if it means I get to see this look in her eyes—the soft, tender look that tells me this was never casual between us. My chest squeezes, and for a beautiful, brilliant moment, I think I might have won over the woman of my dreams.

Then the door opens, and Phil from the Grove steps in. His eyes move from Lily to me, and everything falls to shit.

*Lily*

I don't know if the hospital has me on some strong painkillers or what, but I actually forgot about Phil. How crazy is that? He texted me last night about a million times before I finally told him where I am. I was surprised he was in town, obviously, but I think a part of me thought he was bluffing. How many times did he tell me he'd come see me before a last-minute "business meeting" came up? In all the time I dated him, he wasn't ever reliable.

How could he be, when he had a whole other family waiting for him at his real home?

Then I fell asleep, and I woke up to bright sunshine, feeling simultaneously like a Mack truck ran me over and like my life could finally begin. My first thought this morning was for my baby—and how for the first time since I got the cancer diagnosis, I actually feel like my baby is connected to me. It's like cutting the cancer from my body lifted a weight from my shoulders.

I'm no longer this sick husk of a woman who might not make it to see my child grow up, or who might not even be able to carry my child. Now I've faced the first big hurdle, and I'm almost through it. Sure, the recovery will be tough, and I still have chemotherapy to contend with, but I've gone under the knife and my baby is right here with me.

For the first time in months, I feel like my future is...well, maybe it's not bright, exactly, but I at least feel like I *have* a future. I hadn't realized how terrified I was of getting this mastectomy until I woke up and everything (including my

dental work) had gone okay. I think I had this niggling fear that the baby wouldn't make it.

More than a niggling fear, actually. I was damn terrified of going under the knife. I thought I'd wake up with one breast and an empty womb, and I'd have to deal with the guilt of a miscarriage along with the scars on my body.

But everything went well. The surgery, the baby, the reconstruction. For the first time in months, I feel *hope*.

Then Rudy walked into my room, and Phil just flew right out of my mind because Rudy is so damn pretty and the soft, sensitive parts of my heart were just delighted he'd actually come to see me.

For those few moments, when the tips of my fingers brushed the edge of his hand, I felt like I'd been wrong to push him away. He came to see me even after I acted like I wanted nothing to do with him, and doesn't that mean there's something good between us? Doesn't that mean he cares?

But then Phil walked through the door, and time has slowed right down. The seconds melt by, and both men look at me, then at each other.

At first, I think Phil is shocked that there's another man by my side. But when Rudy stands up, his chair clattering to the floor, I realize they've met.

*Oh no. Oh no, no, no.*

Listen. I know that this far, as you've read my story, it might seem like I make bad decisions. It might seem like I'm a grown woman who has no idea what the hell I'm doing. That's fair. I don't, in fact, have any idea what the hell I'm doing.

But this?

Rudy and Phil showing up in my hospital room not twelve hours after I've gotten major surgery?

This is bad, even for me.

This must be in the top ten worst moments of my life. My stomach bottoms out, and I just *know* things are about to get much, much worse.

Rudy freezes, standing awkwardly next to the bed, his hand still gripped in mine, eyes on the man in the doorway. “Phil? What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I was just going to ask the same thing.” My ex-boyfriend is holding a bouquet of flowers, and I notice they look like the sad kind of bunch you get at the grocery store. Nothing like the gorgeous bouquet Rudy brought.

Then I feel like a maniac, because why the hell am I comparing flower arrangements when these two men are shooting daggers at each other?

“Um...” I blink as both men turn to face me.

Something horrible crosses Rudy’s face. He glances down at my stomach, then back at my face. “You’re pregnant?”

“Wait.” Phil takes a step forward. “I thought they had you in the oncology ward because of a bed shortage or something. But...you have fucking *cancer*?”

I flinch, tearing my gaze away from my ex to look at Rudy. I don’t know what I want to see in his gaze, but it’s not the harsh coldness in his eyes. He straightens up, his hand dropping from mine. His brows tug together and he searches my face as I try to find the words to say what I feel.

“I wanted to tell you,” I finally whisper.

Rudy takes a step back. “You’ve been pregnant this whole time?”

“Are you fucking this guy?” Phil asks, stepping up to the other side of the bed. The two men tower over me, and my eyes flick from one to the other. My heart starts pounding and I close my eyes, feeling trapped and claustrophobic and so fucking stupid.

This is my own damn fault. My fault for getting involved with Rudy. My fault for telling Phil where I am. My fault for getting pregnant in the first place. I knew my birth control prescription had run out, and I knew it had been three days since I’d taken a pill by the time I filled it again. But I still chose to have sex with Phil, didn’t I?

I don't know if the cancer is my fault, but it sure as hell feels like it.

"Iliana," Phil snaps. "Answer the question."

I hate when he does that. He treats me like a child and scolds me like he has a right to. I frown at my ex, wondering what the hell I ever saw in him.

"You left, Phil, so I'm not sure what business of yours it is who I sleep with. You have some nerve waltzing into this room telling me I'm wrong for moving on, when I was the other woman without even knowing it. Or did you forget that you have a wife and kids waiting for you at home?"

"Ex-wife," he spits.

I blink. "What?"

"I left her. I'm here, but I find you shackled up with someone new? Didn't take you long."

"You left your wife for me?" I whisper, more bewildered than anything.

In all the possible outcomes of my situation, Phil leaving his marriage to come raise my baby with me didn't even register on my radar. When Phil told me he wanted me to abort my child right before walking away from me, I thought that was the last time I'd ever see him. I was glad for it, too, naïve as I was at the time. I was convinced I could do everything on my own.

That was before the cancer diagnosis.

My mind reels, and I remember Rudy is there when I see him walking toward the door.

"Rudy!" I call out. "Wait."

He pauses at the door, eyes flicking from me to Phil and back again. "I shouldn't have come here," he says. "This was a mistake."

"So fucking leave, asshole," Phil spits over his shoulder.

"Phil, stop," I admonish. Typical. The man has always had a temper. What the hell did I see in him, anyway? Maybe



when we were in Italy everything just felt a bit more romantic.

I try to sit up to call Rudy back, then wince as pain radiates across my chest.

Rudy pauses, taking half a step toward me. Then his face hardens, and he turns away and walks out the door.

A nurse bustles in. Her name is Wendy, and she must be nearing the end of her shift because she's been taking care of me all night. She's kind and gentle and incredibly efficient, but she has a spine of steel. Her hair is a riot of curls barely tamed in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her rich, dark skin is set off by the blue scrubs she's wearing, and she lifts an eyebrow at the interloper in my room. There's none of the soft kindness in her gaze now. "Everything okay here?" Her eyes narrow on Phil. "Who are you?"

"I'm the father," he says, that hard, bulldog expression setting itself over his features.

The nurse doesn't even blink. She turns to me. "You want him gone?"

"She wants me to stay," Phil says, taking a step toward the nurse.

She lifts a hand. "Sir, one more step and I'm calling security. Now, Lily, you want this guy here, or do you want him gone?"

I take a little sip of a breath and lie back on my pillows. "Gone," I whisper. "I think I need to sleep."

Phil splutters, but the nurse extends a hand toward the door to my room. "You heard the woman. Out."

"I'm coming back later," Phil says, and it sounds a little bit like a threat.

I just close my eyes. I don't have the energy to deal with any of this.

Wendy closes the door behind him with a sneer. "He seems like a winner."

I huff a bitter laugh and blink my eyes open. I turn to watch her take my blood pressure and let out a long sigh. “I think I fucked up, Wendy. The guy I want didn’t know I was pregnant until just now, and he told me he never wanted to be a stepdad. The father of my kid didn’t know about the breast cancer. I don’t want him anywhere near my baby, but he just told me he left his wife for me. Everything is a mess.”

She grunts, making notes on my chart. “Don’t worry about any of that now. You’ve got more important things to think about than some prissy little man with an ego problem, or some blond hunk who won’t get his head out of his ass and accept you as you are.”

My laugh is a bit lighter this time. “You know, that might be the most accurate description of him I’ve ever heard.”

“Which one?” She arches a brow, grinning.

“Both of them.” I laugh, then shake my head. “But I meant Phil. He is prissy, small, and he has an ego problem. I can’t believe I ever had sex with him.”

“I know his type. They turn on the charm like a faucet, and turn it off just as quick,” she says, then slides my chart back where it goes in its slot at the head of my bed. “Doctor Gilmore will be here in a few minutes, and they’ll be serving breakfast within the hour. Your mom and sisters coming back today?”

I nod. “I’m surprised they aren’t here already.”

“If they have another box of goodies today, tell them to save me one of those blueberry muffins,” she says, then gives me a wink. Her hand squeezes my shoulder. “You’ll be okay, Lily. Trust me.”

I nod and watch the nurse leave, grateful to have yet another woman on my side. If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the past few months, it’s that women are a lot more reliable than men when the going gets tough. A *lot* more reliable.

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MY DOCTOR CONFIRMS the surgery was a success and is confident I'll be able to leave the hospital within a couple of days. They think they got all the cancer cells, which is good news. My mom, Trina, and Candice ask about a thousand questions, and I'm glad they're here. I don't even have the energy to decipher words, let alone ask for details on medical procedures and follow-ups.

First, sleep. Then, home. After that, when I have the energy, I'll think about the upcoming chemo. Once that's done, I might even consider the looming prospect of labor and delivery. Actual motherhood is on the very distant horizon.

Rudy and Phil can go kick rocks for all I care right now. My mother fluffs my pillow as I drift off into a hazy sleep, a hand on my stomach to feel my growing bump.

I have more important things to think about now.

*Rudy*

**S**he's pregnant.  
*Pregnant.*

With another man's child.

I slam my hands on my steering wheel until my palms hurt, then glare up at the big, boxy hospital building.

What the fuck?

Sucking in a deep breath, I close my eyes for a beat. What the hell did I expect, coming here? That unicorns would fart rainbows and butterflies and I'd live happily ever after?

Now I know the truth: Lily really did do me a favor by pushing me away. It doesn't help the fact that her lie—a lie by omission, but still a lie—has the sting of betrayal. Even after I told her about my ex and the kid I treated as my own, she didn't have the decency to tell me what was going on. Why? Was she afraid of my reaction? Did she want me to keep clinging on like an idiot? She could have told me on our first date and saved us both a lot of trouble.

As I turn the key in the ignition, I wonder if that would have worked. If I'd known about her baby as we sat watching the sunset together, would I actually have refused to see her again? If she'd told me she was pregnant when she talked about the cancer, would I still have felt that deep desire to protect her, or would I have walked away?

I don't know how to answer those questions. My chest feels torn to shreds, because all I really want to do is go back up to her room and wrap my arms around her.

