



LOATH ME,
Love Me

MANDY HUEY

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An Enemies to Lovers Romance

Mandy Huey

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Chapter 1:

To Maine

I can't wait to get out of here.

Don't get me wrong, I don't hate my job. I love it. Why wouldn't I? Being one of the top-performing partners at Ruthers & Dean Investment Group, I'm richer than I ever thought I'd be. However, it's not every day that I get to take a vacation and go back to my roots.

I look around my office to ensure I do not forget anything I need to do before my vacation. My eyes land on the few framed photos on my desk. I reminisce over one of my best friend, Myles, and me from our high school graduation.

So much has changed since then, and it feels like a completely different lifetime ago. He joined the Navy shortly after graduation, and I headed off to university in the Big Apple. Now I'm a partner of a global investment group, and he's a new dad. I can't help but marvel at how time changes everything.

Satisfied that I've completed everything, I head for the door.

Ding.

Seriously? I drag myself back over to my computer, knowing if I leave it, I'll be wondering about it the entire drive back to Maine. I check the email and am relieved it's nothing important.

"Mr. Galloway?" My assistant's voice comes over the intercom.

"Yes, Lisa?" I respond, trying to hide the annoyance in my voice.

“There are a few more documents for you that were just delivered. Can you take a look at them before you leave?”

“Yes. Thank you, Lisa.” I sigh. It’s always something.

She softly knocks on the door before opening it, her heels clicking against the floor. She places the files on my desk and gives me a nod. I nod in return and pick up the documents as she quietly makes her exit.

“More merger bullshit.” I mutter to myself and shake my head. It never ends.

The documents don’t need immediate attention, so I put them in my briefcase and leave the office.

“Have a good vacation, Mr. Galloway.” Lisa smiles from her desk.

“Thank you.” I flash a grin at her. “Hopefully, you’re not too busy while I’m gone.”

Although I was annoyed she needed one last thing from me before I took off, I’m thankful for Lisa. She’s a great assistant and a delightful person. She’s always on time and seldom calls in sick. I hope my partners don’t take advantage of her while I’m gone. I start to think maybe I should have told her to take a vacation as well, but she can handle herself while I’m gone.

I mindlessly make my way to the elevator and press the button to head down. Once in the parking garage, I wave goodbye to various coworkers. Then, eager to begin my vacation, I make the short drive from the office to my condo.

I try to remember the last time I took a vacation and my memory comes up empty. Who knows how long it’s been, not to mention how long since I’ve been home to Camden. I always try to make time for my friends and family when I can, but I’ve been neglecting them as of late.

I pull into the underground parking and hastily make my way upstairs. As per usual, I left packing until the last minute. I could kick myself as I scour my closet and dressers for clothes to wear, figuring I should bring a few extra sets of clothes, just in case. I double-check to make sure I have my toothbrush, toothpaste, and other toiletries. Worst case scenario, I can

always go to the store and buy myself any other essentials I may need.

I will need to answer a few emails while away, so I pack my laptop in my briefcase.

At last, it's time for me to head to Camden. Growing up in a small town in Maine is so different from life here in New York. Everyone knows everyone in Camden, and nothing ever changes, which is part of its charm. It's nice to head back to something so familiar, even if it has been a while since I've really called Camden my home.

As I pull out of my parking garage and head towards the highway, my phone rings. It's Myles. I put him through the car speaker.

"Hey, buddy, what's up?" I cheerfully ask.

"Are you on your way yet?" Myles' voice booms through the car. I wince and turn down the volume, which I always forget to do for phone calls after blaring music on drives home.

"Just left. Do you need me to pick up anything for you or Hudson?"

"No thanks."

"If you change your mind, let me know."

"Will do." Myles sighs.

"Are you okay?"

He sighs again. This melancholy is very unlike him. Even though he's navigating newborn parenting, he's still usually more cheerful. I wonder what the issue could be since he's got everything he could want. All of his dreams from when we were kids came true. He joined the Navy, met the love of his life, and had a son.

Suddenly his voice cuts through the silence.

"Not really, man. But we can talk when you get here."

"We can talk now, if you want." I suggest. "I'm just going to be in the car for the next seven hours."

“Jess left,” he blurts out.

“What?!” I shout, filled with alarm.

“She decided that she wasn’t cut out to be a mom, so she left.”

“Did she take Hudson?”

“Nope. She left him here with me.”

I stay quiet for a moment, processing. I’ll never admit it, but I’m slightly relieved that Jess didn’t take Hudson because Myles would have been even more devastated.

“What the hell am I going to do, Scott? I don’t know how to be a dad!”

“Myles, take a deep breath. You’re going to be okay. You got this,” I try to reassure him.

He lets out another deep sigh. “My parents can help for now. But they’re getting older and can only do so much.”

“I’ll help you in any way I can. I’m here for you, always.” I promise.

“Thanks, Scott. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’re my best friend! And besides, Hudson is my Godson.”

Myles chuckles, and I hear Hudson crying in the background.

“I have to go. Duty calls.” Myles hangs up before I can say anything else.

I can’t fathom how someone could just up and leave their family. I’m not a parent, but I can assume it’s challenging. From what Myles has told me, being a parent is a 24/7 job. I haven’t met Hudson in person yet, but I’ve seen pictures and had video chats. He’s such a little sweetheart. That feeling must be unlike any other joy in the world.

How could Jess do this? My knuckles still tighten around the steering wheel, angry for Myles. I never met Jess, but I can tell she’s a coward. She took the easy way out by leaving. Myles is a good man, and he would’ve helped her with any problems she was having.

But now he's going to need all the help he can get, and I'm racking my brain for how I can assist. He's going to be a great Dad. He just needs to get on his feet.

A light bulb goes off in my head, and I quickly call my parents.

"Hey, sweetie. Are you on your way?"

"Yes, Mom, I left about an hour ago. But something has happened."

"Oh no, honey, are you okay?"

"I'm good. I just need to ask you and Dad a question."

I'm hesitant, not sure of how to phrase it. Myles is like their second son, and I don't want to worry them. They will know sooner or later, but it will most likely devastate my mother.

"Go ahead..." My mother says cautiously.

"Would it be okay with you guys if I stayed a bit longer? If not, I can rent a room—"

"Of course you can!" My mom cuts me off. "Stay as long as you'd like! But why are you extending your vacation?"

"It's Myles." I pause for a moment. "Jessica left them."

My mother makes an audible gasp.

"She did what?" The anger in her voice is rising.

"Myles just called me. Apparently, she didn't think she was cut out to be a mom and left."

"I'm appalled. Oh my, poor Myles. Poor Hudson!" My mom says. She sounds concerned, but maybe not surprised? I try not to read into it considering it's so late.

"I know, Mom. Myles is my family, and I want to be there for him. But I just need to clear it with work first. So, let's just keep this between us."

"Scouts honor." My dad chuckles in the background. Typical response from him.

"I should be there in a few hours. You guys will probably be asleep. Is the hide-a-key in the same place?"

“Yes, it is. Drive safe, honey. We’ll see you in the morning. We love you!”

“Thanks, Mom. Love you too.” I say before I hang up the phone.

I turn up the music again and drum my fingers to the beat as I drive, trying to decide the best way to take more time off. If they don’t grant me the vacation time, I can always work remotely from Camden. So I don’t see why it should be an issue. Since it’s already pretty late and no one would answer my phone call in the office, an email would most likely be the best course of action.

The hours tick by, and the sun disappears on the road in front of me. An hour outside of Camden, I pull into the nearest gas station and fuel up. I haven’t eaten since leaving work. I head inside the roadside diner on the same lot, sit at a small table near the window, and order something small to get me through the last leg of my drive. The waitress brings over my order as I pull out my laptop to craft my vacation request email, revising it a few times to ensure it sounds urgent.

“All done, darlin’?” The waitress approaches my table with the check.

“I am, thanks.” I smile at her as I hit send and close my laptop.

She hands me my check and walks away with a smile. I leave her a generous tip, as I remember what it was like to work in the restaurant industry.

The road is dark and quiet, and I quickly pull out of the gas station parking lot. I don’t bother to check my surroundings before I head out and...

Crash.

“Oh fuck.” I mutter out loud.

I look in my rearview mirror and see steam from whatever car I hit. And a very pissed-off blonde storming toward my door.

“DO YOU NOT PAY ATTENTION TO WHERE YOU’RE GOING?” She angrily shouts at me through my window.

I exit my car and head around the back to check out the damage, ignoring the angry woman until I process the situation.

It doesn't look too bad, a minor fender bender at the bed. But her bumper came off. It looks like a junker car anyhow, held together by duct tape and sheer will. So I'm not sure if it's even my fault.

"Are you even listening to me?!"

"Sorry ma'am, I was just—"

"Ma'am?" She cuts me off. What else was I to call her? Screaming bitch?

"I just wanted to assess the damage before we discussed what to do." I start, trying to remain calm. "I don't think we need to get insurance involved. There's barely any damage to my car, and no offense, your car already looks worse for the wear to begin with."

"Excuse me?! My car was perfectly fine before your pompous ass decided that blind spots were beneath him!" She shouts as I turn to face her. Her hands aggressively land on her hips as she waits for me to respond.

"Look, instead of going through insurance, why don't you bill me for the cost of the bumper? No one's premiums go up, and they don't overcharge either one of us for fixing something cosmetically."

I walk over to my car and pull out one of my business cards. As I turn around, I notice her taking a photo of my license plate, which doesn't phase me. If she wants to go through insurance, why not. She's only hurting herself.

"Here." I try to hand her my card, but she bucks back. "Have your mechanic bill me."

She scoffs. "You're a real piece of work, you know that? Clearly, not from around here with zero respect for the locals. You can't just—"

Local? Interesting. I grew up in the closest town, and I don't recognize her. She keeps rattling on with colorful language,

but it's been a long drive, and I've stopped listening.

"Listen, it's getting late, and I have somewhere to be. This is where I'm staying..." I quickly jot down my parents' address on the back of the card. "If you need to keep yelling at me, just go there. Otherwise, call the number on my card."

As I climb back into my car, I can hear her huffing and puffing, clearly wanting to continue tearing a strip off of me. But she takes a deep breath and heads into the diner. I make sure to take a picture of her license plate and the damages, just in case she tries to bill me for more.

Nice one, I think to myself. Welcome home, Scott.

Chapter 2:

Reunited

I finally pull into my parents' driveway and notice the lights are still on in the living room, which is odd. I assumed they'd be asleep at three in the morning. I get out of my car and take my suitcase out of the trunk. I approach the house and see someone moving in the living room. They must have seen my headlights.

"Scott!" My mother shouts as she swings the front door open.

"Mom, what are you still doing up?"

"I was too excited to sleep," she says with a sheepish grin.