But then what?

I heard her voice when she learned that Phil had left his wife for her. She sounded *hopeful*.

She doesn't want me. She probably just wanted a man to lean on, and I was the fool who gave her the chance.

Tires squealing, I race out of the parking lot and head back to town. I park outside my office building and storm inside, locking myself behind my door and burying myself in work.

Iliana lied to me. She kept secrets from me. She did exactly what my ex did to me, which was make me feel attached before pulling the rug out from under me. It's better to end things now, because what the hell else is going to happen?

I won't be the fool who gets attached to another man's child before having fatherhood ripped away from me again. I'll never meet a woman and ride off into the sunset. I'll have one-night-stands. I'll fuck. I'll be a bachelor until I die.

Isn't that what I always knew would happen? Nothing has changed.

But as the sun goes down and I stay locked in my office, I can't help feeling like everything is different. This pain in my chest just isn't going away.

*Lily*

**M**y mother runs interference like it's her job. I don't see Phil at the hospital again, but I think I hear his voice outside my door. When I'm discharged, Candice brings me home and stays with me until I'm settled, then my mother comes to stay the night.

I'd love some privacy, but it hurts to move and I feel weak and tired. No morning sickness, though, which is a good thing.

After three days at home, when the pain in my chest has gone down to a throb and an annoying itch, I finally answer one of Phil's many phone calls, bracing myself for his hostility. For once, I'm alone in my apartment. My mother has gone out to get groceries, and both my sisters are busy. Nora hasn't stopped in and I'm pretty sure she's in Reno again.

"Lily," he says, his voice soft. "I'm glad you answered." That charm faucet is turned up to full blast, and I'm too weak to put up my walls.

I lie back on my couch and close my eyes. "Hi, Phil."

"How are you feeling?"

"Great," I answer, feeling anything but.

There's a pause. "I'd like to see you. Talk to you. I'm sorry for how I acted at the hospital, but I just hated seeing you there with another man."

I'm not sure what to say. The last thing I want to do is talk to Phil, but he's the father of my child and he came all the way to Heart's Cove to see me. Don't I owe him a conversation?

I sigh. "We can meet tomorrow."

“Great,” he says, a touch of smugness in his voice. “What about that café on Cove Boulevard? Four Cups?”

I grimace, then pause. On one hand, I know if we meet at Four Cups I’ll have exactly zero privacy. Not only does my sister co-own the joint, but that’s the congregation spot for all her—*our*—friends. My mother is always there along with Dorothy and Margaret, and there’s no guarantee Rudy won’t be there either.

On the other hand, Four Cups feels a lot like home turf. If Phil starts acting like an ass, it’ll be much easier to kick him out.

“Sure,” I hear myself saying. “Ten o’clock?”

“Can’t wait,” he says, then disconnects.

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CANDICE IS behind the counter with the barista, Sven, the two of them wearing their usual pink *Heart’s Cove Hotties* tees. Fiona is sorting through bags of coffee behind them with a clipboard resting next to her. The three of them look up at me and I wave before taking a seat in an armchair by the window. I let out a tired sigh.

Since the only medication I’m on right now is ibuprofen, I decided to prove to the world that I’m a strong, independent woman by driving myself to the café—and promptly realized this strong, independent lunatic should have waited a few more days post-surgery to have a conversation with her ex. It took a lot more effort than I expected to get myself the couple of blocks from my apartment to Four Cups. It hurt to use my arm on the steering wheel, and I was grateful I drive an automatic. I parked right outside and shuffled indoors, and I already feel like I need a nap.

“Here,” Candice says, setting herbal tea down in front of me. “You want me to get you anything? Food?”

I shake my head. “I’m meeting Phil.”

Her face hardens. I told my sisters about how Phil reacted when I told him about the baby, and let's just say my family is not a fan of him. Can't say I blame them. Apparently, Nurse Wendy told them all about the little stand-off in my room too. Because my family needed more ammunition.

But my baby should have a right to know his or her father, so I'm here. Being the bigger woman. Being strong because that's what I need to do.

The past few days since my operation have been filled with nothing but clarity. I still feel this bright, warm connection to the baby growing inside me, like a haze has lifted from my mind. I can *think*. And the baby's father is here, so I owe him at least a conversation.

A few minutes later, when I've mostly caught my breath and my tea is cool enough to drink, Phil blows through the door looking as dapper and distinguished as the day I met him.

We met in a coffee shop just like this one, in Milan. I was sitting on a cobbled patio sipping espresso and going over one of my clients' accounts on my laptop when he walked by. Our eyes met, and I swear I could hear a string quartet playing in the background. The Italian sunshine warmed my back and lit his face in a golden glow, and that was it. We slept together that evening and he promised me the world.

Over the months that followed, Phil wove a story about his life that felt as surreal as our first meeting. He told me about growing up in the States, then moving to Paris to work for world-class couturiers when he was in his twenties before starting his own business a decade later. He pulled himself up by his bootstraps, he told me. He worked himself to the bone. Then he made it—and I was the lucky woman who got to enjoy the fruits of his labors with him.

He didn't mention the family he already had back in Paris.

I still don't know how much of what he told me was true and how much was pure fabrication. I probably never will.

"Lily," he says, his broad hand on the back of the armchair across from mine. "It's good to see you. The past week has



been hell.”

I give him a tight smile. Am I supposed to feel sorry for him? Did he forget that I’m the one who had surgery, and who still has a mountain of pain ahead of me?

He ducks to the counter to order a drink, then comes back to sit down. We watch each other for a moment. When Candice brings his mug over, he doesn’t thank her. Doesn’t even look at her, just flicks his wrist to wave her away.

I bristle. You can tell a lot about a person by how they treat people they think are beneath them. I wonder if he would’ve been polite if he knew she was my sister?

He steeples his fingers. “You should have told me about the cancer. I would have come.”

I sip my tea, wrapping dignity around myself like a blanket. “I didn’t need you to come.”

“You need support.”

“I have support.”

“Who? That ass with the blond hair? Come on, Lily. You can do better. How old is he? Twenty-five?”

I don’t answer. Rudy’s age has nothing to do with his. In fact, Rudy has nothing to do with this at all. I set my teacup down and take a breath. “Why are you here, Phil?”

When Phil walked away from me, I felt heartbroken. I was overwhelmed, devastated, and scared. Then I got my diagnosis, and I fell down a deep, dark hole and I realized the heartbreak was nothing. From then on, I mostly felt a numb kind of terror. Rudy woke me up again, and now, for the first time in a long time, I feel like myself again.

I went through surgery with a child in my womb. If my kid can survive what I’m going through—if *I* can survive—then I don’t need a man like Phil to inject me with false promises.

Phil takes a deep breath to gather himself. “Lily, I came here for you. For our child.”

I nod. “I’d like my child to have a father,” I answer neutrally. I narrow my eyes. “What’s your plan?”

Phil leans back and slurps his coffee. That always bothered me. The slurping. Who needs to slurp every single drink? Water, coffee, alcohol—always with that disgusting noise. His eyes lift to mine. “My plan is to come here and make you see sense. Now tell me what’s going on. Why did you go under the knife when you’re pregnant? That can’t be safe.”

*Under the knife?* As if I had a choice? As if I was getting a boob job for cosmetic purposes? As if my entire medical team didn’t strongly suggest I treat this cancer as soon as possible in order to *save my life*?

He must see the look on my face because that charm faucet opens a little. “That’s my kid too, Lily.”

I nod. “That’s true.” Technically. Biologically.

He spreads his hands. “So pack your things and come home with me.” He says the words like they’re the most natural thing in the world. Like my leaving Heart’s Cove isn’t just an option, it’s an eventuality.

I stare at him, wondering how the hell I ever had sex with him. Sure, he’s attractive. He’s successful. He has a charm faucet entirely under his control. But he’s just so...*arrogant*. And fucking condescending.

“Home?” I manage to squeeze out. “Where is home?”

“I’ll set you up in my apartment in Milan, baby. It’s all ready for you. There’s enough room for a nursery too, and we can hire a nanny. You’ll have help there.”

I frown, trying to understand the audacity of this man. “You want me to leave my entire family and my medical team to go to Milan with you just months before my baby is born? You want me to give birth in Italy?”

“I want you to be where you belong.”

I think I’m in an alternate universe. Is this guy for real? “You broke up with me, Phil. You told me to abort my baby, and you walked away. I haven’t heard from you for months.” I

lean forward. “You have a wife and kids I never even *knew* about. Why the hell do you think I would leave with you? So I can be the other woman for the rest of my life?”

Phil’s face hardens. “Of course not. I left my wife for you, Lily.”

I pause. “You mentioned that.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You have houses in seven countries, Phil,” I remind him. “Traveling here isn’t exactly different from your usual life.”

He glances around the room with an ugly sneer on his lips. “Trust me, babe, it’s different from my usual life.”

Right. Because he’s the hotshot fabric supplier who rubs shoulders with all the haute couturiers in the world. How could I forget?

I take a sip of tea to give myself a moment to think. When I set it down, I search his eyes. “You really left your wife for me?”

A loud bang makes me jump, and I see Candice behind the nearest end of the counter, fiddling with one of the display cabinets. The door of one of the cabinets behind her is swinging open as if it’s been slammed too hard to stay closed. She looks...angry.

Phil doesn’t notice. “I did. I did it for you, for the baby.”

Something isn’t adding up. Narrowing my eyes on the man across from me, I lean back. “What about your other kids?”

“What about them?”

I put a hand on my stomach. “Why is this baby suddenly more important than your existing children? You told me to, quote, ‘Get rid of it or get out of your life.’” My eyes harden. “Why the change of heart?”

The man bristles. He’s not used to this. We met in Milan and I was just happy to have a companion once in a while. I thought I was in love, but what was it, really? He’d flit in and out of my life and take me to romantic dinners, then lie on top

of me and stick his dick in me until he came before falling asleep. He didn't even know I was an accountant until we'd been seeing each other for two months. I'm not sure I've ever really questioned him. I always just accepted his presence.

Not anymore.

“That baby is my blood.” He thrusts a finger at my stomach. “Now stop it, Lily. Pack your bags and come with me. I have flights booked. We could be in Milan by morning.”

Another bang, but this time Candice holds the cabinet closed. She turns slowly, shoulders bunched, and starts rubbing a spot on the counter with a dishrag with vigorous intensity, clearly listening to every word.

My lips almost twitch. I can't believe this is my life—and is it bad I'm kind of enjoying this? I've been through so much. Faced the fear of my own death, of my baby's death...and I'm still in the thick of it.

Phil's arrogance and condescension are nothing.