My mother gives me a tight squeeze and leads me into the house. Nothing much has changed since the last time I was here. It still feels and smells like my childhood home. Photos of our family line the mantel and the wall next to the staircase. The hallway has a fresh coat of paint, but the floorboards leading to the kitchen are still warped from the changing weather, having never been replaced. Best of all, my parents still have the same smiles plastered across their faces. I never realized how much I've missed them until I see them standing in the hallway, the same proud grins they've had since I was a kid. I also never realized how much older they are getting until I've come back after being away from them this long.

I never intended for it to be this long between visits. But with everything going on with the company, I just haven't had time to come out and see them. My parents are super supportive, so of course, they understand the time crunch. However, being their only child, I can tell it hasn't been easy on them not to see me as often as they'd like.

"It feels good to be home," I say as I embrace both of them. I would tell them how much I've missed them, but it just might

bring my mother to tears.

They don't say anything, but the tightness of their hugs tells me they're happy I'm home too. As I look at the time, I feel bad that they stayed up this late. I excuse myself to my old bedroom, which my parents have converted into a guest room.

The walls changed from the navy blue and sports theme that I had throughout high school. Now it was elegant and understated, the walls are a tranquil pastel green with artwork of flowerpots and rain soaked forests. Not at all like the Sports Illustrated posters that once hung in their place. My queen size bed sits in the middle of the room, with matching white nightstands hugging either side.

My father must have known I'd be working a bit, as a makeshift desk sits in the corner and doesn't match the rest of my mother's chosen decor. It isn't much, just a long folding table with what looks like one of the dining room chairs and a desk lamp from my father's den. While minimal, the gesture means more. I remind myself to thank him in the morning.

I set my laptop case on top of the desk, and just like I put off packing my bag, I decided to put off unpacking it. Finally, I change into a pair of pajamas and head to bed, not realizing how tired I was until my head hits my pillow.

A knock on my door wakes me. I groggily look around the room, my eyes struggling to adjust to the sunlight peeking through a crack in the new curtains.

"Coffee's hot and there's breakfast downstairs!" My dad bellows through the door.

Even as a full-blown adult, my parents still cater to me. I don't think it will ever change.

I slowly pull myself upright, stretch like a cat, and make my way downstairs. The smell of bacon and eggs flows through the house—memories of rushing down the stairs like a teenager flood my thoughts. I specifically remember being thirteen or fourteen, sleepily wandering into the kitchen in my pajamas, waiting at the kitchen table while my mom fixed me

a plate. Sure, I could've done it myself, but my mom always kissed my head and told me to sit.

"Looks good, Mom." I smile as I enter the kitchen, stopping to kiss her on the cheek as she flips the last pieces of bacon sizzling in her cast iron pan.

"Help yourself, Scottie." She beams.

Without thinking, I open cupboards and drawers to grab dishes and utensils, just like I did every day of my young life. I load my plate full of food, make myself a cup of coffee, and sit down with my parents as if no time has passed.

We sit in silence for most of breakfast, my father reading the newspaper as he always has. I notice my mother has changed with the times a little bit. She leans over an e-reader, tapping through each page, rather than struggling to hold open a paperback while she sips her coffee. I watch them in awe, knowing that my parents' little nuances will always bring me comfort.

Without looking, my father reaches across the table to hold my mother's hand. This instantly warms me. Their constant show of affection for one another has always given me hope that I'd find a love like that someday.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. My parents have never been too keen on devices at the table, however seeing as my mom has her e-reader, I think I can get away with it. I pull my phone out of my pocket and glance down. It's an email from the partners at work.

My brow furrows at the beginning of the message. They don't seem too pleased with my decision to stay longer, but they grant me the extra leave. The email states that I need to be back in New York in six weeks for the merger, which is reasonable.

I sigh with relief and put my phone back in my pocket.

My dad folds down the corner of his newspaper and raises an eyebrow at me.

"It's work. They're asking me to head back in six weeks for the merger," I announce.

“Excellent, that should be enough time to help Myles get settled with Hudson!” Mom smiles gleefully.

I nod in response and stand to put my dishes in the sink. I head upstairs to the washroom and shower quickly. A long drive with only one stop has done nothing for the way I smell. After I finally brush my teeth, I feel rejuvenated.

I open my suitcase, deciding to throw on a pair of black jeans and a white T-Shirt with a red and black plaid overshirt. The early autumn days can get chilly in Camden. Looking in the mirror, I realize I rarely dress casually anymore. Yet, surprisingly, I already feel more myself than I did in the city.

I send Myles a text to tell him I’m on my way and head back downstairs.

“I’m heading out. I’ll see you guys later.” I wave as I leave.

“Be safe!” My mom shouts from the kitchen. I chuckle at this as I walk toward my dented bumper, briefly forgetting about my late-night fender-bender.

Pulling up to Myles’ parents’ house gives me a similar wave of nostalgia. The porch stretches across the front of the farm-style house, attached to what looks like a newly installed deck wrapping around the side. Trees line the property, the leaves changing from green to warm shades of red.

I spot Myles’ mother, Kate, outside gardening. She stands to greet me as I climb out of the car. Myles’ parents never liked being called Mr. and Mrs. Baker, insisting I call them Kate and Martin.

“Scott, it is so good to see you.” She wraps me into a hug, similar to my own mother.

“It’s good to see you too, Kate.”

“Make yourself at home. Myles is upstairs.” She waves toward the house.

As I head inside and up the stairs, I hear the faint sounds of children’s music coming from Myles’ old room, and Myles

humming along to the tune. I smile as I gently knock on the door before entering.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” I announce, causing Myles to whip around.

“Scott! I was wondering when you’d be here.” He pulls me into a hug.

As I wrap my arms around him, I can tell he’s lost a fair bit of weight. He pulls back and smiles at me knowingly, looking exhausted but elated as he brings me over to a crib by the window.

I look over and see Hudson, swaddled in a blanket. Being an only child raised in a small family, I realize I don’t think I’ve ever seen a child this young, much less held one. Hudson looks up at me, his eyes the same striking hazel color as Myles. His nose is rounded at the tip too. I’ve also never seen a newborn with so much thick, dark-brown hair, also like Myles. The family resemblance between him and his father is uncanny. Hudson’s rosy, plump cheeks take my heart by surprise, feeling nothing but love for this tiny human.

“So, how are you holding up?” I ask as I sit on the edge of Myles’ bed, watching him as he gently picks up his son.

The confidence in his movements as he rocks Hudson and whispers to him is beautiful. It amazes me how the immature, clumsy demeanor that Myles used to have has changed so much. Fatherhood has changed him in more ways than one. And while Jess has for sure done a number on his head, I can see that his son owns his heart.

“I’ve been better, but you know me. I always roll with the punches.” Myles smiles. “You can hold him if you’d like.”

I nod as he hands Hudson to me, making sure I support Hudson’s head. I prepared myself for meeting him, read a few books, and watched a couple of “how-to” videos. But I don’t think anything has prepared me for the overwhelming amount of love I already feel for someone I’ve just met, especially once Hudson wraps his shriveled fingers around my thumb.

“I’m sorry, man, it can’t be easy.” I say, focusing on the warm bundle in my arms, “Hudson is adorable.”

Myles nods, but his eyes are distant and sad. We both turn to the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

“What are you boys up to?” Kate pops her head into the room.

“Scott’s meeting his Godson.” Myles responds, gently slapping my back.

The music comes to a sudden stop as the timer must’ve run out on the musical elephant it was coming out of. Hudson cries out, clearly upset by the silence. I panic slightly and motion for Myles to take him.

“I’ll deal with it. You two go out.” Kate rushes over to me and scoops Hudson up. He immediately stops crying while Myles and I glance at each other in awe.

“Scott, make sure Myles has some fun while you’re in town.” Kate says over her shoulder as she makes her way to a rocking chair sitting in between the crib and Myles’ bed.

I nod and drag Myles out of the room as he watches his mother hum to her grandson, looking so grateful for her.

“To the Sea Dog?” I suggest.

“To the Sea Dog!” Myles exclaims, trying to sound enthusiastic.

We pull up to the bar and head inside. The Sea Dog Brewing Co. became our frequent hangout once Myles and I turned 21. The smell of stale beer hits me as the door swings open. Rustic booths line the walls while the bar sits in the middle of the room. So many evenings were spent here with friends, flirting with the same women, drinking the same beer, leaving our teenage years behind, and envisioning how our adult lives would turn out.

Myles wanders over to what used to be our usual booth like a reflex, and I head to the bar to grab our first round. I wave at a few people as I cross the room, taking comfort in knowing that I’m still a friendly face.

With the bartender's back to me, I notice right away that she is someone I don't know. Her long blonde hair is tied in a messy knot on top of her head. Her black Sea Dog T-Shirt cuts off her tattoo sleeve and her tight jeans accentuate her amazing ass. I can't help but stare as I wait for her to finish with her customer.

"Hey darlin'." I turn on the charm. "Can I get a couple of—" I stop in my tracks as she turns around.

It's the girl from last night. Who tried to tell me that I caused damage to her junker. Who used a level of profanity I didn't know existed in Camden. The woman with the perfect ass is the woman whose ass I hit at two in the morning.

"You." She says, narrowing her eyes at me with her hands landing on her hips.

"Oh fuck." I sigh, holding back an eye roll.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I was trying to order a drink," I begin before she cuts me off again.

"We don't take platinum cards here, so..."

I open my mouth to speak, but stop when a hand lands on my shoulder.

"Giving you a hard time?" Myles asks.

"Yes." We both answer simultaneously, then glare at each other.

"I see you two have met." Myles giggles, but I do not see this as funny.

"You know him?" The woman asks with disgust while pointing at me as if *I'm* the stranger here.

"I've known Myles since we were in kindergarten, sweetheart." I defend.

"How unfortunate for him." She clenches her teeth and squints at me.

This is going very well, I think to myself.

“Annabeth, this is Scott. The friend I was telling you about.” He begins. “Scott, this is Annabeth. She is also one of my best friends and works here with me.”

“Charmed.” I say, extending my hand for Myles’ sake.

“I’m not.” Annabeth shrugs as she turns away to serve someone else.

Myles sighs and flags down the other bartender, who gets our drinks and starts a tab for us. Myles leads us back to our booth, where I savor my first sip of ice-cold beer and look back at Annabeth.

I’m almost sure that bitch would’ve spit in my drink.

Chapter 3:

Enemies Made

We sit at the table in silence for a minute while I continue to watch Annabeth. When I finally lean back to face Myles, he's shaking his head and suppressing a chuckle.

"What?" I ask with zero patience for where he's going with this.

"Soooooo, what was that about?" He gestures between Annabeth and me.

"We got into a fender bender last night just outside of town."

I know my confession will lead to more questions, but I wasn't expecting a wholehearted laugh to burst out of him. I take a slow swig of my beer, letting the icy glass cool my sweating palms.

"Wow. Not at all what I was expecting." Myles clears his throat, trying to match my seriousness but ends up giggling to himself.