“Why Milan?” I ask, because I like the way his face is turning red. “I thought you said your home base was in Paris?” My eyes widen as a realization hits me. “Did you really leave your wife? Or is this just a way to get me to stay in Milan and be your good little Italian side piece?”

Phil grips his coffee mug so tight his nail beds turn white. “I left my family for you, Lily.”

“You divorced her? Truly?”

Phil shifts in his seat. “We just need to sign the papers.”

My eyes narrow. “Who needs to sign the papers?”

“Both of us.”

“So you're separated but not divorced?”

“What does it matter?” he explodes. “I'm here, aren't I?”

Candice is leaning against the counter nearest us now, not even pretending to work, and she goes very, very still. I can feel her gaze on us like a physical weight.

“I’m just trying to get a sense of the situation,” I answer neutrally. “Does your wife know you’re here?”

“Ex-wife,” he bites out, and I decide not to tell him that technically, she’s still his wife.

I arch my brows.

He shuffles uncomfortably. “She knows I met someone.”

“Met someone,” I repeat slowly. “And the baby?”

“What about it?”

“Did you tell your wife—ex-wife—that you’d fathered a child?”

“How the fuck is this relevant?” Phil spits, throwing his hands out. “Lily, I’m here, and now we can be together.”

I almost start laughing. Phil is so far down my priority list, he isn’t even a blip. A cancer diagnosis does that to a person. A baby does that to a person. Puts everything in sharp focus. I was his side piece for months without knowing it, and when I got pregnant, he wanted me to get rid of it. Then he walked away and didn’t say a word to me for *months*. Now he wants us to play at being a happy family? Is he deluded? “We broke up, and I’m not interested in picking up where we left off. If you left your wife for me, you did it a few months too late.”

Phil’s lips lift in a snarl. “I’m here because you were too fucking dumb to take the pill properly and you got yourself knocked up.”

My muscles lock up. There’s something ugly in his eyes. I’m not enjoying the redness in his face anymore. This was fun for a bit, because I got to poke him and see the true asshole beneath the charming veneer. But I don’t like the turn this conversation is taking.

“That wasn’t a solo endeavor, Phil,” I hiss, anger arcing through me. “Takes two to make a baby.”

“Your fucking fault, Lily. And now that I know you’re sick, I’m trying to figure out if you’re even able to carry that kid to term. The doctor told me you need chemo, Lily. So you’re planning on poisoning our unborn child as well as

putting it through the trauma of surgery? Some fucking mother you'll make."

I freeze. In just a few sentences, Phil has managed to cut to the core of my worries. It's like he's been able to take a scalpel to me and dig through my insides to figure out exactly how to make me hurt. Isn't that what I've been telling myself? That I'm not good enough? That I'll fail? That even though my medical team assures me these things are safe, I can't quite shake the feeling that I'm starting this whole motherhood thing off on the entirely wrong foot?

Tears well up behind my eyes, but I will not cry.

I. Will. Not. Cry.

This asshole might have donated his DNA to make this baby, but I will fight tooth and nail to make sure he can't hurt it the way he's hurt me. If there's one thing I've learned since I found out I'm pregnant, it's that I'm strong. I'm so damn strong I wonder why I ever thought I needed to run away. I didn't find myself in all those international trips. I didn't need to wander from country to country to figure out what I wanted.

I just needed a smack across the head with a two-by-four to show me what's really important.

My baby. My family. My *home*.

I also learned that I have support. I have a whole army of women at my back that are there for me whether I need a laugh or a cry or food to stuff my face with.

"You're nothing," Phil hisses, his face twisted in a snarl. "A piece of ass I kept in Milan, and now I'm in this shitty town because you were stupid enough to get yourself pregnant."

Dozens of cups fall off the counter and smash on the floor beside us in a cacophony of breaking ceramic. Phil startles, rearing back, and Candice leaps over the counter like she's a teenager and not well on her way to her fifties. Her movement is graceful as she vaults over the edge, her face like thunder. My sister grabs a serving tray from the counter with both

hands and holds it up near her shoulder like she's about to bring it down on his head.

"It's time for you to go," she says deliberately, in a soft, calm voice. The menace in her eyes is unmistakable.

Phil scoffs. "I'm a paying customer."

"I don't give a shit." Candice looks great and terrible and furious, and I've never loved her more. She lifts the tray a little higher, and Phil has the decency to look concerned.

He pushes himself up to his feet. "I tried, Iliana. You're throwing away a good life. You and the baby could have it all, but you'd rather stay in this shithole. Don't come crawling to me when it falls apart, and keep my name off the birth certificate." He gives me one last venomous stare, lifts his gaze to Candice, then stalks out the door.

I feel...odd. A bit detached.

I'm relieved, of course. Relieved that he's walking away and he's not going to grab me by the hair and drag me across the world to a foreign country. But I'm also deeply sad. My kid won't have a daddy. Not to mention those hateful words swirling in my head, reminding me of all the things I'm most afraid of. What if he's right? What if I'm really not fit to be a mother? My body isn't exactly doing what it's supposed to do right now. I'm laughably unprepared for whatever comes next.

Candice's shoes crunch on all the broken mugs. Face red, hands trembling, she turns to me. "You want me to kill him? Jen knows a pig farmer who can get rid of the body."

Blinking at my big sister, I let her words sink in. Then Fiona ambles over with a broom and leans it against the wall before putting her hands on her hips. "I'll help. Grant has all kinds of tools in his workshop we can use to chop him up into itty bitty little pieces. He showed me how to use the table saw just last week. It's kind of fun."

They look at me, completely serious, and I feel my lips twitch. Then the three of us burst into inappropriate, raucous laughter, and all the tension in me drains away.

Nothing says friendship like homicidal intentions.

My tears soak into a scratchy napkin as I finally wipe my eyes, laughter fading into little leftover giggles. I lean back against my armchair with a sigh. My body feels broken and exhausted, but somehow lighter.

I wouldn't trade this sisterhood for anything. Least of all a flight to Italy with Sir Charming Fuckwad.

Then the café door flies open so hard it hits the wall and leaves a dent. Rudy strides in, face set with grim determination. He stares straight at me, completely ignoring Candice and Fiona and the rest of the patrons in the room.

He stalks toward me like a predator and I freeze in my seat. Gone is the happy, charismatic Rudy who doesn't have a care in the world. The man before me is dangerous. Determined. I blink, and he's in front of me. Then, without a word, he wraps his hand around the back of my neck, tilts my head up toward him, and crushes his lips to mine.



*Lily*

**R**udy is kissing me.

He's kissing me *hard*. It's less of a kiss and more of a claiming. He shoves his tongue into my mouth and grips the back of my neck so hard I'm trapped against him. Stupidly, my body heats up and lust floods my veins. I just had a mastectomy days ago, and now my body wants sex? What the hell is wrong with me?

Rudy breaks the kiss but doesn't move back very far. We're both panting hard, and his hand is shoving into the hair at the back of my head. I like the way it feels. I like the way he smells. I like having him here, a strong man whose shirt I can curl my fingers into when things get hard. He leans his forehead against mine and closes his eyes.

It feels good. So, so good to have him close.

"Lily," he sighs, as if my name is his salvation.

"Rudy." My breaths are still sharp, and there's a twinge in my armpit from sitting forward like this. I should take another painkiller before things get worse, but I still feel vaguely uncomfortable taking medication while pregnant. I feel like I've put my baby through enough. The poor thing will have to go through chemo with me, and I'll never even get the chance to breastfeed. Baby's not getting the easiest start to life. I shift again, and another slice of pain lashes from my armpit to my sternum.

When I try to extricate myself from Rudy's hold, he tightens his fingers in my hair. "I don't care about the baby,"

he says fiercely. “I want you, Lily. You’re my woman. The only woman. I want you beside me.”

He slides his other hand over my stomach, and suddenly I’m mad.

What is *up* with these men just coming over here and thinking they have a right to me? To my body? Suddenly, it doesn’t feel so good to have his arm wrapped around the back of my head. It feels *stifling*. It feels like another offer of being shoved into an apartment in Milan behind a locked door, away from everyone and everything I know. It feels like someone shoehorning their way into my life when it should be *my fucking decision*.

I slap his hand away and pull my head back, glaring.

Rudy straightens, his thick brows tugging together. “What?”

“Did you hit your head?” I ask.

“What?”

“In what world is it acceptable to march in here and kiss me like that? After the way you acted at the hospital like some caveman who was angry that someone dared talk to his woman? After you walked away from me like my baby was a parasite?” Anger whips through me. Not only at Rudy, but at this whole situation. I don’t have *time* for this! I want to laugh about burying bodies in pig pens, not deal with stupid men and their stupid egos.

“No, Lily—”

“Then you waltz in here and say you ‘don’t care about the baby.’ I don’t know about you, Rudy, but that’s not exactly a ringing endorsement for fatherhood.” I scoff, moving to cross my arms, then wince. Stupid operation. Stupid boob. Stupid cancer.

Stupid *Rudy*!

“That’s not what I meant, Lily. I just meant that I’ll be there for you. I was surprised, that’s all.”

“So?” I let out a bitter snort. “So what? You were surprised I’m pregnant. Great. So was I. I asked you for casual sex, Rudy. I didn’t ask you to be my kid’s stepfather.”

He bristles. “It was more than casual sex.”

“Fine. It was more. Then it ended. You can’t just stride in here like I’m going to fall at your feet and ask you to save me. I’m *over* it, Rudy. Over men thinking they need to pick me up and be by my side. I’m *fine*. I’ll be okay. I don’t need you. I just want to be left alone!” My little speech ends on a shrill note, and I know my face is red with emotion.

Rudy’s face goes utterly blank. He stands up straighter, taking a step back. His heel grinds into a shard of broken mug, but he doesn’t even glance down. He just holds my gaze as his throat works to swallow. Then his chin jerks down sharply. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have come here.”

I watch him turn on his heel and walk away, the cheery bells above the door ringing as if to mock me.

Candice and Fiona’s eyes bore into the side of my head, but all I do is lean forward and pick up my teacup. I sip at it primly, pretending it doesn’t taste cold and bitter after sitting on the table for so long. Swiveling my head, I meet the stares of my two girlfriends. “What.”

Fiona clears her throat and grabs the broom she’d leaned against the counter. “Well, you told him where you stand,” she says neutrally. “That’s for sure.”

Candice hums, still staring at me.

I turn my head and stare straight ahead, the last wisps of anger still burning through me.

Anger feels *good*, I realize. Sharp and astringent. I’ve spent the past couple of months drifting from crisis to crisis, feeling overwhelmed by everything the future holds.

But I made it through my surgery and yes, I’m still sore as hell, but I’m here. I drove myself down the block and sat myself in this chair and told not one but two men to leave me the hell alone. Which I sincerely hope they do.