"I was leaving the diner just outside of town. It was late, and I wasn't paying attention. I backed into her. She freaked. I told her to send me the bill." I try to remain casual about it because it was nothing major, and those are the facts.

Well, minus a few profanities thrown my way.

"She told me some 'pompous asshole' backed into her." Myles says using air quotes.

"And I was right," Annabeth's voice interrupts as she approaches us.

I roll my eyes at her, making sure she notices my dislike for her, and goes away. But, unfortunately, she doesn't waver,

gives me a death stare, and squeezes into our booth next to Myles.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I snarl at her.

“My shift is over. Besides, this is our booth.” Annabeth gestures between her and Myles. “We always sit here.”

Myles shrugs and grits his teeth. Honestly, the nerve of this woman. He is my best friend.

Immediately, I kick myself for having such childish thoughts, and I brush away her attempt at making me jealous. After all, Myles can have other friends. I’ve barely been home over the past few years, so I shouldn’t be surprised if more people have entered his life.

I still can’t help this nagging feeling of regret. Like maybe Myles wouldn’t be in this situation if I visited more. I could’ve guided him when he first started seeing Jess. I could’ve warned him. I could’ve steered him away from people like Annabeth, glaring at me from across the table.

Before I can come up with a witty response, Myles pleads, “C’mon guys, can’t a man enjoy a beer with his two best friends?”

He’s right. I’m here for him, and we’ve never let a woman get in between us before. So we’re certainly not starting now.

“I’m sure he can buy new friends.” She fires back, flashing me a fake grin.

“Why don’t you go f—”

“Listen, you’re both important to me.” Myles cuts in. “So I suggest you figure out a way to be civil.”

“I can muster up some civility.” I say through my teeth.

We both look at Annabeth, waiting for her response. But, instead, she rolls her eyes, and it takes every fiber of my being to remind myself that I can be civil. I can always go back to my roots and employ what my mother taught me: If I have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all.

Annabeth looks between us before saying, “I can just make myself scarce. We’ll talk later, Myles.” She scowls at me and gets up from the table. “When you’ve ditched money-bags over here.”

As she brushes past me, I grab her wrist, pulling her back to my level.

“Another round when you get a chance. *Ma’am*.” I whisper.

A shiver passes through me as I glance at her wrist, warm under my hand. She must’ve felt it too, as her tanned skin pimples under my touch. Our eyes meet once more just as she pulls away from me and leaves the table.

I have to stop myself from staring at her as she walks away, her sway confident and hypnotizing. I try to shake it off, refusing to be sucked in by this she-devil, even if she has the finest ass.

Myles catches me staring again, smiling from ear to ear.

“Like what you see, man?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...” I focus on my almost empty glass, avoiding eye contact.

“Sure.” Myles shakes his head. “She’s not as bad as she seems, you know.”

“I find that hard to believe.” I chuckle and toss back what’s left of my beer.

I look up to see Myles frowning.

“Oh, shit. I didn’t mean to offend your girl.” Idiot. Maybe that’s his new girlfriend. And not only was I staring at her ass, but I was also ready to rip into her.

Myles lets out a loud laugh. “She’s far from my girl. She’s been a huge saving grace.”

I snort. Myles’ face goes dark, and I realize there’s more he isn’t telling me.

“Annabeth is, or should I say *was*, Jess’ best friend. They moved here together, and she’s been there through every part

of our relationship. Oddly enough, when Jess took off, she stepped in and offered to help.”

I can see why he has a soft spot for this girl. She can't be all that bad. Once again, I feel gutted that this girl who he hardly knows has been here during what is probably the most challenging part of his life. And I haven't. Even though I feel the envy making my ears hot, I'm glad he's had support.

However, something he said lingers in the back of my mind.

“What do you mean since she left? I thought she left yesterday.”

He hadn't mentioned anything about her leaving before yesterday. Or maybe he had, and I wasn't paying attention.

“She left a couple of weeks ago.” He finally admits, staring at the table and fidgeting with his now empty glass.

Stupid. I should have known something was off when Myles called a few weeks ago. I figured he was just sleep-deprived, as new parents often are. Because, of course, who wouldn't be tired with a newborn?

“Why didn't you tell me?” I ask.

“I'm not sure. I don't think I really processed it until a few days after she left.” Myles looks up from the table with tears in his eyes. “I thought she would come back, that she just needed a few days. But, obviously, I was wrong. I feel like an idiot.”

“I am so sorry, Myles. I can't imagine what you're dealing with.” I reach across the table and place my hand on his, not knowing what to say.

I pull my hand back, and we sit in silence for a while. Admittedly, I don't know how I'd handle this if it were me. Myles is actually the only person I've ever told that I someday might want a family of my own too. After all, all Myles has ever wanted was a family. And now his world is crashing down around him, which is one of the reasons I haven't settled down. The heartbreak must be overwhelming.

“So, are you interested in Annabeth?” He breaks the silence.

“Smooth transition, man.” I shake my head at him in disbelief, remembering how often he’d coax who I liked out of me at this very booth.

“I promise she’s just protective. She’s actually really cool.”

Annabeth was far from hard on the eyes. A natural but intense beauty. Her words stung, but her penetrating green eyes left their mark. If she weren’t so abrasive, I probably would consider asking her on a date, but I can’t imagine it going anywhere beyond that.

Finally, I raise my eyebrow at him, finding it unlikely that I’ll be here long enough to get to know her anyway. “I don’t know. The jury’s still out.”

“How long are you here for, anyway?” Myles asks.

“Six weeks. I have to be back for the merger, but otherwise, I’m free as a bird.”

“That’s a lot longer than we discussed.” He says, confused.

“Long enough for me to help you get on your feet.”

Myles sits there with his mouth hanging open, seemingly in shock. “You don’t have to do that. I know your job is important to you.”

“You’re more important than any job. You’re the closest thing I have to a brother.”

“I have no words. This is—” Myles stops.

I nod at him awkwardly and offer to grab another round to give him a moment. As I approach the bar, I see Annabeth sitting at the bar with another woman with darker hair with their backs turned to me.

“... and he’s such an asshole! I don’t know what Myles sees in him!”

“I’ve never seen you so worked up like this over a guy you just met.” Annabeth’s friend teases.

I can only assume they’re talking about me since she mentioned Myles. I stand a few paces away to avoid drawing attention to my eavesdropping.

“He just has this arrogant air to him, Carla. Like because he has money, he’s above all.” Annabeth scoffs and throws back her drink, clearly exasperated.

“Anna, c’mon! We both know the real reason you’re so wound up is because you think he’s hot.”

Annabeth chokes on her drink and coughs. I can’t hold back my laughter, so I walk up and lean on the bar next to Annabeth’s friend, who I’ve now learned is Carla, pretending to ignore them.

“A pitcher, please.” I ask the bartender, then I turn and wink at Carla. Annabeth’s face has faded into a brilliant tomato red.

“Do you think he heard us?” Carla whispers.

I tip the bartender and reach for the pitcher being handed to me. “Oh, he definitely heard you,” I whisper back.

Carla giggles and covers her face.

Annabeth is mortified and avoids my gaze. I shake my head, reveling in her discomfort.

My laughter immediately fades when I see Myles intensely staring at a message on his phone, his face white.

“Everything okay?” I question as I put the pitcher down in front of him.

“I just got a text from Jess.” He replies.

I plop down in my seat and wait for him to say more. But whatever Jess sent has him speechless.

Finally, I ask, “What does it say?”

Instead of answering me, he stares into space and slides his phone to me.

Jess: Myles, I just wanted to let you know that I’m having custody papers drafted for Hudson. I am forfeiting my parental rights. The only thing you’ll have to do is sign. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer soon. Take care xo

I look up at Myles and see tears in his eyes. I, too, am speechless. Who the fuck sends this in a text message? A severely screwed up person, that's who. I'm livid and ready to punch a wall. But instead, I slam my hand on the table, making many bystanders look over, including Annabeth and Carla.

I wave to Annabeth, trying to signal her to come over. Instead, she scoffs and turns back toward the bar. I stand, muttering to Myles that I'll be right back.

I hurry up to the bar and scold Annabeth in her ear. "What's your problem? You can't take a hint?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, how can I serve you, sir?" She turns slowly with her deadpan tone.

"Shut up. Jess texted Myles," I nod toward our booth, where I can see Myles' shoulders shaking. He's sobbing into his hands.

"Shit." Annabeth hops off her barstool and rushes to Myles' side. I wasn't expecting such concern from her, which melts some of the ice between us, but I try not to pay much attention to it.

"What happened? What'd she say?" Annabeth asks as I sit back down. I slide the phone to her so she can read the message. I watch her intently as her deep green eyes glow from the light of the screen as she scans it.

She slams the phone down on the table. "Fuck her."

Myles tries to contain himself. I've never seen him this messed up. I'm frozen, unable to figure out our next steps.

"Here," Annabeth hands me a set of keys. "My car is out back. Let's get him out of here."

"My car is out front. It's also not a death trap on wheels, so let's take mine." I hand her back her keys, tuck Myles' phone in my chest pocket and slide out of the booth.

"Really? Not the time to bring up your oh-so-charming antics from last night." Annabeth whispers as she helps Myles to his feet.

Shit. She's right. I hate that she's right. I made it about me when we should be worrying about Myles. I quickly stride in

front of them, get the doors, and unlock my car for Myles.

After closing the passenger door for Myles, Annabeth turns to me. “Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. Get him home.”

“You’re bossy, you know that?” I blurt out, immediately regretting it.

“And you’re a dipshit for letting him read that inside.” She starts, stepping closer and getting right in my face. “She’s been sending messages like that for weeks, and every time, he breaks down. Some friend you are. I’ve been doing *your* job while you live it up in New York.”

“No one asked you to. I can take it from here!” I try to sound convincing, but I’m not so sure.

She throws her hands up. “I’m sure you can. Or you’ll pay someone to.”

“What is it with you and the money!”

“Whatever, just get him home. I’ll be right behind you.” She hurries back inside. I watch her whisper something to Carla, give her a squeeze, then bend over the bar for her jacket and purse.

I shake my head as I climb into the driver’s seat, trying to focus on Myles. I feel like a coward. Where have I been? How could I stay away this long? I’ve been too self-involved to notice my parents aging and my best friend in pain. Work obsessed and arrogant. Fighting with a stranger won’t fix this. I have to fix this.

“You good?” I ask Myles cautiously.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” He says, but I’m not convinced.

I turn on the ignition as Annabeth pulls out of her parking spot across the parking lot behind the bar.

She flips me the bird as she rolls past.

Chapter 4:

How It Should Be Done

Annabeth's car is nowhere in sight when we pull up Myles' driveway.

"I told her I'd call her tomorrow." Myles finally says after an otherwise silent car ride.

"When?"

"When we left the bar. She protested but understood and said she'd come over in the morning."