Jen appears from the kitchen in the back of the café with a tray of fresh salted caramel brownies. She puts one on a plate and drops it in front of me, nodding without a word. Then Fiona starts sweeping, and Candice heads behind the till.

I eat every bit of that brownie, trying to forget that they're Rudy's favorite.

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MY CHEMOTHERAPY IS SET to start four weeks from now. I have appointments with obstetricians and oncologists, and they all assure me that things are going well. I rest, eat, and even do some work. I go see Dr. Gardner twice a week, and she helps me center myself. My mother and sisters bring over so much baby stuff that my tiny apartment is overrun. The crib gets shoved between the wall and my bed, the rocking chair in the other corner of my cramped living room. There are diapers stacked all the way up to the ceiling in the corner of my bathroom.

Nora checks on me often, and even gets Fallon to cook dozens of meals for me, so my freezer is always stocked with home-cooked meals ready to be reheated. When I thank her, she just winks and tells me she used her super-special little-sister powers of persuasion to keep him coming back week after week, and I'm not complaining. The man can cook.

I'm lucky, I realize. And I'm nowhere near alone.

In those weeks, I don't think of Phil—but I do think of Rudy. I see him driving around town, and I see his company's real estate signs all over the place. I was rude to him. I know I was. He came over to tell me he'd stand by me and I pushed him away.

Again.

But I still feel like it was the right decision. The clarity I experienced after my mastectomy fades a bit, but I still feel more determined than ever. If I let Rudy sweep me away, I'm afraid I'll lose myself. He promised me the world, but I've spent my whole life traveling and I've seen enough to know

that I don't need those kinds of promises. I need to know that my baby will be okay, that I'll be okay.

I might not have a perfectly healthy body, but I'm going to be the most kick-ass mother this town has ever seen.

*Rudy*

**M**y life hasn't changed. As the weeks pass, everything is the same as it was before Iliana came to town, so it shouldn't bother me that she turned me down.

But it does.

I go to work, come home, work on my house, hang out with Lee, spend time with my grandmother, and it all just seems so fucking pointless.

Whenever I catch a glimpse of Lily, she's with her sisters, her mother, and her friends, and I'm on the outside.

Autumn has already painted the leaves in red and gold when I run into Georgia Neves again. She looks as glamorous as ever, and she gives me a broad smile.

"Rudy." She spreads her arms and gives me air kisses on each cheek. "You look very handsome today."

I glance down at my jeans-and-sweater combo, and grin. "You can't help yourself, can you?"

Her laugh is carefree, and for maybe the first time, I feel like she's genuine. If I were a better man, I'd wonder what was behind the shadows in her eyes. I'm not, though, and all I can think about is the fact that I still don't want her any more than I did before.

The only woman I can think of is Lily.

"I haven't seen you since you so rudely left my home after half a glass of champagne." She winks, and I know there are no hard feelings. "How are things with your girl?"

I shrug. “There is no ‘my girl.’”

“Oh, honey.” She squeezes my arm. “Well, I have good news for you.” She brightens. “My best girlfriend is moving here, and she needs a super sexy agent to show her all the nicest properties in the area. I gave her your number.”

I nod. “Much appreciated, Georgia.”

“Do you have time for a drink?” Georgia smiles at me, her red lipstick shaping her full lips into a lush pout. “Cantina has a special on margaritas this afternoon.”

“You never struck me as the type of woman who goes out searching for happy hour specials.”

A sensual smile turns wry. “That’s because you know nothing about me. Come on. Tequila fixes everything.”

I’m pretty sure that’s the exact opposite of the truth, but I let her hook her arm into mine and we walk down the tree-lined street toward the Mexican restaurant. It’s a beautiful late-September afternoon, where the air is warm yet crisp and the whole world feels like it’s holding its breath.

For what, I’m not sure. Maybe for me to get my head out of my ass.

“My new home was featured on an interior design blog, did you know that?” Georgia asks pleasantly, her head tilted to the sky. A curl of her hair falls onto my shoulder, an intimate caress of the silky strands.

“That’s great,” I say, eyes drifting to the side as we pass Lily’s street. I do that every time I walk or drive by, because I’m a desperate fool.

“My ex-husband saw it, and it made his head explode.” She laughs in a way that makes her sound just a little bit evil. “I think he’s convinced I do things just to piss him off.”

“Do you?” I tear my eyes away from the distant shape of Lily’s building to glance at Georgia.

Her arm squeezes over mine. “I plead the Fifth,” she says with a sly grin. “He tends to forget that we’re divorced, which

I don't exactly think is my problem. Ever since I glitter-bombed his bedroom he's had such a stick up his ass."

A surprised chuckle falls from me. "You did what?"

Georgia, the refined, elegant woman clinging to my arm, *glitter-bombed her ex-husband's bedroom?*

"You know," she starts conversationally, "if you sprinkle glitter on a ceiling fan it really gets *everywhere* when you turn the thing on. I laughed my ass off when I went to our arbitration at the lawyer's office two whole weeks after he left a very nasty voicemail on my phone. He still had a couple pieces of glitter in his eyebrow." She shifts her purse on her shoulder and glances at the distant horizon, sucking in a deep breath. "So did his hot young assistant, actually. Wonder what she was doing in his bedroom." Georgia's voice goes a bit tight at the end, but she turns a bright smile on me. "Oh well. Guess I'll never know."

"I'm sorry, Georgia." Voice muted, I give her arm a squeeze. I feel an odd sort of affection for Georgia. I know we'll never be close—she'd never let anyone, much less a man, get close to her—but I still feel like we could be friends.

She shrugs. "I'm here now, and I'm going to drink margaritas with a gorgeous younger man. You think we could get a picture for my Instagram? I got a suspicious new follower that I'm pretty sure is my ex-husband being a creeper."

I chuckle, something tight loosening inside me. I prefer this relationship with Georgia, I realize. She's not flirting shamelessly with me, she's just...lonely. Maybe we all are. "Sure," I tell her. "I'll take a photo with you."

"Marvelous," she says, and we turn down the street toward Cantina. "Maybe I'll unblock his phone number before we post it. We can take bets on how long it'll take him to call and screech at me. I'm thinking thirty seconds."

"Does he not realize the two of you are divorced?"

"Honey, he's got a stick up his rear. He probably can't think of anything beyond how much his asshole hurts."



I burst out laughing, and it feels like the first time I've laughed in weeks—just as we pass the Four Cups Café, and Lily walks out.

*Damn.* She looks incredible. I don't know if it's the autumn afternoon sunshine or the pregnancy, but the woman is glowing. Her chocolate-colored hair is shiny and thick, falling in loose waves down her back. She's smiling bright and wide, and it fades when she sees me.

I stop, Georgia's arm still hooked in mine, and all I can do is stare. There's a slight swell in Lily's lower stomach, and all I want to do is drop to my knees and press my lips to it.

I was such a fucking idiot for how I acted at the hospital. And instead of fixing it, I came barreling into the coffee shop and kissed her like a cat marking his territory. Not my greatest moment. No wonder she pushed me away.

Lily's eyes flick to Georgia, then to our clasped arms. Her mouth tightens for a moment, then she forces her face to relax. She nods. "Rudy."

"Hey, Lily. You remember Georgia." I drop her arm and nod to the woman at my side.

"Of course." She smiles at my former client, one hand moving to her stomach. My chest aches something fierce being here, close enough to catch a faint whisper of her scent, but too far away to touch.

"We were just heading to Cantina for their margarita special," Georgia says, surprising me. "Would you like to join?"

"Um, no," Lily answers without hesitation, and a little bit of me dies. "I'm good. Also, I'm pregnant. Margaritas aren't really enticing right now."

Georgia's brows jump up, and she glances at me. The question in her gaze is clear.

Lily rolls her eyes. "It's not his." She hikes her bag over her shoulder, but she only catches one of the straps. The other falls down, and a bulky item comes falling from her bag.

A book.

I lean over to pick it up, turning it around to see the collection of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* I gave her for her birthday.

She kept it?

Frowning at the cover, I lift my gaze to Lily's. She blushes, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The fingers of my free hand curl into my palm, everything in me resisting the urge to reach over and sweep my fingers over that peach-colored flush.

"I've been reading them for the baby," she says, not quite meeting my eyes. "I'm thinking this kid is coming into the world with a bit of a rough start, so I might as well not kid myself with fluffy fairy tales. Better stick with the dark and twisted."

I can't help it as a grin tugs at my lips. Lily answers it with one of her own, and for a moment, I forget all about Georgia. I forget about the coffee shop and the margaritas and everything else.

The woman who holds my heart in her hands is smiling at me, and for the first time in weeks, I feel like I can breathe.

Then Lily clears her throat and takes the book from my hands, giving us both an awkward nod. "Well, I'd better..." Her voice drifts off, and she just shuffles past me to walk away. I watch her go, loving the way her leggings cup her ass. Even as my heart is slowly shredded by her leaving without looking back, I can't deny how much I want her still.

The sound of a throat clearing makes me look at Georgia, who has a gleam in her eye and a smirk on her lips. "There's a story there," she says. "And you're going to tell it to me over margaritas."

*Lily*

**C**hemo sucks. Like, a lot. Knocks me on my ass when I get it, and takes days to recover enough to feel halfway normal. Next thing I know, a nurse is sticking another needle in my arm and hooking me up for another round.

Lying back in the chair in the hospital ward, I stare at the other half-dozen patients getting their treatment. One girl looks about fifteen. She's lost all her hair, but she's chatting happily with the nurse who's checking her IV. An older gentleman is in the chair beside her, and he just looks very tired and very, very sick.

So far, a month in, I've kept all my hair. I might be one of the lucky ones. Apart from the aches and nausea, I've noticed a lot of forgetfulness—like the time I called my mother because I'd lost my phone for the nth time, only for her to ask me how I was calling her. We laughed about “chemo brain” but I was still horribly embarrassed. But perhaps the most bothersome symptom I've had is what the nurses call peripheral neuropathy. I have no sensation in the soles of my feet or the tips of my fingers, and I feel flat-footed and awkward when I walk or try to do things with my hands like do up buttons or pick up small objects.

Maybe that's the reason I haven't removed the pendant hanging around my neck, the sapphire hard and cool against my breastbone. Or maybe its slight weight reminds me of my father's strength all those years ago.

“How's your niece liking college?” a nurse asks as she bustles around me. “Northwestern, right?”

I smile. “Allie’s loving it. I think she’s enjoying being away from Heart’s Cove, but my sister Candice is gravely insulted that Allie isn’t homesick. Her best friend, Clancy, is at the community college in town and she’s hoping to transfer somewhere closer to Allie. They still talk every day.”

The nurse—Caroline—smiles warmly. “It’s got to be a strong friendship to last through distance.”

“It is. Allie will be back for Thanksgiving,” I say. “And I have a feeling once she feels how cold it gets in Illinois, she’ll be missing our mild winters enough to be glad to come home.”

Caroline chuckles. “You’re all set,” she tells me with a kind smile. “I’ll be back to check on you in a few. You got everything you need?” She nods to my tablet, phone, and stack of magazines.

I nod. “All good.”

“That’s a beautiful necklace,” Caroline tells me, nodding to my neck. “I’ve seen it on you every day and keep meaning to comment on it.”

“My father gave it to me before he passed,” I hear myself saying. “He had cancer too.”

“I’m sure he’s right here with you,” she says before patting the back of my cushioned chair and walking away. I sink back into the chair and close my eyes, wondering if she’s right. I haven’t taken the pendant off since I started chemotherapy, and it does feel like it gives me strength. My father didn’t make it, but he was still strong. A fighter.

Like me—and my baby.

Mac picks me up once I’m done. He’s got a big pickup truck that is very difficult to get into when you’ve just had cancer drugs pumped into your body and a growing baby bump throwing off your center of gravity. I try to haul myself up, and Mac stands behind me to give me a boost. He waits until I’m clicked into the seat, head resting on the seat.

“I’m sorry,” he says, standing in the doorway. “I’ll take Trina’s car next time I come pick you up.”

“S’okay,” I tell him, breath still coming in jagged gulps. “But you might have to help me down when I get home.”

He smiles, then jogs around the front to get to the driver’s side. I watch him with sick fascination, wondering if I’ll ever have the strength to jog again.

“How are the kids?” I manage to ask, eyes drifting shut as we get on the road.

“They’re great. Toby’s so protective of Katie, and I have a feeling he’ll be a good cousin for your little one too.”

I smile, eyes still closed. “The baby will have lots of love, that’s for sure.” We drive in silence for a while. “Thanks for picking me up,” I say. “I really appreciate it.”

“You’re family,” he says simply, and I open my eyes. He slows the truck down as we turn into the busier center of Heart’s Cove. His words sink down into me, diffusing into something warm and nice. *Family*. It’s a much bigger word than I realized.

“So you gonna ask Trina to marry you or what?” I ask as he pulls up to my building. “Make this whole ‘family’ thing official?”

Mac grins, one hand on the steering wheel as he turns the truck off. “Has she asked you to drop hints or something?”

I let out a laugh that sounds more like a puff of breath. “No. She’s still trying to convince herself that her last marriage ending in disaster means she never wants to do it again.”

Mac tilts his head. “And you don’t think that’s true?”

“Trina would cream her panties to wear a wedding dress again. She probably has a secret savings account for it already.”

Mac laughs, and his smile lingers as he slips out of the truck. The man lifts me right out of the passenger seat and lets me lean on him all the way to the elevators and into my apartment. By the time I lie down on my old sofa, I’m about ready to pass out.

“Thanks, Mac,” I mumble, lids heavy.

“Anytime. Your mom will be over soon. She just texted me to say she’s leaving Candice’s place.”

“Okay,” I say, and fall asleep right after the door closes behind him.

A very small part of me wishes a man like Mac was staying and cuddling close to me while I lie on the couch feeling like garbage—and by “a man like Mac,” clearly, I mean Rudy. But only a small part of me. The rest of me is still rational. I’m sure he’s not thinking about nursing me back to health anymore. He’s probably having margaritas with gorgeous, sexy, *healthy* women, grateful he dodged a bullet shaped like me. It’s better for me to go through this alone.

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WEEKS PASS, and I realize I was wrong. Even without the baby, there’s no way I could have done this completely on my own.

I’m glad I moved to Heart’s Cove, and as overbearing as my family is, I wouldn’t trade them for anything.

I feel the baby kick for the first time at twenty-one weeks. It feels weird, like little fluttering in my stomach. It’s happened before, I realize, delicate little flutters that I assumed were nausea or something chemotherapy related. Lord knows there have been enough odd and uncomfortable symptoms caused by my treatment. Shocked, I realize that for weeks, I’ve been feeling my baby flutter. This feels different. Stronger. It’s not cancer related. It’s something much more beautiful.

I happen to be outside when it happens, carrying a bag from the pharmacy with fancy moisturizer I bought myself as a treat. I lean against a brick building, hand on my stomach as tears well in my eyes. I can’t help it. The joy I feel is indescribable because I know I’m doing it. Even with the surgery, and the chemotherapy, and all the damn brochures and questions and unknowns, there’s a baby growing in my womb and it’s *kicking*.

“Lily?” a voice calls out, right before I hear rapid footsteps approaching. “Is everything okay?” Rudy appears beside me, his face tight with concern. Bright eyes search my face, then shift down to the hand I’m clutching over my stomach. “What’s wrong? Is it the baby?”

My throat is so tight I can’t talk. Instead, I grab his hand and shove it against my stomach. “The baby’s kicking,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “First time.”

Rudy’s features grow focused, and the baby stills for a moment. Would he be able to feel such small movements? Then the baby moves again, more vigorously this time, and Rudy’s face melts into the most gorgeous, beautiful smile I’ve ever seen. He’s as shocked and full of wonder as I am, and his other hand moves to my bump right beside my own. I look at the way his big, broad hands cover mine and span almost the full width of my little bump, and it feels so right to have him touching me like this that I could cry.

Well, I’m already crying, but I could cry some more.

“Holy shit,” Rudy whispers, awe tingeing his words.

Then I remember what the hell I’m doing—who the hell it is that has his hands all over my stomach—and I stiffen. Rudy must feel it, because he reluctantly drops his hands and takes a step back. He rubs his neck and arches his brows at me. “I was worried when I saw you stop and grip the wall,” he tells me. “I thought something was wrong.”

Sniffling as I wipe tears from my cheeks and snot from my nose—sexy, I know—I shake my head at Rudy and try to compose myself. “It just surprised me, is all.”

“I’ve never felt that before,” he says, still slightly awed.

I snort-laugh. “Me neither. Except I just realized what I thought were chemo side effects might have been my baby all along.”

Rudy smiles that brilliant, earth-shattering smile of his, and all I want to do is fall into his arms. I rack my brain, trying to remember why it was that things didn’t work out between us. It was my fault, wasn’t it? He kissed me and I got angry.

But now my thoughts are all jumbled and I can't quite remember why.

"Can I walk you home?" Rudy asks.

My building is half a block away, so I shrug. "Sure. No margarita dates this afternoon?"

His lips twist. "Lily, that wasn't what it looked like. We're just friends."

"I thought you were business associates." My voice sounds bitter, and I mentally kick myself. Why am I being such a jerk? Why do I care? Why can't I just be a gracious, elegant woman who floats along the street beside him and makes him realize everything he's missing?

Instead, I'm a pregnant, frazzled mess who's acting like a jealous girlfriend. As if. *I'm* the one who broke up with *him*.

We get to my apartment, and when I open the door, Rudy sniffs. He frowns, glancing at the lobby.

My cheeks burn. "It's an old building. Smells musty, I know. You get used to it."

"You should be staying somewhere better," he says. "A house. Somewhere with room for you and the baby."

"Yeah, well, when the House Fairy drops one off for me, I'll move."

I get lost in his eyes for a moment, loving the way his lips curl at my dumb joke. Without a word, he hands me the bag with my fancy moisturizer, and I hadn't even realized I'd dropped it—or that he'd picked it up and carried it for me.

"Thanks," I say sheepishly. "And I'm sorry for being so rude. You can have margarita dates with whoever you want."

His lips quirk. "Glad I have your blessing."

My stupid, traitorous cheeks start burning even more. "That's not what I meant. I just... I'm..." I take a step into the lobby and grip the door like it's a lifeline. "I'll see you around." Then I force myself to close the door and walk to the elevators without looking back.



We broke up because I'm going through the hardest time of my life, I remind myself. I remember now. Between cancer and surgery and chemo and childbirth, it's too much for a fledgling relationship like ours. I have my family, and that's enough.

It has to be.

*Rudy*

**F**or once, I appreciate that Heart's Cove is a small town. Not only have I seen Lily at least once every week around town, but I've overheard my grandmother getting regular updates about her condition. I know her asshole of an ex hasn't been back since that day at the coffee shop.

The baby is due in mid-January, and being at the beginning of December now, that means she's about thirty-two or thirty-three weeks along. Not that I'm keeping track or anything. Ever since I felt the baby kick back in September, my mind just keeps track of these things without me having any control over it.

Lily finished all her courses of chemo and by all accounts, is doing okay. Of course she is—she's strong.

The days have passed in a haze of work and renovations and petty distractions, but I still feel like a chasm has opened up inside me. Weeks go by in the blink of an eye, only punctuated by the moments I see Lily.

It's pathetic, really. I should be over her by now, but there's still an ache in my chest that I can't seem to shake.

The only place I feel any kind of peace is my grandmother's bookstore. Today, as a chill settles in the air outside, I inhale the scent of paper and ink and glue and wait for another day to pass me by. Maybe after Lily's baby is born, I'll be able to move on. When I know she's safe and healthy.

I shelve a few new books we've received as Dorothy leans against the counter, chatting to my grandmother as if they're the best of friends.

I've noticed a change in the two of them. They'll say nasty things to each other, but there's less venom behind the words. They'll visit with each other and have perfectly civil conversations, when a few years ago there'd be projectiles flying whenever the two of them were in the same room.

I don't know if it's the fact that Dorothy has her own man in Eli now, or just that our community has grown in size and in love. But I'm happy for my grandmother. She doesn't make friends easily.

Kind of like me.

"Poor girl is just skin and bones now," Dorothy says as she straightens a stack of books on the counter. "To think she has to go through labor in just a few weeks too."

"She's strong," my grandmother replies, and I hear a hint of respect in her tone. "If she can get through everything she has so far, she can deliver a baby."

I could have told her that. From the moment I met Lily, I knew there was steel in her spine. Then she told me about the breast cancer, and everything made sense.

The book I'm holding is upside down—a fact I only notice after I've shelved it. I sigh, pulling it out, and slide it back in right side up. I've been distracted for weeks. Working helps, of course. The business is booming, and my grandmother's bookstore is ticking along just as it always does. The renovations I've done on my home are almost complete.

But it's all so meaningless. From a distance, I watch Lily fighting for her life and her baby's, and I spend my evenings ripping up old carpet and painting walls. Why? Why does any of it matter? The things that used to matter seem so empty now. It took all my effort over the past decade or so to establish myself in the world of real estate—for who? For what?

This buzzing in my skin won't settle, even though I'm in my grandmother's sanctuary. I need to get out of here.