I say nothing as I climb out of the car and walk up the front steps, but I'm relieved.

Myles' parents look concerned as we enter, but I wave them off, gesturing that he'll be okay. We head quietly upstairs, where Hudson is sleeping soundly in his crib. He looks so peaceful. Myles walks over and stops in front of the crib. His back is to me, but his shoulders are shaking again.

"Myles?"

"How could she do this to us, bud?" He whispers, not to me, but Hudson. He reaches down and gently strokes Hudson's hair, which just about breaks my heart.

I help Myles get situated in bed and then head downstairs to fill his parents in about Jess' text. After answering their questions, I head down to the basement to crash on their couch out of habit. I already know they'd let me sleep here as I so often did, so I don't bother asking.

I take off my jeans and slide under a throw blanket knitted by Kate. I feel tired, but I'm wide awake, replaying my argument with Annabeth in the Sea Dog parking lot over and over in my mind. I can't decide what's sticking with me more. The fact

that she's been supporting Myles more than me, or the way she sways when she walks away from me.

I wake up to a screaming baby. I jolt out of bed and rush upstairs to find Myles' dad, Martin, sheepishly handing Hudson back to an impatient Kate. Then, like magic, Hudson settles so quickly in Kate's arms.

"Morning, sunshine." Myles says as he meets me at the top of the stairs with a cup of coffee. "Never a dull moment over here."

I grunt but then smile after my first sip. "You're forgiven."

Myles seems to be in a better place this morning, but I can tell by the bags under his eyes that he didn't get much sleep either.

"Knock knock!" A small voice says as the front door squeaks open.

"Annie!" Kate shrieks as she rocks Hudson over to greet Annabeth.

Fuck.

She sees me first as I have yet to move from leaning against the door frame at the top of the basement stairs. She snickers. "Nice boxers."

Double fuck. In my wake-up panic, I forgot to put my pants on. I ditch my mug in the kitchen and hurl myself downstairs to put on jeans as Annabeth chuckles behind me. When I return, Annabeth has snuggled herself onto the couch with a cup of coffee, like she owns the place.

"Less chilly?" She sizes me up and grins mischievously.

"Not since you got here." I reply. Martin's abrupt chuckle makes Kate jump, and she snaps him a look.

I shrug, but on the inside, I'm super proud of my quick comeback. Especially if she's going to waltz in here like she's been here as long as I have.

"Why don't you three head out to the new deck to enjoy your coffee? I'll put the baby down." Kate says as she takes Myles

from Annabeth.

Myles and Annabeth grab their mugs while I rush back to the kitchen to grab mine and trail behind them. I can't help but feel out of place in their makeshift family, like I've been gone too long. But I shrug it off and decide to do what I came to do: Help Myles.

I make my way across the deck in the crisp fall air, taking a seat on the closest patio chair, next to Annabeth.

"I have to do better for him." Myles announces.

"What do you want to do?" Annabeth asks without missing a beat on what he's discussing.

"I think that you need to get your own space with Hudson so you can create your own routine with him." I suggest. "Your mom can't watch him forever."

Not knowing anything about the circumstances of Myles staying with his parents, I took a shot in the dark. I want to be supportive, but I also want to help him make any changes he needs to make while I'm here. I'd also much rather be the one giving advice rather than the woman sitting next to me, rolling her eyes before she rebuts.

"That's such a stupid idea." Annabeth throws daggers at me. "He should stay here and get help as long as he can."

"Then what?" I snap. "Get so used to the help that when he's finally on his own, he falls on his face? Pass."

"He won't fall on his face. He'll always have help. Who says shit like that?"

"You're the one suggesting he live with his mommy for the rest of his life." I mutter.

"Enough!" Myles finally interjects.

"You're such a tool." Annabeth turns to Myles, her demeanor immediately changing. "I don't understand how you're friends with him."

Knowing him as well as I do, I keep my mouth shut. He only ever raises his voice when he's pissed off, and that can get

ugly fast.

“I think maybe you should leave.” He looks at her, emotionless.

Annabeth blinks at him, shocked. Clearly, she hasn’t been around long enough to know when to back off around Myles. I can’t help but smile as I sip my coffee.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” She scowls at me.

“How good this coffee is.”

“I highly doubt that, you smug bastard.”

I choose once again to say nothing and continue to stare at her, smiling. But inside, I’m ripping apart her hostile performance and telling her she knows nothing about me. As I stare at her, I get the small desire to prove her wrong, show her what an amazing friend I can be, but I’m interrupted by Myles.

“Scott, I think you should leave as well. Neither one of you is helping.”

I was not expecting that. But I nod and place my mug on the railing as I stand.

Annabeth raises an eyebrow, and Myles nods. I walk out of the yard with Annabeth not far behind me. We walk in silence toward the driveway, but I notice her car isn’t there.

In an effort to be the bigger person, I say, “I’d offer you a ride, but—”

“I’d say no anyway,” she hisses as she brushes past me.

“What’s your problem with me, really?” I finally ask, exhausted from whatever has given her such a messed-up opinion of me.

“I should ask you the same question!” She whips around, her blonde hair gently blowing in the autumn breeze.

She’s wearing it down today, with a set of sunglasses perched on her head keeping it from flying in her face. She crosses her arms, making her tattoos slightly bulge while she waits for me to answer. I can’t help but stare as numerous shapes pop out of her sleeve: A pirate ship that morphs into a wave, butterflies in

the shape of a flower, and a heart with words I can't make out because she's standing too far away. All of it black ink, meshing together with purpose.

"My problem is you follow Myles around like a puppy dog. He's getting over the love of his life, so do yourself a favor and wait for the dust to settle before trying to wedge yourself in."

Annabeth lets out a maniacal laugh and flashes me what looks like a genuine smile, a response I was not expecting considering the wrath I've endured from saying much less.

"You've got issues, Scott. Get your head out of your ass." She flicks her sunglasses down and walks away. I swear she's putting an extra swagger in her step so that my eyes stay glued to her long after she rounds the end of the driveway and disappears.

Flabbergasted, I look back at Myles to see if he heard everything and give him a can you believe her look. He's standing at the railing, smiling and enjoying the whole show. This leads me to think he asked us to leave on purpose. He's cooking up something.

My parents don't notice me at first as I try to head upstairs quietly. But my mom spots me climbing the stairs before I can run and hide under the covers, as I did as a child when I knew I was in trouble. And that's precisely what Annabeth is. Trouble.

"Scottie, where were you last night? You didn't call." She frowns.

"I'm sorry. Myles needed some help with Hudson."

I purposely leave out Jess' message, knowing it will upset her. They don't need to know the custody part just yet.

"You're such a good brother. Well, I hope you had a good time." My mom smiles at me.

I nod and head up to my room. I open my laptop and check my work emails—anything to distract me from the past 24 hours.

I open my laptop, and the first thing I see is forty-seven new emails, all from this morning. I wonder how many I usually get in a day. I usually check them as soon as my computer dings. It's been nice not to have to think about work. Although, having to put up with Annabeth doesn't exactly make things any better.

The emails are mostly just housekeeping things: minutes from meetings I've missed, changes in the merger, or nothing of great importance. I send a quick email to Lisa, asking her to screen my emails and only forward me urgent messages while I'm away. I'm not used to having so much free time. I don't know what to do with myself. Usually, I'd be at work or in a meeting, doing something with my time other than this.

I close my laptop, convinced I need a nap since I barely slept. I toss and turn a bit, but manage to sleep for about an hour or so. I've always hated how groggy I feel after napping. So I take a shower to freshen up before heading back downstairs. A note on the kitchen table is waiting for me.

Scott, we didn't want to wake you, but we're going out. Be back after dinner. Love, Mom and Dad xoxo

My parents, always old-fashioned. They could have just texted me. I chuckle to myself as I text Myles to see if I can come back over.

"Is it safe?" I peek my head into Myles' room before approaching. Myles waves me in, not moving from his spot on his bed where he's scrolling through his phone. I can hear Hudson cooing and want to spend more time with the little guy, so I walk past Myles and pick Hudson up. Having no experience with babies, Myles laughs at me as I hold Hudson like a ticking bomb. Myles helps me get comfy in the rocking chair, propping pillows under my arm so I can relax while snuggling Hudson.

Hudson immediately smiles as if I'm not a stranger to him.

"He likes you, you know?" Myles beams.

"I like him too."

“He looks just like you,” I whisper, not wanting to scare him.
“Except he’s cuter.”

We sit in silence for a bit while Hudson and I stare at each other. These are the moments that sting me the most. I wasn’t there when Myles found out he was going to be a dad. I wasn’t there when Hudson was born. I didn’t hold him within his first few days on this planet. I know times have changed, but I can picture a different version of myself calming Myles down as he paces the waiting room, worrying about meeting his son.

And I wasn’t there to hold both of them when Jess abandoned them. I imagine everyone voiced their concerns about Hudson growing up without a mom. But from the look on Myles’ face when I arrived, not many people can see that he too feels abandoned.

And I wasn’t there.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do yet?” I finally look up at Myles.

“I don’t have a clue. I really didn’t think Jess would pull shit like this.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask, hoping he finally gives me something to do, to make up for the things I haven’t done.

“Do you know anyone who wants to be a mother of a child?” He sighs, only being half-serious.

“What about Annabeth?” I probe. Sure, I think she’s hell on wheels, but they’re friends. Most relationships are based on friendship first. So it’s not as ludicrous as Annabeth made it seem.

“Nah, man. I don’t see her like that. More like a sister.”

“Every relationship has to start somewhere.” I tease him.

“Creepy, dude. Besides, she’s more your type than mine.”

“Myles, c’mon.” I sigh.

“She’s really not that bad,” He repeats. “The two of you just got off on the wrong foot. You are way more alike than you may think.”

I shrug, unconvinced.

“You’ll see that I’m right soon enough.”

“What does that mean?” I say as Hudson starts to squirm, and I hand him back to Myles.

“You’ll be seeing a lot of each other while you’re in town. So I’d appreciate some civility. For Hudson’s sake.”

“Unfair,” I whine. “You can’t use the kid against me!”

“Tough! He’s all I have.” We both laugh until Myles grows suddenly quiet, and the reality of that last part sinks in.

“He’s not all you have. I... We will get you through this.”

“I know. It’s strange how nothing else seems to matter anymore. All I want is to give this little man the best life he can possibly have. Even if that means we’re alone.”

I watch him as his eyes melt into his baby boy. I want to tell him he’s not alone, that Annabeth was right. He can stay here as long as he wants. He can move into his own place if he wants to, and the same people who support him now will support him then. We will all help him through this—especially his parents and me. And I guess Annabeth.

If we don’t kill each other first.