"I'm going out for lunch," I tell Grandma, and nod to Dorothy. The two of them fall silent as I walk past, something

unreadable in their gazes. They probably want me to start dating Lily again. Maybe they think I'm a coward for not being with her while she's going through all this.

Maybe they're right.

I inhale the scent of winter, buttoning up my light jacket and burying my chin in my chest. This winter has been a wet, cold drizzle, a perfect complement to the state of my mood.

*Poor girl is just skin and bones now.*

Dorothy's words echo in my mind, and I pause on the sidewalk. Maybe I should bring Lily some food, make sure she's okay. I shake the thought away as soon as it pops up. No matter how hung up I am on her, I'll have to admit sooner or later that we're not together. I don't have the right to take care of her. I can't call her mine.

My shoes scuff on the sidewalk as I make my way down the street, not even sure where I'm heading. There's a new Italian restaurant that just opened up, and they have a good lunch special. I could do Mexican or stop in for a sandwich at Four Cups.

Wherever I go, though, I'll be alone. That never used to bother me. I'd eat in restaurants by myself or with a date, and the experience felt the same either way. No real connection, only distraction. Now, I feel Lily's absence down to my bones.

The sky is a mass of dull, heavy clouds when I look up through the naked tree branches lining Cove Boulevard, and I know I need to get out of here. Our community is too intertwined, and I've heard Candice insisting that she's hosting Christmas this year. I managed to avoid Thanksgiving at Trina's house, thank God, but I had to reject six invitations to do it. I'm not going through that again at the end of the month.

Maybe it's time for me to pack up and move away. After a vacation over the holidays, I can take a page out of Lily's book and take off for a while. One of my employees could be promoted and my business could run itself. I could take a few months off. Disappear. Try to forget the way Lily's lips felt against mine.

Somehow, I end up at the community garden. There are new benches here now, and the naked remnants of new plants and trees that will burst with life in the spring. The empty lot behind the garden is vacant, and I've heard there's a petition going around to either incorporate it into the garden or turn it into a park and playground for kids.

Maybe Lily's child will get to enjoy it.

When I take a few steps closer, I see her. She's on that same bench where she sat when she told me it was over between us. Her head is tilted up to the sky, as if she's soaking up any rays of sun that pierce through the gray clouds.

And I can't help it. I change my trajectory and move closer.

Lily's eyes open when she sees me, and a sad kind of smile tugs at her lips. "Hey, Rudy. Happy belated Thanksgiving."

"Same to you." I sit down exactly where I sat last time. So close to her, but with a chasm between us.

"Any plans for Christmas?" she asks, and I wonder if I'm imagining the hopeful tone in her voice.

"Thinking of going down south," I say. "San Diego, maybe. Mexico. Never been to South America. I might see if there are any cheap flights anywhere."

She's quiet for a moment, then nods. "That sounds nice. You should go to Machu Picchu. It's worth braving the hordes of tourists."

I study her face, and realize Dorothy was right. Lily's lost weight. A lot of it. It's not that cold today, with just a bit of bite in the air, but Lily's bundled up like she's in Alaska. Her skin is pale, and she looks like she's drowning in her jacket. A few strands of dark hair stick out of the fluffy pink hat pulled low over her ears.

"How are you doing?" I ask. "I heard you finished your chemo."

She nods. "Waiting on the last blood test results to come back. Hoping everything's clear because I'm ready to move

on.” Her hand slides over her bump, and I wish I had the right to touch her. To put my arm around her and pull her into my warmth, to tell her that I’m right here and I’ll make everything okay.

But that’s not what she wants.

My eyes trace the curve of her cheeks, the sharp blade of her jaw. Her cheeks are too hollow. Would she go to lunch with me, if only so I could make sure she eats something?

“I heard you’re moving out of your place,” Lily says, eyes tilting back up to the sky.

I huff a laugh. “Those old ladies love to talk, don’t they?”

Lily turns a smile on me, and it stops my heart dead. She shakes her head. “It’s out of control.” She pauses. “So you’re really getting rid of that house?”

I shrug. “I’m in real estate. The market’s up, and I just finished fixing it up. Makes sense to sell.”

She nods. “It’s a good little house.”

“I knocked down a few of the walls on the ground floor,” I tell her. “It’s more open plan now. I put in a powder room downstairs too, but I kept that office as-is.” The office where we worked alongside each other, where I felt at home in that house for the first time. “New kitchen too,” I add, and it comes out as a hoarse whisper.

A touch of color stains her cheeks, and I wonder if she’s thinking of the time I crowded her against the counter and kissed her like she belonged to me. She looks anywhere but at me, and it makes me want to haul her onto my lap and crush my lips to hers.

I’m not over her. Not even close. I haven’t even thought of any other women since she walked into the bookstore and asked me for recommendations last summer. The only face I think of when I’ve got my hand wrapped around my cock is hers—but it’s more than just sex. I want to be beside her. I want to be the one she leans on, the one she asks for help. I want to wake up next to her every morning and see that sweet, sleepy smile on her face.

I want *her*.

Lily groans, shuffling forward on the bench before bracing herself. “Standing up is getting more difficult every day,” she says with a rueful grin. “Can you believe I had to ask my mother to tie my shoes yesterday? And I have seven weeks left of this crap.”

I laugh, catching her arm to help her stand.

Then her brows tug, and she puts a hand to her stomach.

“Lily?”

“I—” She leans forward, gasping.

White-hot fear arcs through me, cutting a sharp line of pain through my chest. “Lily, talk to me.” There’s an edge to my voice, because I can see the pain twisting her features. She’s clutching her stomach and taking short, sharp gasps. “Lily, what’s going on? Talk to me, baby. I’m here.” I put a hand on her back, my other hand wrapped around her arm to support her.

“Something’s wrong,” she squeezes out between breaths. “Something’s wrong with the baby.” A stain appears between her legs. She’s wearing dark-gray maternity leggings under her jacket, but I can still tell the stain is red.

Pure, ice-cold panic jets through my veins, and then I’m moving. As gently as I can, I haul Lily into my arms. My heart hammers as I carry her out of the garden and onto the street.

I pause at the entrance to the garden as Lily lets out a whimper that spears me right through the chest. She’s hurting. My woman is hurting and I need to get her help *now*.

Hospital. I need to get her to the hospital.

My mind whirls. Taxi? Or do I call 911 right away and wait for an ambulance?

Lily’s nails dig into my neck and she lets out a pained cry that cuts me like a knife.

I’ll drive, I decide, because there aren’t any taxis in view and my car is only four blocks away, parked outside my office

building.

Four blocks. I can carry her for four blocks—but will she be okay? Trying not to jostle her, I take a step, then see my cousin Jared exiting one of the shops on Cove Boulevard. His eyes widen as he takes me and Lily in, then waves me forward, clicking a fob that lights up a car on my side of the street.

“Put her in there,” he calls out, waiting for a car to pass before jogging across the street toward us.

I put Lily down as gently as I can, too tense to reply to anything my cousin says. She leans against the side of the vehicle as I move the passenger seat as far as it will go and lean the seat back until it’s almost fully reclined. Then I help her in, clicking the seatbelt over her bump.

Jared appears at my side. “You going to the hospital?”

I nod, then wrap my fingers around the keys he’s extending toward me. I don’t have time to feel surprised that the cousin who’s always hated me is giving me free use of his car without question. “Thanks,” I say, voice harsh.

“I’ll go to the café and find her sister.”

“Good.” I’m already sliding behind the wheel and putting the key in the ignition. Jared is hustling toward Four Cups when I glance over at Lily.

With a fresh wave of terror, I notice the stain has spread. She’s bleeding and in pain and I’m going to lose my fucking mind if anything happens to her or the baby.

I thought I was going on vacation? I thought I was going to *leave?*

*Never in a million years.*

Using the car’s Bluetooth, I call 911 as I put the car in gear and speed down the street, hands gripping the steering wheel so tight I can’t feel my fingers.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”



“I’m in the car with my—” I only hesitate for a second, because I know what Lily is to me. I’ve always known. “I’m in the car with my woman. She’s pregnant, but there’s blood and she’s having severe abdominal pain.” Distantly, I notice my voice is steady.

Lily reaches over and sinks her nails into my thigh so hard I know it’ll leave marks, even through my jeans. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters except getting Lily some help and making sure I’m right here by her side.

Where I belong.

As I talk to the emergency responder, a sense of clarity washes over me. It doesn’t matter what Lily says, or how many times she pushes me away. It doesn’t matter how long it takes or how many times I need to try to convince her. She’s mine. She’s been mine since the day she walked into the bookstore, and she’ll be mine until the day I die. I’m claiming that baby inside her too.

My woman and my child are in trouble, but I’ll be damned if I lose either one of them.

*Lily*

The last thing I remember is passing out when a pack of nurses and hospital staff haul me out of the car. I remember Rudy's face through it all, tight with tension but firm with resolve.

Then, nothing.

I open my eyes and realize I'm in a hospital bed. There's a blurry shape in the chair next to me, and for the second time in only a matter of months, I croak the first name that comes to my lips. "Rudy?"

He jumps up from where he was slouched, as if my voice woke him up. He comes into focus as he leans over the bed, his hands smoothing over my forehead and cheeks. "I'm here, baby. I'm right here. You're okay. The baby's in the NICU, but they think he's going to be okay."

A drop of water hits my nose, and I realize it came from Rudy.

"Why are you crying?" I ask, my voice sounding oddly distant. I try to lift my arm to wipe the wetness off his cheeks, because a man like Rudy shouldn't be crying. He should be dating someone young and carefree and unburdened.

But even as the thought crosses my mind, I know I don't want that. I want him to stay right here beside me forever and ever and ever.

"I'm crying because you scared the shit out of me, Lily," he says with a soft laugh. He presses his lips to my forehead,

and it feels like he's doing it to reassure himself that I'm really here. "I'm glad you're awake."

"I want to see my baby." Everything feels fuzzy, but I find Rudy's hand and squeeze. "Take me to my baby, Rudy. I want to meet..." I blink, some of the blurriness clearing. "You said 'him.' It's a boy?" My voice trembles, and Rudy's face splits into a smile.

"A beautiful baby boy, Lily. He's perfect, just like his mama."

"I want to see him," I repeat in a hoarse whisper.

"You will," he assures me. "Let me just call the nurse, okay? You had to have an emergency C-section and you're not supposed to move."

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I THINK I fall asleep for a while, because when I wake up, the room is full of people. My mother, my sisters, a couple of nurses...and Rudy. He's holding my hand, standing right where he was when I passed out as if he hasn't left my side.

I like the thought of that—Rudy being by my side. The thought stays with me as my mother bustles on the other side of me. Pushing myself up, I pause when I feel lightheaded. I'm getting real sick of feeling like my body is giving out on me. The blanket covering me falls to my waist, and I touch my stomach, feeling bandages beneath the hospital gown.

More scars. A breath slides through my lips, but I also feel oddly proud. I've been sliced open and poked and prodded for months now, feeling like death was on my doorstep, but I'm still here. I'll have marks on my breast and stomach for the rest of my life, but I've made it over another hurdle.

I'm still breathing.

And I'm going to meet my baby today, no matter what the nurse or doctor or anyone says.

My mother and sisters are talking, telling me a million things that I don't have the energy to listen to right now. My mother squeezes my hand and I give her a smile, then turn to look at Rudy on the other side of me.

"Take me to see him," I tell Rudy, and he gives me the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

He really is a gorgeous man. Too gorgeous. Makes me feel all weak and wobbly inside.

But he's strong, too, and he doesn't shy away from the tubes and equipment and bandages over me. He doesn't protest like my mother does about me moving, he just brings a wheelchair over and helps me into it, then smooths my hair back and puts a strong hand on my shoulder. I reach up and cover his hand with mine, letting out a long sigh.

Then Rudy wheels me to the NICU, and I go and meet my baby.

"I'm sad I didn't get to experience birth," I say quietly. After everything I've been through over the past few months, I wanted that moment when I got to push, when I got to feel my baby's skin against my chest.

One of the wheels of my wheelchair gives a squeaky whine with each turn. Rudy rumbles softly at my back, pushing me steadily down the bright hallway. "I experienced it for the both of us," he says grimly. "You're lucky you were asleep for it. I don't think I've ever been so scared."

We turn a corner and I see signs pointing to the NICU. "Your mom died when you were born," I say, remembering one of our first conversations, realization dawning. "You thought I was going to die too."

He huffs, and I wish I could see his face. Instead, we head down the hallway and turn into the ward.

My baby is in an incubator wearing a diaper that looks too big. He has a shock of black hair on his head and the most perfect fingers and toes I've ever seen. I suck in a breath, leaning forward in my chair until the stitches in my stomach

protest. Rudy engages the brakes on my wheelchair and moves to the other side of the incubator.

Dragging my gaze away from my son, I look at Rudy. He meets my eyes over the baby and smiles gently. “He’s perfect, Iliana.”

Moisture gathers in my eyes as I look down again, slowly threading my arm through the hole to touch my baby’s soft, soft skin. “He is,” I whisper. “He’s finally here.”

Rudy hesitates on the other side of the incubator, then clears his throat. “May I?” he asks, hands near the holes on the other side.

I nod, unable to speak. With infinite care, he runs one of his long, masculine fingers over my son’s ear and down his arm. My baby immediately wraps his fingers around Rudy’s index, and we both let out a surprised laugh.

“He likes you,” I say. “I’m trying not to be jealous.”

“I came here and read him some fairy tales earlier,” Rudy says, redness rising on his cheeks. “I didn’t know if you’d want me to touch him so I didn’t, but I thought he might like some company in the first few hours of his life. He probably recognized my voice.”

A hard, painful fist grips my heart. This beautiful, caring man dropped everything today to be here, and even made sure that my baby wasn’t alone. We stay there for a while, until I shift in the wheelchair and Rudy notices me wince. Then, we’re rolling that squeaky wheel all the way back to my room. I fall asleep with a smile on my face and my fingers intertwined with Rudy’s.

---

THOSE FIRST FEW weeks are hard to keep track of. I learn that I had a placenta abruption, where the placenta pulled away from my uterine wall. I could have lost the baby if Rudy hadn’t gotten me to the hospital so quickly. My son, Liam, was born at thirty-three weeks, three weeks shy of full-term. They’ll

have to keep him in the NICU for a while, but the doctors tell me he's doing great, and they don't think he'll have any long-term health problems.

I keep waiting for Rudy to tell me he's busy, that he has to leave. I keep waiting for his eyes to dim as he tells me that this is too much for him, and that he didn't sign up for a woman in remission from breast cancer with a preemie baby.

But every day, Rudy's here beside me. It doesn't matter what the weather is, what day of the week it is, or what's going on with his business. He always comes back, and I've started relying on his presence. I wonder if all the weeks I spent alone have been for naught, because I've just gone ahead and asked him to save me anyway.

One day, a week after I give birth, Rudy enters my room as he slides his phone into his pocket. He'd stepped out to talk to one of his employees, and he comes right back to take a seat beside my bed.

“So when's your flight?” I ask, voice carefully casual.

Rudy frowns. “My flight?”

“You said you were leaving for the holidays.” I pause, holding my breath, because suddenly I feel awfully nervous about facing days or weeks without him by my side.

But Rudy just laughs. “Lily, you're going to have to try a lot harder than that to get rid of me. I'm spending the holidays right here. And if you get out in time, I'm spending the holidays at my house.” A twinge of disappointment passes through me, until Rudy slides his broad hand over my jaw to cup my cheek. “And so are you.”

I blink. “What?”

“Your apartment is tiny, and it's too small for the three of us. You'll move in with me.”

My brows lower. There are a lot of things in those two sentences that I have to question, because it sounds like he's ordering me around. A lot of assumptions Rudy seems to be making, including the fact that he seems to think I'm moving in with him, and he's using words like “the three of us.” I'm

ignoring the fact that I kind of love the way those words sound.

“Do I get a choice in the matter?” I snip, arching a brow. “Or are you going all caveman on me again.”

“I’m going all caveman on you,” Rudy informs me, dead serious. “If you don’t want to move into my place, fine. I’ll deal with your apartment, even if it does smell musty and moldy as hell. But I don’t care, because I’m staying with you, Lily. We’ve wasted enough time dancing around each other. I’ve watched you bear these burdens on your own for the past six months, and I’m sick of standing aside. You made your point, babe, you’re strong and brave and you kick ass. And now you’re mine.”

My heart just...melts.

But still! He’s being such a damn *man* about this. “You do realize it’s the twenty-first century, right?” I give him my best, sassiest eyebrow arch. “I don’t belong to anyone but myself.” My words are hard, but something ignites in the middle of my chest, and it feels a lot like hope. Rudy has been beside me from the moment I stood up in that garden until now. Maybe even before that. Wasn’t he the one who took my cancer diagnosis in stride? Who still treated me like a beautiful, sexual woman? Who didn’t even hesitate to ask me if I needed a ride to the hospital?

I pushed him away because I didn’t think he could handle all the complications of being with me, but he’s been at the hospital every day for over a week now, practically living in my room. I’m pretty sure I bled all over his cousin’s car—which was another surprise, that Jared would so willingly hand his keys over, but I guess everyone is more complicated than they seem at first glance. He met my baby, and the awed look in his eyes matched the one he gave me when he felt my son kick. He looked like a proud father.

I think I might have misjudged Rudy. He’ll be able to handle all these complications after all.

Rudy leans forward, resting his forehead against mine. His hand is still wrapped around the back of my neck, and he holds

me in place long enough that I can take in his scent. It makes me a little dizzy because he smells so good.

“You’re wrong,” he tells me. “You belong to me, and I belong to you. We’re moving in together, and I’m going to be the best father that kid could ever ask for, and the best man you could ever dream of.”

“Now you just sound arrogant,” I answer, but the fight is gone from my words.

Rudy pulls back an inch, and he must see the smile twitching at my lips because pure male triumph flashes in his eyes. “So,” he says. “My place or yours?”

“Yours,” I whisper. “Mine smells musty and it’s too small for the three of us, anyway.”

I grin at the flash in his eyes, then tilt my head up to catch his lips in a kiss. It lights me up all the way down to my toes, and I can’t help curling both arms around his neck, burrowing my fingers into his hair. He smells like man and strength and safety, and he’s all mine.



## *Epilogue*

LILY

**R**udy did an incredible job renovating his house.  
*Our house.*

The whole place gleams with new wood floors and fresh paint, and after I agreed to move in, he tells me he even set up a nursery in the closest bedroom to the master.

That first evening we have together, I end up leaning against the kitchen counter more or less in the same place I stood when Agnes interrupted our hanky-panky session all those months ago.

Rudy puts his hands on the counter on either side of my hips, his face the picture of male contentment. “You’re here,” he says, running his nose up my neck and placing a kiss just under my jaw. “Finally.”

Curling my hands into his golden hair, I let out a shuddering breath. “I’m here.”

Later, when we move to the bedroom, I open the door and start laughing. Rudy’s arm curls around my shoulders and I feel his smile in the warmth of his touch.

“I like what you did with the place,” I say, eyes on all my throw pillows neatly arranged on Rudy’s much bigger bed.

“I’m nesting,” he replies, an echo of my words all those months ago. And when I turn in his arms to lay a kiss on his lips, the look in his eyes tells me it’s true.

---

IF I EVER HAD ANY doubts about Rudy, he obliterates them in the weeks after I give birth. It's not a sexy time for me, I can say that much with absolute honesty. There's bloody wounds and budding scars to add to my ever-growing collection. I'm exhausted, sleep deprived, and nowhere near the glamorous woman who kissed Rudy in the yacht club bathroom.

Rudy doesn't seem to mind. Every night, he curls his arms around me and tucks me into his chest, and it feels like home.

Despite being born prematurely, we discover that Liam's lungs are fine, because there's no shortage of screaming and crying at all hours of the night. Caring for a newborn is just as difficult as everyone says, and I can hardly believe my luck at having Rudy by my side.

I'm sad I didn't get to give birth, and I'm sad I don't get to breastfeed, but those are disappointments I can bear, because the truth is, I'm a fighter. Both my baby and I survived the past few months together, and the only thing that matters is that we're here.

One morning I wake up and realize that Rudy let me sleep in, because I find him in Trina's old gliding rocking chair, feeding Liam a bottle. Leaning against the door jamb, I watch the two of them until Rudy glances up. He gives me a soft smile. "How'd you sleep?"

"I think I actually got six hours straight. I feel almost human."

"You have an appointment with Dr. Gardner today, right?" His eyes move back to the baby, and he shifts his hold so Liam is tucked into the crook of his elbow. Rudy strokes the baby's toes with infinite, tender care while holding the bottle to Liam's mouth.

My heart clenches, but I manage to make my voice work. "Yeah. Ten o'clock."

"I'll drive you," he says, and it's a useless statement because Rudy has insisted on driving me everywhere since I got out of the hospital. "I can take Liam for a walk while you

talk to Dr. Gardner, and then we can grab some lunch. What do you think?”

“I think that sounds good,” I whisper, emotion clogging my throat. I have a life here, and I don’t feel the need to book a trip to a new country. I’ll travel in the future, of course, but I hope I’ll do it with Rudy and Liam by my side.