Chapter 5:

Opposites Attract

For the next few weeks, keeping my promise to Myles seems to be an impossible task. Being civil with Annabeth is more challenging to deal with than I anticipated. She's taken every opportunity she can to try to get a rise out of me. Every single opportunity. It's hard to fake pleasantries with someone who doesn't offer the same level of respect. So I've been taking everything she's been dishing out, hoping for a moment alone to put her in her place finally. But with us constantly being a foursome with Myles and Hudson, I've had to keep my mouth shut to prevent my blood from boiling.

Unfortunately, I'm slightly simmering and am just waiting for my chance to give her a taste of her own words.

"Hey, I need to run to the store. Can the two of you watch Hudson for me?" Myles asks, popping into the kitchen. I'm loading the dishwasher while Annabeth scrolls through her phone at the table.

"Yeah, not a problem. He's sleeping. How hard could it be?" I joke.

"As if you could handle it by yourself if he was awake." Annabeth comments without looking up from her phone.

"Do you have to be such a raging bitch all the time? Or am I just getting special treatment?" I blurt out, whipping around to face her.

Annabeth goes to open her mouth, but I continue before she can get a word in.

"For the last two weeks, you've been nothing but an asshole to me, and I can't for the life of me figure out why," I start. "Are you bored or something? Do you crave attention in your small

world? I don't know what your problem is, but I'm not going anywhere, so I suggest you get used to it, or there's the fucking door."

I can feel the heat in my cheeks and the vein in my head throbbing. Annabeth's face is red. Her lips pressed tightly together. I'm not sure if it's because she's about to explode or holding back tears. Either way, I don't care. A man can only take so much bullshit before he bites back.

A cry from upstairs turns both of our attention to Myles.

"Shit. Nicely done, guys." Myles huffs.

"I'm so sorry, man." I call to Myles as he leaves the room and climbs the stairs.

"Yeah, sorry!" Annabeth shouts. I glare at her. "What?" Annabeth asks innocently.

"Nice save. Really subtle." I give her a thumbs up.

"Ugh, I so loathe you." Annabeth rolls her eyes.

"Well, at least the feeling is mutual." I flash her a sarcastic smile.

"Let's just help Myles, okay? I'll keep my mouth shut if you can stop acting like a douche."

"How am I—"

"Like that," she cuts me off. "Stop looking at me like that and scoffing at everything I say."

"You're one to talk. Every single thing that comes out is rude." I say calmly, trying to find some semblance of common ground with this woman.

Annabeth sighs, "I'll tone it down, if you can." She stretches her hand out for a handshake, the air around her changing.

I step toward her and take her in for a moment. Her eyes, once so venomous, now look like they're filled with tears.

"Are you crying?" I ask.

"No." Her brow furrows. "I just don't want to lose Myles. He's like a brother to me. And if you are a package deal, then I

guess I'll have to deal with it. Okay?"

It's at this moment that I notice how tender her tone can be. The words flow out her mouth like silk, delicate but precise. I must've really struck a chord for her to soften so quickly. I mean, I'm grateful, but also a little sad. Because I never realized that it's not just Myles who needs help. Annabeth lost her best friend. She needs help too.

"I'm sorry, Annabeth. It was unfair of me to blow up at you like that. I should have just told you I didn't appreciate the way you were speaking to me. I hope you can forgive me." I shake her hand, running my thumb over her knuckles.

Her eyes widened. Obviously, she wasn't expecting that.

"Thank you for apologizing," Annabeth says quietly. "I'm sorry too. Forgive me?"

It's a half-ass apology, but I'll take it.

"I guess we're all going together. Everyone ready?" Myles returns with Hudson in his arms and the diaper bag thrown over his shoulder.

Annabeth drops my hand and brushes past me to grab Hudson. "Where are we headed?" She asks, slipping into her shoes.

"I need to head to the grocery store, hardware store, and post office."

"I thought you said this was going to be a quick trip," I tease as we all file out of the house and walk toward the car.

"It was, but then Hudson woke up. So I figured we'd hit everything faster together." Myles loads Hudson into the back of my car and buckles him in the car seat. He squeezes in next to him in the back seat while Annabeth cautiously slides into the passenger next to me.

I glance at Myles in the rearview mirror and then Annabeth. She gives me a tight smile before facing the window.

It's not much, but it's a start.

Our first stop is the post office. As we pull up, I notice flyers line the front window advertising the town's annual charity event every Fall. I smile to myself, knowing that it was myself and Myles who came up with the concept our junior year of high school. It was so successful that the town kept it going all these years.

Annabeth's face lights up as she climbs out of the car. I can't help but wonder what she's thinking.

"I love this event!" She squeals.

Myles chuckles to himself in the back seat.

"Scott, I know you grew up here, but do you know about this drive the town does every year?" Annabeth asks.

I've never seen her so excited and smiley. I've only ever endured her wrath, so this side of her is new and refreshing. Of course, it might crush her soul to hear that I invented it, so I play it cool.

"Sounds kind of familiar." I say, looking at Myles in the rearview mirror, who's suppressing further laughter.

"So every year, the town collects food, clothes, and household items that go to the nearby homeless shelter for families in need. It's so great—everyone pitches in. There are carts with autumn-themed food and drinks for people to buy, proceeds go to the shelter, there's even live music and a bonfire. Seeing the togetherness of it all is so... inspiring."

"That's pretty awesome." I say while getting out of the car, helping Myles take Hudson out of his car seat. "That's one perk of small-town life. You see everyone coming together. Not like New York."

"Yeah, I get it. I came from a big city, too. It's one of the reasons I wanted to move to a smaller town in the first place."

I look at her as she stares off into the nearby park. She quickly notices her shields are down, so she clears her throat and attempts to help Myles juggle the baby and the diaper bag.

"No, no. I've got him. I'll just be a sec. You guys hang out here." Myles nudges me, nodding toward Annabeth.

I shrug, not wanting to poke the bear. We both smile awkwardly and stare at our feet.

“I love New York,” I start. “But there’s so much I miss about living in Camden. Mostly my friends, my family, the tight-knit community. In New York, you’re pretty much on your own.”

“I hear you. It can be lonely in the city. It can be lonely out here too, but the air is different. People care, even if they haven’t known you that long.” Annabeth looks up at me. “Like Myles folks, Kate and Martin...”

There’s more to her story than I realized. I want to pry, but I don’t. So, instead, I change the subject. “Want to see my favorite place in town?”

She nods cautiously and looks back at the post office.

“Myles will be fine. He knows where to find me.” I grab her hand, cold from the autumn chill, and lead her across the street. For once, she doesn’t resist me.

With my free hand, I text Myles: *library*.

He sends a thumbs up and a heart emoji. Prick probably planned it this way.

The library is where I spent a lot of time as a kid and later as a teenager learning about the business I work in now. Despite living in the big city, this library is still one of my favorite places on earth.

The warmth immediately thaws us as we enter. It’s not much, a typical small-town library with tight rows of shelves. But the dust seems thicker, and the shelves seem emptier. It breaks my heart to see what was once my kingdom as nothing more than a dimly lit collection of outdated encyclopedias. And yet still, the musty smell of old books hits me hard, and I take a long, deep breath.

“Nothing quite like it, is there?” Annabeth says. I look over to see her inhaling too, only with her eyes closed.

“Agreed.” I smile at her, and she smiles back, sincerely this time.

We wander through the stacks before I walk up to the front desk to speak with the librarian. I'm happy to see Barbara, who's worked here since I was a small boy.

"Miss Barbara! Long time no see. I was hoping to run into you today. There's something I would like to do for you guys."

"Scott! It has been far too long. What can I help you with?"

"It's more a question of what can *I* help *you* with. I know the library doesn't have a lot of financial resources, but I would like to change that."

I peer around me to make sure Annabeth is out of earshot and hand Barbara an envelope. Enclosed is a check with a large sum that should help get my safe haven back on its feet.

She opens the envelope, and her eyes fill with tears. "Scott, this is too generous. I cannot accept this."

Miss Barbara attempts to hand me back the check, but I wrap her hands around it.

"I've been meaning to do this for a while, and I should've come sooner. Use this to update your collection and purchase some computers. This library, and you, raised me. The kids in this town deserve the best. No exceptions. Understood?"

Miss Barbara nods and dabs her eyes with a handkerchief. She rounds the desk and throws her arms around me, squeezing me tight.

I hug her back, knowing that this is the least I could do after everything she's done for me growing up.

"I'll take that as a yes," I whisper.

She nods into my shoulder, pulls back, and tries to compose herself.

"Making the locals cry already, Scott?" Annabeth walks up behind me.

"No, just catching up." Miss Barbara says, sniffing. "Your boyfriend is a very generous man, Annabeth."

Annabeth's eyebrow furrows. I know full well she's about to correct her, so I grab her by the elbow and walk her toward the

door.

“We should be getting back. Don’t spend it all in one place, Miss Barbara.”

“Thank you, Scott. I just—” Barbara chokes up again as she waves us out.

“Did you just give her money?” Annabeth whispers, not as quietly as she thinks.

“Yeah. Why?” I avoid her gaze.

I don’t hear Annabeth’s steps following me, so I turn around to coax her along. She’s smiling at me again. Only this smile feels different. Admiration? Affection? I suppose she realizes that I’m not as bad as she thinks. But I didn’t do this for her. I did this for the kids. They deserve all of the resources that I didn’t always have.

“Quite the philanthropist.” She breezes past me and strolls back to the car where Myles and Hudson are waiting. As I trail behind, Myles raises his eyebrows at me, and I roll my eyes.

Philanthropist. I like the sound of that.

Chapter 6:

Cabin Adventure

As the annual charity drive fast approaches, I'm more and more distracted by getting to know Annabeth. Some days she's cold and distant. Other days she teases and throws more gentle daggers my way. But more often than not, our interactions are more like our day at the library. Awkward but sweet. She opens up from time to time, and for the briefest moments, I see what Myles sees: A force to be reckoned with, but if she's on your team, she's your biggest supporter. Sure, that's probably the tamest description I can come up with, but since I still don't really trust her, I'm trying to keep her more alluring qualities out of my mind.

The other morning, she came over to Myles' house for breakfast. She had clearly just rolled out of bed, her hair messily piled on top of her head, track pants with the word Tough plastered on her ass, and an oversized sweatshirt with a UCLA Berkeley logo on it.

Her carefree demeanor was refreshing to watch as she helped Kate bring food to the table, but it brought yet another unwelcome thought: I could see myself with her. I could fall for her.

I hate when Myles is right.

I too have been becoming a bit more comfortable around her. I sat at the table in flannel pants and a T-Shirt, messy bedhead and all, without worrying about her taking a jab at me. As I sipped my coffee, I spotted Annabeth eyeing me, from my bare feet to my blue eyes as I peered at her over my coffee mug.

"D-do you want more?" She stuttered as she held up the coffee pot.

“No, thanks.” I answered, but she lingered for a moment before putting the coffee pot down.

We sat at the table with Myles’ family while Hudson slept in his bassinet between Myles and Kate. We discussed the upcoming drive, and Annabeth got very animated once again.

“I’m so glad they still run this thing since you left, Scottie!” Martin slaps me on the back. I choke on my coffee while Myles snaps his dad a look.

“What?” Annabeth asks, looking between Myles and me.

Myles clears his throat while I take a sip of orange juice. “The charity drive was cooked up by Scott and me when we were kids. A way to get out of homework, but it paid off. Well, it did for Scott. He kept it going long after our assignment.”

I kick Myles under the table, and he grimaces.

“Really?” Annabeth gives me a tight-lipped grin.

“Uh, yeah,” I start. “I didn’t mention it?”

“No. You must’ve forgotten,” Annabeth mutters and focuses on pushing her scrambled eggs around her plate.

The whole table is quiet. Kate gives me a sad smile while Martin looks at us, not knowing what the hell he said to cause the silence.

“Myles, why don’t you tell them about your little trip idea before the fundraiser?” Kate chimes in, trying to change the subject.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go now.” Myles looks at his mother. They share a few secretive looks while I turn to Annabeth, trying to imagine what’s reeling through her head.

“Nonsense! You had it all set up. It’ll be a nice break before the hustle and bustle.” Kate nods knowingly at Myles. I’m suspicious as to what Kate is implying with that nod.

“Alright, then. Pack a weekend bag, guys! We’re heading a few hours north to a cabin I rented. Unless anybody has an issue with that?” He looks between the two of us.

Neither one of us protests the idea. After all, we've been playing nice for Myles. Besides, it might actually be nice to blow off steam while I'm on vacation. So it shouldn't really matter whose company I have to endure. Even if Annabeth seems sour because she wasn't aware I started the charity drive.

"Perfect! Why don't you two head home and pack up? We'll leave in a couple of hours?" Myles smiles as he picks up Hudson and rocks him.

Annabeth and I nod at him and then each other. So, we finish up our coffees, say our goodbyes, and head for the door.

"You want a ride?" I ask, noticing she walked again.

"No, that's okay. We're going to be crammed in a car together for a few hours soon," she says casually but stops and turns to face me. "I didn't mean it like that. I just mean I'd prefer to stretch my legs before the long drive."

"Understood." I throw my hands up in defense. "See you shortly."

As I take the short drive to my parents' house, I can't decide if I prefer her constant insults or these weird bouts of silence. Either way, I'm determined to enjoy this weekend and not give Annabeth a second thought. Even if she's all I can think about.

Myles texts me to ask if we can take my car and if I can grab Annabeth. His dad is checking the van to see if it'll make the drive. I reluctantly agree, pack up my stuff, and head over to the address Myles sent me to where Annabeth rents a second-floor apartment in a low-rise apartment building just up the street from Myles. I didn't realize how close she lived as I never asked. I see her body sag as she realizes I'm the one picking her up, not Myles.

She tosses her bag in the trunk and climbs into the passenger seat. As she buckles herself in, her phone dings.

"It's Myles..." Annabeth's brow furrows.

"What'd he say?"

“He said Martin is still looking over the van and Myles is having a meltdown, and we should get a head start before it gets dark.”

“Oh,” I sigh, trying to hide my disappointment. “Did you want to wait for him?”

“No, it’s okay. We can go, I guess.” She sounds unsure and suspicious. She continues to text him, biting her lip. I wait for further instructions.

A final ding chimes, and she puts her phone away. “Let’s go. He texted me the address, so I’ll help navigate.”

“Do we need keys or anything?”

“He said there’s a code. He texted it to me.”

“Alright. Let’s hit the road?” I ask, still unsure myself.

She gives me another tight-lipped smile and nods.

I just agreed to spend several hours in a car with Annabeth. We’ve only been alone a handful of times, whenever Myles walked out of the room. This trip could go in several directions, considering our ever-changing track record for being able to stand each other.

“So, this should be fun.” She breaks the silence with what feels like sarcasm.

“We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.” I immediately say, hoping for a sane response.

She rolls her eyes and turns on the radio, picks a station, and I immediately change the channel.

“No country music in my car.” I say sternly.

She scoffs, unimpressed. After another few moments of silence, she exhales loudly and starts fiddling with the radio again, landing on an alternative rock station.

“I love this song.” We both speak at the same time.

“You like this song?” She says, sounding a little too surprised.

“I do. What, I can’t like The Strokes?” I say, turning the volume down slightly.

“No, you can. You just seem a little too straight edge to like that kind of stuff.” She says matter of factly.

“Well, I like all kinds of things,” I defend.

“Like what?”

I think for a moment, then remember the small T-Rex skeleton on her forearm, a logo that I recognized the first time she put her hands on her hips.

“Jurassic Park.”

“Really?!” She squeals. “Oh my God, I’m obsessed.”

“Clearly,” I gesture to her arm resting on the center console.

“Oh, this? Yeah, this was one of my first ones. I grew up watching those movies over and over. How terrible are the reboots, am I right?”

“Oh, they’re awful, for sure.”

We go back and forth, discussing our favorite scenes and our love for the original film above all others. She ends up telling me some facts I didn’t know about the series, a true Jurassic nerd gushing about behind-the-scenes anecdotes. When I can, I glance at her, and she seems relaxed. Not at all bothered by the fact that she’s stuck with me for a few hours.

“What other movies do you like?” She asks.

“I like disaster movies.”

“Me too!” And thus begins another heated discussion, mostly about volcano movies versus end-of-the-world movies. We both agree that volcano movies seem more believable, minus the one volcano movie that destroyed our souls, simply titled *Volcano*.

I’m surprised how quickly our drive passes and how much we have in common. Other than movies, we have similar taste in music, but not books. Annabeth admitted to enjoying those chick-lit books while I enjoy non-fiction. She laughed when I said I like business books, clearly not surprised given my role in finance.

We stop at a liquor store halfway to the cabin as well as a market to get some things to eat for the weekend. As I fill our small cart with a few essentials, Annabeth turns the corner with her arms filled with my junk food.

“That’s not coming with us.” I stop her.

“Oh, come on. I’m not eating rabbit food the whole weekend.” She gestures to the cart, unimpressed with my choices.

“They’re called veggies. You should try them sometime.” I say as she rips open a bag of marshmallows and eats one.

“No, they’re called carrots, and they’re the bane of my existence. Put them back.”

“I happen to like carrots.”

“Fine, you can eat them. As long as I can buy these.” She lifts her arms and plops her goodies into my cart. I sigh and nod as she trots toward the cash register.

Overall, as I peel each new layer of Annabeth back, I’m noticing more and more that the icy exterior might just melt.

“We’re here,” I say as I pull up a gravel driveway just as the sun is setting.

“Finally.” She jumps out of the car before I’ve even parked.

We both walk toward the cabin and stop. Cabin is an understatement. The height of the log columns and the sheer size of the wrap-around porch made both of our jaws drop. As we key in the code and open the double doors, the amazement continues. The lower level is an open concept, with the living room, dining room, and kitchen flowing together. Windows line the back wall of the cabin, with a brilliant view of a river surrounded by trees. A hot tub and the biggest barbecue station I’ve ever seen sit on the deck behind the cabin. Finally, I turn to see a staircase in the corner leading up to a loft-style den, with various closed doors in both directions. I assume some are bedrooms, and some are bathrooms.

I head into the fully loaded kitchen and admire the granite countertops. Annabeth crosses into the living room and plops

down on one of the two leather sofas. She grabs a remote from the coffee table and presses a button. The cabinet across from her glides open, revealing a television.

“Can we live here?” She chuckles.

“We?” I blurt out, instantly regretting it.

Her smile fades. She stands and heads back out the door to the car. I mentally kick myself and follow her.

We quickly unload the car, fill the fridge, and venture upstairs to claim our bedrooms. We both call dibs on the room facing the river, but I’m too tired to face off again.

“You take it.” I sigh.

“No, you drove. You take it.” I’m surprised by her response.

“I insist. It’s fine,” I step into the room across the hall from her. “See? This room’s nice. And it’s close enough for you to continue throwing insults at me.”

“Insults?!” She screeches.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Harassment may be a better word.” I lean against the door frame. She mimics my stance in her doorway, and we stare at each other. Slowly, her face softens, as does mine. She looks like she’s about to say something, but decides against it and clears her throat.

“Want to text Myles and see where he’s at?” I ask.

“Sure.” She pats her pockets and realizes her phone is in the car. As she rushes out to the car, I decide to call Myles instead.

“Hey man, what’s your ETA?” I say as I head downstairs.

“Aw man, I don’t think I’m going to make it!” He says, not sounding at all disappointed.

“You planned this, didn’t you?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“Did it really take you this long to figure it out?”

“Fuck, no. I knew it when you texted Annabeth.”

“Then why did you still go?” He asks.

I fall silent.

“That’s what I thought. Have fun, bro. Let me know how it goes.”

He hangs up. I’m cursing him loudly when Annabeth closes the front door, looking alarmed.

“Myles isn’t coming.” I announce.

“What do you mean?”

“He played us. He was never coming.”

“What the hell is this? The Parent Trap?”

I laugh. “Looks that way.”

“I’ll kill him when we get back,” she murmurs as she types something into her phone.

“So... we’re staying then?”

“Oh. I mean, sure, if you want to...” She asks, looking a bit more hopeful than I thought she would.

“Well, I’m not driving back tonight.” I say as I move toward the fridge and open it, grabbing two cold beers and offering one to Annabeth.

“Okay. We’re staying.” Annabeth accepts the beer and clinks her bottle against mine. We both take a sip and stand silently at the kitchen island. Of course, my first thought is to ask her why she would want to stay with someone she apparently despises so much.

Unless she doesn’t hate me, then I’m in more trouble than I thought.

Chapter 7:

Sparks Fly

Our first hour at the cabin is awkward and quiet. We explore the rest of the rooms upstairs and find two more bedrooms and a master bathroom. The den has a small table with two chairs and a cabinet filled with board games. We play a quick game of checkers. Well, I play while Annabeth absentmindedly scrolls through her phone between moves. Her lack of attention frustrates me even more when she wins.

Needing to do something other than sit in silence, I offer to make dinner and head down the stairs to the kitchen.

“You cook?” She asks after finishing her second beer. The surprise in her voice annoys me because she’d know this if she even bothered to get to know me rather than rag on me to no end.

“Sometimes. Why would you rather cook?” I snap a little too hard.

She bucks back a little, throwing her hands up like she’s a hostage.

“No. But can I help?” She asks innocently, a few tendrils of hair falling in front of her face.

Her cheeks are red from the beer, and she’s blinking at me expectantly. Yet, even when she’s infuriating, all I seem to want to do is brush those strands behind her ear and caress her cheek. And other things.

I pull out some vegetables, a cutting board, and a knife, placing them on the other side of the island for her. I push my dirty thoughts aside and turn toward the stove, far away from temptation. Before she starts chopping, she moves behind me to reach the fridge, grabbing us each another beer. She pops

the cap off and hops up onto the counter to sit next to me. She holds out the bottle, waiting for me to take it, watching me as she takes a slow swig from her own bottle, watching her throat as she swallows.