“Your mom called me too,” he says, eyes still on the baby. “She chewed me out for not having her over at the house yet, but I think she was mostly kidding. Maybe. He’s a few weeks old now and we have a routine down, so maybe we can have your mom and sisters over? My grandma’s been asking about the baby too.”

I laugh. “I’ll tell my mom she can come over tomorrow. She’s been blowing up my phone too. We’ll see how that visit goes, then invite everyone else over after. Does that work for you?”

Rudy nods, flicking his eyes up to mine. “Yeah.” He smiles, returning his gaze to the baby in his arms.

What is it about attractive men holding babies? It’s got to be the hottest thing in the universe, which is saying something because right now, sex is the furthest thing from my mind—but the sight of Rudy feeding my child with love in his eyes makes my body freeze, emotion rooting my feet to the ground.

How could I get so lucky? How did I manage to find a man who can treat this child like his own, then look at me like I’m the best thing that ever happened to him?

“I don’t deserve you,” I blurt.

Rudy stops rocking, puts the now-empty bottle aside, then shifts Liam to his shoulder. He walks toward me while gently patting the baby’s back, his hand spanning almost the entire width of Liam’s tiny body.

Rudy moves toward me until he’s standing just inches from me. His eyes hold mine for a beat, then he shakes his head. “Lily, out of the two of us, the lucky one is me.”

“You really believe that,” I whisper.

His eyes crinkle as those beautiful, masculine lips curl into a smile. “Of course I do. I love you, Lily. And I love Liam too.” Still holding the baby against his shoulder, he reaches over to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “You want coffee?”

I blink, unable to process the question because Rudy just said he loves me, and it sounded like he really meant it. Gaping at him, I stand rooted to the spot until my man lets out a little chuckle. He ducks his head and kisses me softly, then moves down the hall, all while burping my baby.

*Our baby.*

Jaw hanging open, I listen to his retreating footsteps until I hear a kitchen cupboard closing and a mug being placed on the counter. Then I follow behind him and accept a steaming mug of coffee from the man of my dreams.

Staring into the brown liquid, I wait until the baby is burped and settled in his cot before moving to intercept Rudy when he makes his way back to the coffeemaker. I put my hands on his chest and lift my eyes up to meet his.

“I love you too, Rudy,” I whisper, the words rough in my throat.

He takes one hand in his and lifts it up to kiss my fingers. “Good,” he says. “Because I’m not letting you go.”

“Right back at you,” I say, a smile blooming over my lips. “So if you ever get sick of seeing this body that’s been sliced open and stitched back up, well, too bad. There’s no trading me in for a younger version.”

Rudy’s shoulders soften as he runs his hands up my sides to rest on my rib cage. He pulls me close, resting his forehead against mine. “Your scars don’t scare me, Lily. They never will. They make you who you are, and that’s the woman I’ve fallen in love with.”

A last hard knot unwinds in the pit of my stomach, and I find myself melting into his arms. My life hasn’t been a fairy tale, but I’m starting to think I might get my happily-ever-after.

---

A FEW WEEKS LATER, when my family and friends have all met the baby and elbowed their way back into my life, I realize that I'm well and truly settled. Being with Rudy every day no longer terrifies me, nor does it feel stifling to have my family around to rely on. I'm not a burden to them; I never was. Therapy helps, of course, especially while my postpartum hormones wreak havoc on my body and mind. I'll get through that too, though, because for the first time since I was a teenager, I have a home.

As that reality really sinks in, I sit back on the sofa watching the early spring sun pierce through the clouds outside, and I find myself on the phone with my sister Trina.

"So your salon appointment is at three o'clock, and we're heading to the Cedar Grove around six."

Chewing my lip, I let out a sigh. My eyes move to the baby sleeping next to me, and I find myself stroking his tiny, soft hands. "I don't know, Trina. Girls' Night doesn't really seem important right now."

There's shuffling on the phone, and Simone's voice comes through the line. "Girls' Night is sacred," she intones. "And you haven't had more than an hour off since Liam was born. So from six to eight, you'll be with us drinking bad wine and singing Mariah Carey songs at top volume. Got it?"

The front door opens and Rudy enters, wearing suit pants and a shirt with the top two buttons undone. He crosses the distance to me in mere steps, placing a kiss on the top of my head before bending down to do the same to Liam. "Is that your sister? I've been told I'm on baby duty from six to eight tonight."

My lips twitch. "You guys set me up," I tell Simone in my best, hardest accusatory tone. "You got Rudy in on it too."

"Good. We'll see you at six." She moves the phone away and I hear her tell Trina to cancel my salon appointment.

Moving the phone back to talk to me, she says, “There. I cleared your schedule. Six o’clock. Got that, Lily?”

The smile tugging at my lips grows to the full breadth of my face. “Got it.”

As soon as I’m off the phone, Rudy hauls me into his arms and kisses me hungrily, his hands sinking into the flesh on my hips. He smooths his hands over me, humming against my lips. “Still as hot as ever.”

A spark ignites between my legs. “It’s been long enough.” A hoarse whisper. “My OB cleared me for sex.”

Rudy pulls back, his eyes taking on a hot, predatory gleam. “The baby’s sleeping,” he notes conversationally.

“Be gentle,” I say, shivering at the way his hands shape my curves.

Rudy kisses the tip of my nose, then gives me a soft squeeze. “Always.”

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**T**he Cedar Grove's parking lot is jammed.  
Girls' Night.

Mostly, my friends take a taxi or have a designated driver for their evenings here, but I've been told that Girls' Nights have started attracting other patrons, too. It seems they've taken on a sort of mythical reputation in and around Heart's Cove—hence the multitude of cars in the parking lot. If people aren't here to participate, they seem to like coming for the atmosphere.

And by "atmosphere," I mean a bunch of crazy forty-somethings letting their hair down.

Tonight is the first time I've been officially invited. Trina even booked a blowout at the salon for me earlier, only to click her tongue when I told her I wasn't in town and would be driving back from Reno this afternoon. She told me Lily's having her first evening away from her baby, and we're making an event out of it. Hamish even agreed to let us put up a sign inside the bar.

Lily only promised to show up for an hour or two, so I'm under strict instructions to arrive on time.

I sped all the way here and left Reno in the dust.

Thankfully, it's the final time I have to make that drive. I put in my two weeks' notice exactly two weeks ago, and today was my last day. I'm officially a full-time resident of Heart's Cove, with nothing holding me back in Reno. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

Except...

As I pay my taxi driver and turn toward the entrance, my stomach shrinks into a hot, hard ball. A line of gleaming motorcycles is backed into a neat line at the front of the bar, each one shining black and chrome under the parking lot lights.

I hadn't realized how much I missed seeing those bikes during the winter months, when rain and even a bit of snow coated our area. It seems the weather has warmed up enough for riding.

The motorcycle on the end of the row is navy, and I recognize the distinctive smoky swirls painted on the body. My stomach unwinds, sending heat spearing lower in my gut.

Even his bike is sexy.

The last time I saw Lee Blair was at Candice's housewarming party. When his eyes met mine across the room, I decided I couldn't do it. The girls had just pulled gossip out of me like it was their job, only to descend on Lily like hyenas.

As someone who hates being the center of attention, having a pack of bloodthirsty gossipmongers asking me the size of Lee's penis is *not* something I want to put up with.

*It's probably very big*, my brain helpfully interjects, and I scowl at myself.

I'm not here to ogle the sexy, motorcycle-riding man who turns my insides to jelly. I'm here for my inaugural Girls' Night. I'm going to drink too much, dance like a buffoon, and make an absolute fool of myself surrounded by all my new friends.

My feet disagree, because they carry me closer to his motorcycle. I bet it would feel positively sexual to have that big machine vibrating between my legs, to have Lee's big, hard body pressed up against my chest.

The leather of his seat is blue too, I notice. A blue-black that gleams under the artificial lights of the parking lot. Glancing around to make sure I'm alone, I run a palm over the



buttery-soft leather of the seat and feel a shiver dance in the very feminine core of me.

This isn't like me. My ex-husband worked in tech. His favorite word was "optimization." Bad boys riding motorcycles are not the type of men I've ever been attracted to. Not then, not now, not ever.

But I remember the way Lee's eyes tracked me around Candice's house, how he almost cornered me on the patio before I ducked away and ran to the kitchen to help Jen. When I finally went home after Candice and Blake's party, it felt like I'd run a marathon.

Palm still running over the soft leather of the motorcycle's seat, I fall into something of a trance. Maybe I'll talk to Lee again. Maybe I'll even do more than talk. Girls' Nights are for bad decisions, right?

He'd be rough, I decide. He'd grip those broad hands over my hips and pull me close, until all I could see was him. Maybe he'd sit me right here on the back of his motorcycle, spread my legs, and—

A loud, crashing noise jerks me out of my stupor. It sounds like a thousand bottles falling and shattering in the alley beside the Grove, echoing against all the brick and concrete. I stumble at the noise, still panting from my too-vivid imagination, and catch myself on the nearest object.

Lee's motorcycle.

In slow-motion, the two-wheeled machine starts tipping away from me. Inch by inch, it lifts off the kickstand beside me, hovers in a near-vertical position for a heart-stopping moment, then starts falling in the other direction.

"No, no, no," I hiss, scrabbling to grab the seat to pull the bike back over toward me, onto its kickstand. I *need* to stop this thing from falling.

But it's *heavy*, and I haven't been to the gym in far too long. That soft, luxurious leather I'd just been admiring slips from my grasp, and the bike tips all the way over...and into the next one.

Horror ices my veins as I watch the line of bikes crash over like a hellish line of dominos. One, two, three...they just keep falling over one after the other. I stand at the end of the line, wincing at each sound of metal on metal, metal on asphalt, metal on concrete.

My breath comes in short, staggered gasps as my shoulders squeeze up to my ears, the awful spectacle in front of me lasting an eternity, until the very last bike in the line trembles, and finally crashes over onto its side.

The silence is even worse. It presses down on me as I watch the line of tumbled motorcycles stretching out in front of me, wondering if I should just turn on my heels and run all the way back to Heart's Cove. I can call Trina and tell her I was held up in Reno. I'll come up with an alibi. I was never here.

Then—footsteps.

Frozen, I gulp down a hard gasp when Lee steps out of the shadows, his eyes sweeping over the trail of destruction caused by my clumsiness, finally landing on me.

There's nothing friendly in his gaze. He stares at me for an interminable moment, until I can't take it anymore.

“Oopsie daisy,” I squeak.

The silence presses in, and Lee tilts his head a few degrees to the side. “Oopsie,” he growls, taking two steps to close the distance between us, “daisy?”

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