I reach for it, and our fingers brush against each other. I quickly turn to place the beer on the kitchen island and focus on the chicken breasts frying on the stove, dissolving any heat between us.

“You don’t like me much, do you?” She asks, swinging her open legs back and forth and kicking the cabinet beneath her.

“What gave you that idea?” I ask, glancing at her tight pants flexing as she moves.

“Well, sometimes it feels like you flirt with me, but other times you avoid talking to me. You often ask questions instead of answering my questions.”

“I answered your questions in the car.”

She sighs.

“You don’t look me in the eye?” She leans toward me, trying to meet my gaze.

I finally look up at her glowing green eyes as they flicker to the sound of the chicken sizzling on the stove.

“That’s better.” she grins mischievously. “Well?”

“Sure, you’re fine.” I finally say as monotone as I possibly can. Her lips part as if she’s going to ask again, but she licks her lips and turns away, taking another sip of beer.

“Forget I asked.” She states in the defensive and distant tone that I’m more familiar with.

I step in front of her just as she’s about to hop off the counter, standing between her legs. I lean my hands on the counter, boxing her in.

“You’re better than fine,” I confess, not being able to contain myself. “You’re a pain in my ass, too.”

Her bellowing laughter sends a heatwave down to my parts. I could listen to her laugh for the rest of my life.

As I lick my lips, I find myself wondering what she tastes like and what other sounds come out of that beautiful mouth. She notices I'm looking at her lips and licks hers as well, leaning back to put her beer down.

"This makes no sense," I whisper.

"Maybe that's the best part." She whispers back while gently caressing my hand that's next to her thigh. I'm about to kiss her when she slides off the counter and stands tightly between me and the counter.

"Let's get in the hot tub." She announces while looking me up and down.

I try to swallow, but my throat feels dry, like eating a handful of sand. I take a sip of her beer as she watches me, waiting for my answer.

"I didn't bring a swimsuit."

"I don't think you'll need one." She turns off the stove, takes my hand, and leads me outside.

The evening air is crisper up here, the autumn chill clearly taking over. Annabeth flips a switch, and the hot tub illuminates, a gentle fog resting on top of the water that's now gently bubbling. She moves to face me and begins to undress without taking her eyes off me, clearly wanting to see my reaction as she removes her shirt.

I let out a long sigh as body pimples in the breeze, but she seems unphased by the cold, her eyes still fixed on me.

She shimmies out of her jeans and stands in front of me in a pair of black lace panties, letting me take in every inch of her. Other than the colorful sleeve on her arm, the only other tattoo she has is a small butterfly tattoo on her hip bone. I want to run my fingers over it and other parts of her, but wait for her to step out of her panties and watch her perfectly toned ass as she slides into the warm water.

"Care to join me?" She gestures, snapping me back to reality.

I nod and slide my T-Shirt off in one swoop. Annabeth watches me intently as I unbuckle my jeans, stepping out of

them and my boxers, kicking them to the side. She's motionless as the bubbles dance around her as she stares. I enter the hot tub slowly and watch as her chest heaves, her breath quickening.

I sit across from her, not wanting to make her uncomfortable. She disagrees because she pouts and crosses the hot tub without a second thought.

Standing in front of me, I pull her into my lap and cup her face. She licks her lips, clutching my wrists as she leans into me. Her soft lips finally meet mine, and I slip my tongue into her mouth. She kisses me back, slowly but with an intensity, which I wasn't expecting. Her hands are in my hair as I press our bodies together, wrapping my arms tightly around her back.

A small gasp escapes as her legs tighten on my lap. I want to feel her, touch her, but not in the water. I lift her by her thighs, and she yelps as we stand. I carry her back inside and lower her butt onto the dining room table, the closest surface as we enter the house. Our lips never break from one another.

I pull away, kissing and licking her dripping neck and chest, all the way down to her hips as she pants. She shivers and pulls me back up to her, running her nails down my chest once we're face to face. She pulls my neck into a deep, passionate kiss. I lift her again, this time to the couch where it's warmer. I lower her and lie on top of her, pulling a blanket over us.

Our kissing becomes more urgent. I groan as she wraps her legs around me. She lifts her pelvis, begging me to get started. She moves back and forth so quickly, but I want to savor her because I'm not done with her yet. I try to kiss her neck, arms, lowering myself to her stomach when she grabs me again, this time with an impatient moan. I grab her wrists and pin them above her head, pressing my body weight onto her to tell her to slow down.

We both stop for a moment. I kiss her gently as she wiggles against me, telling me to move. Now. I slowly enter, and we both exhale in relief. I watch her closely as I move above her,

faster and faster, her eyes squeezed closed while she bites her lip.

“I want to see you.” I whisper in her ear.

She nods and barely utters, “Okay.”

She begins to shake uncontrollably, and her eyes pop open as the heat of finishing rolls over her, and she cries out my name. The sight of her is incredible, and before I know it, I’m grunting and panting, thrusting my entire body into her as I finish.

I kiss her again, deep but sluggish. I feel her shudder against me, so I pull myself up and cross the room to grab another blanket from the opposite couch. I turn around, startled to see that she’s followed me.

I offer her the blanket, but she tosses it aside and leads me up to her bedroom, still dripping from the hot tub. She lifts the blankets and slides in between the sheets, pulling me in with her.

She wraps her limbs around me, kissing me and touching me. Then, just when I think I’m done, I feel myself growing ready under her fingers. I move on top of her again, entering right away this time, but moving slower and kissing her gently. We both pant and sway, toppling over the edge again, this time together.

As I drop down next to her, out of breath and sweating, she giggles.

“What?” I lean over, tracing my finger across one of her tattoos.

“I just think it’s funny that this is the most time we’ve spent together without bickering.” She props herself up on her elbow and throws her leg over my waist.

“Well, I had to do something to get you to shut up.” I say as I graze her leg up and down.

She slaps my arm, feigning insult.

“I was flirting with you! It was foreplay,” she defends.

“You gotta get a new dictionary.” I say. She shakes her head and kisses me again.

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” She whispers into my mouth, gently tugging on my bottom lip with her teeth.

“More than you know,” I whisper back.

Annabeth turns around and presses her back into my chest as I wrap my arms around her. Within minutes, her breathing has slowed, and I can tell she’s asleep. I breathe her in as I tighten my grip around her and close my eyes, drifting away with her taste still on my lips. Finally, holding her feels like a taste of what I hope is never-ending bliss.

Chapter 8:

The Next Morning

I wake in Annabeth's bed, naked and alone.

As I sit up, the previous night flashes through my mind. Images of our limbs intertwining and Annabeth's beautiful face contorted with pleasure floods my thoughts. I'm instantly exhilarated.

All this time, Annabeth thought she was flirting, while I thought she hated me. Typical of me to expect a woman to be instantly charmed by my smile and status. I'm so used to women wanting me or wanting something from me. It wasn't until last night that I realized how exhausted I was from doing what others wanted instead of reaching for what I actually wanted—craved, in fact.

I look around the room for something to wear, then remember my room is across the hall. I tiptoe to my bag, find a pair of sweatpants, and slip them on. As I inch down the stairs, I hear Annabeth humming while the smell of bacon wafts toward me from the dining room table.

As I approach her from behind, I notice she's wearing that baggy UCLA Berkeley sweatshirt... and nothing else. The shirt reaches just below her butt, her cheeks peeking through as she reaches for a mug on a high shelf. Lord help me, she is stunning.

She jumps as I wrap my arms around her and inhale her neck. She turns around and runs her hands through my bedhead.

"Morning, gorgeous." She says.

"Morning." I kiss her, bending her back and lifting her thigh. She pushes me away and shakes her finger.

“Not fair.” I gesture to her outfit and lean back on the kitchen island.

“I could say the same thing.” She points at my pants, my sculpted hip bones stretching out over the waistband.

She winks at me and turns back to the scrambled eggs on the stove.

“But I’m hungry.” I whine.

“Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Not for breakfast,” I whisper in her ear as I approach her again.

She tries to turn around again, but I don’t let her. Instead, I spin her, pressing our bodies onto the kitchen island. I reach under her sweatshirt and gently rub her between her thighs. She exhales loudly, still trying to face me, but I have her pinned between me and the counter.

“Well, if you’re really that hungry...” she trails off and reaches behind her and into my pants, stroking me. I growl loudly, and before I know it, I’ve spread her legs, bent her over, and slipped inside her. She gasps every time I thrust, and we both finish so quickly that I collapse on top of her, both of us lazily lying face down on the cold granite countertop.

“Okay, Scott. If we’re going to keep this up, I’m going to need to refuel.” She props herself upward and shoos me away as she turns back to her eggs. “They’re burnt.”

“No, they’re just well done.” I say, looking over her shoulder at the once golden eggs, now brown. “They look great. Let’s eat!”

But before I can move, Annabeth turns around, wraps her arms around me, and buries her face in my chest, breathing me in. A gesture that feels so natural, as if she belongs here, with me. I don’t know where we go from here, but I don’t want to go back to what we were. However, I don’t want to scare her by saying that to her. So I wrap my arms around her and squeeze her.

Without saying a word, we both let go, and I help her set the rest of the table as if we've done this a million times together. But something crosses my mind: I don't know a lot about the beautiful woman in front of me. I know she works at the Sea Dog, she was friends with Jess, but is now close with my best friend, and that she comes from a big city.

As I watch her from across the table, staring out the window while taking bites of bacon and overcooked egg, I realize I want to know everything about her. But also, more than anything, I want something I've never wanted before.

I want her to know me.

But my resolve fades as I notice her expression isn't as happy as I'd hoped. Instead, she looks like she is processing or maybe regretting.

"You okay?" I ask cautiously.

She blinks at me, startled by my question, "Yeah. I'm just thinking."

"Okay. Care to elaborate?" I wipe my mouth with a napkin and lean back in my chair. She hesitates. I'm not sure what she's thinking about, so I pry further. "Do you want to talk about last night?"

"Do you mean last night... and this morning?" She finally meets my eyes and crosses her arms.

I'm so used to this stance of hers that I can imagine her walls slowly climbing up as her wrists lock in place at the crooks of her elbows. I don't know what I've done to bring this side out of her yet again, but I'm tired of playing this game.

"Of course, I do. If you want to," I say.

"C'mon, Scott. Don't act like I started this and that all of it is my decision." She snaps right away.

"I'm not! I'm only saying we can talk about it if you want to. I don't need to." It's a fact. I don't need to discuss this unless she needs to.

"You don't need to?" She starts. "Oh, I see. So this was a normal weekend for you. I should've known."

I can't stop my eyes from popping out of my head. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, c'mon. Belt? Notch?" She points to herself. "Me?"

It dawns on me: Annabeth thinks I sleep around. She actually thinks I do this regularly, gallivanting around town, picking up women to seduce and fuck. I want to yell at her, pack up my bag, and leave her here for still being a colossal bitch. Even after everything that happened last night.

But something comes over me. So instead, I calmly stand up, round the dining room table, and kneel next to Annabeth. "I... never do this."

A tear rolls down her cheek. She quickly wipes it and turns away, probably hoping I didn't see it.

"Annabeth. I have never done this. Hell, I've barely done anything that we've just... done. But I have to admit..." I take a deep breath. "That I don't want to do this with anyone else. Ever."

I slide her chair back and turn it toward me. When she finally meets my stare, tears stream down her cheeks. Only this time, it's coupled with a wholehearted smile.

"I'm sorry," she says, wiping her cheeks aggressively. "I don't know what to think in situations like this. I really thought you hated me and wanted to... I don't know... hate fuck."

"Is that what it felt like?" I grab her hand, coaxing her to stand.

She shakes her head. I pull her into another hug, and we stay there, swaying. I don't know what kind of past she must have to make her so guarded. Not only did she push me away since the day we first met, but second-guessing my intentions when we haven't even discussed it is a whole other set of baggage I wasn't expecting. Annabeth has a depth to her that I would never have imagined. And strangely enough, I'm already in deep. And it doesn't scare me.

"Do you regret it?" I ask as I sniff her hair.

"What?"

“Last night. This morning.” I squeeze her tighter. “This.”

“No.” She looks at me. “I wished for this.”

Chapter 9:

21 Questions

Myles was right. Annabeth is amazing, and I make a mental note to tell him that when we get back.

The rest of the day feels like we're just meeting for the first time. Sparks fly faster, flirting feels more uncomplicated, and Annabeth feels warm and unguarded. We shower together (getting dirty versus clean), clean up the kitchen together, and watch TV together. Everything is done together, and I can't get enough of her.

But something is still nagging me in the back of my mind. I barely know Annabeth, and I want to use the rest of our alone time to get to know her.

"Let's play a game," I say as she grates cheese for the dinner I'm finally making. We had to toss the underdone, abandoned chicken from last night. I grabbed pasta at the market, so we decided to make mac and cheese together.

"I'm not falling for that again." She jokes and pretends to run away from the kitchen before coming back. "What did you have in mind?"

I pour the noodles into the boiling pot and turn to face her at the island, leaning over to steal some cheese. "Twenty questions."

She looks at me, puzzled. "Really?"

"Well, okay, not 20 questions. But maybe let's ask each other questions so we can get to know each other better. Yes?"

"Ah, so like, 21 questions?"

"Sure, why not." I shake my head, adoring the woman standing in front of me. "But your questions can only be one-

word questions. But you have to give a detailed answer. Deal?”

She finishes grating and licks her thumb, thinking about it. “Deal.”

“I’ll start. Question 1: Berkeley?”

“Oh, my sweatshirt?” She asks as she slides the full bowl of cheddar to me. She hops up onto the island and crosses her legs. “Yes, I went to UCLA Berkeley. I dropped out, but always kept the sweatshirt. Reminds me of a difficult time that I overcame.”

“Is that where you’re from? LA?” I sprinkle the cheese into a separate pot that’s bubbling with milky sauce.

“No. But that’s another question, Mr. Galloway.” She teases. “My turn. Question 1: billionaire?”

“Again with the money!” I turn, and she squeals as I tickle her knee. “No. More like a multi-millionaire. My partners and I practically built the company from the ground up. Most of the time, I have more money than I know what to do with, so I donate most of it.”

“Most of it?”

“Okay, okay, a good chunk of it. But hey, that’s another question.” I shake my whisk at her before dipping it into the cheesy liquid, “Question 2: LA?”

“Nope. San Francisco. Berkeley felt far enough away from home without losing touch. Turns out it actually wasn’t far enough.” She eats a few stray pieces of cheese off of the counter and reaches for a bag of chips. “Okay, my turn.”

We go back and forth like this all through dinner and cleaning dishes. Turns out, Annabeth moved from San Francisco to Santa Monica when she was twelve after her mother left an abusive relationship. She didn’t have any siblings and felt stuck with her mother, watching toxic relationships eat her mom alive, one after another. Annabeth never mentions father.

She moved to Berkeley, hoping to get away from her mom and enjoy her freedom. Jess was her roommate freshman year at

UCLA Berkeley. They both grew up in bigger cities, but dreamed of a quiet life in the country. After reading books and watching movies featuring the beautiful east coast seasons, Jess and Annabeth decided to take a road trip during the summer of their junior year. They fell in love with Maine, specifically Camden, and both dropped out of UCLA Berkeley before the fall semester even started.

Then Annabeth asks me about my upbringing, which is pretty tame compared to hers. I tell her how my parents didn't have a lot of money growing up, so I spent a lot of my time at the library, daydreaming about the life I could have, and of course, the life I could one day give them.

"So, wait a second. You own your parents' house?!" She shouts while stretching her legs across me on the couch. I sit on the opposite side, feet propped up on the coffee table. We're snuggled under a blanket while the fireplace crackles in the corner.

"Hey, it's not your turn," I tickle her feet, "But yes. I bought it for them after my first year in New York. My grandmother left it to them, but they couldn't afford it with bills piling up, and they almost had to move. So I bought it."

"Wow, that's generous."

"I'm glad you think so. Okay, question 20: Bartending? You could do so much more."

"I know," she whines, sipping her glass of red wine. "I took Film Studies, but never saw anything coming of it after dropping out. I know what I'd like to do, but..."

"What would you like to do?" I ask, stroking her leg under the blanket.

"Photography." She says, embarrassed. "It's stupid."

"It's not stupid!"

"Everyone with a half-decent phone is a photographer now. I couldn't do it."

"That's in the big city. In Camden, you have the community behind you." I whip out my phone and start to search for half-

decent photographers in Camden and the surrounding area. “Look, there’s no real competition out here, and I’m sure that you could promote a budding business like this at a whole bunch of town events.”

“It’s alright, really. I like the Sea Dog. It’s working for me, for now.” She stares into the fire. “I just never thought I’d be here, alone.”

She’s talking about Jess. She told me they planned to take the year off to breathe and experience life. But then, Jess met Myles and didn’t want to leave. But Myles left for a tour, and shortly after, Jess found out she was pregnant. And Annabeth being the type of selfless person she is, she stayed with Jess through all of it. I can see the hurt rippling over her face.

“She never messages me, you know?” She sniffles. “After all that I did for her, she left, and she’s only been messaging Myles since. I don’t know what I could’ve done.”

“Hey,” I say softly and pull her closer, brushing her hair from her tear-soaked cheeks. “You couldn’t have done anything. Hell, you did everything! I’m so sorry she left you. But can I ask, wouldn’t it be worse if she was sending you the same fucked up messages she’s sending Myles?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. But, at least it would show me that she actually cared about me once. The silence is worse, like I was just along for the ride, picking her up every time she fell down.”

“Well, if she’s that clumsy, maybe it’s good she stumbled out of your life. Maybe she’ll realize that the support you gave her was unlike anything else.” I sigh as she rests her head on my chest. I stretch out on the couch and pull Annabeth on top of me, wrapping my arms around her.

“Not likely. I checked her social media recently. She’s back in California, engaged to her high school boyfriend.”

“What!” I shout, popping up and startling her.

“Don’t tell Myles!” Annabeth points at me, then settles us back onto my chest. “It would destroy him.”

“Fuckin’ bitch.” I grumble.

“Whatever, her loss, I guess. Okay, my turn. Question 20: Girlfriends?”

I can't help but laugh at her quick change of topics. “Nonexistent.”

“I find that hard to believe,” her head wobbles.

“I mean, I've dated. But nothing serious.”

“How come?” She probes.

“Too busy, I guess. It's not like there weren't any potentials. Just nothing ever really clicked. Some women would throw themselves at me, give me everything I could want, and we'd be attached at the hip for a few weeks or months. But the excitement would fade, and I'd want to move on.”

“Mr. Galloway will see you now...” Annabeth giggles to herself.

“I'm not explaining this right...”

Annabeth rests her chin on my chest, staring deep into my eyes. “Those women didn't challenge you. They didn't make things interesting.”

“That, and I think they wanted me to be something I'm not. A cold, rich man, who's work-obsessed, but can be fixed by the woman who wanders into my life.”

“Ah. That old cliché.”

“Correct.” I pause, taking a deep breath of Annabeth. “Question 21. Father.”

“I knew that was coming. I never met him.” She sits up, reaching for her wine, tossing the last of it back. “But I saw him. Once.”

I sit up, facing Annabeth as I cross my legs. “And?”

“Well, I knew his name, so Jess found him on social media. He turned out to be the CEO of this big accounting firm in the heart of San Francisco. We staked out his office building for three days before we caught a glimpse of him leaving one afternoon. He looked professional, carrying a briefcase, texting while hustling out of the lobby. I was walking across

the street from the coffee shop we were camping out at. But I stopped at the crosswalk when I saw his face melt from stern to smiling as a little girl ran up to him. He dropped everything and scooped her up, kissing her all over. A woman came jogging up behind her, and he wrapped her into the hug. He was happy. He had a family. Naturally, I freaked. I called my mom on our drive home, and she told me I was stupid for looking for him, that he wanted nothing to do with me then and probably nothing to do with me now. She's probably right."

I sit and listen intently as she tells me this, grabbing her hand when she gets angry and pulling her close when she cries. I feel guilty for all the time I spent hating her without realizing she was in this much pain.

"When was this?" I finally ask.

"Before we left for our road trip. It was Jess' idea."

I think on this for a minute, processing all that she's told me this evening. "Well, maybe walking up to him on the street wasn't the best approach. Maybe you could write him a letter?"

"I did." She gets up and walks over to the front hall, reaching into her purse for a crinkled, sealed envelope. "I almost mailed it that day at the post office." She sits on my lap.

"Why don't you send it?"

She snuffles again. "What if my mom's right? What if I send it and he tells me he doesn't want me. Or worse, what if he doesn't respond."

"So what? That's his loss, too."

She lets out a small scoff. "Seems like I'm losing a lot of people these days."

I slide her onto the couch. "Well, I'm not one of them." I reach for her hand, and she takes it. I guide her to the door.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a mailbox at the end of the road." I slip on my shoes and jacket and turn to her.

Panic washes over her face. “But it’s dark outside! We’ll get lost.”

I turn my phone’s flashlight on. “I’ll light the way. We’ll find our way back.”

She slips into her shoes and wraps herself in the blanket from the couch, staring up at me as I hold the door open for her. “After everything, I already feel like I’m finding my way back.”

As we wander down the damp gravel, we hold hands, the smell of wet earth coming to life in the blackness. It doesn’t take us long to find the end of the road with the mailbox sitting at the corner. I illuminate the slot and squeeze her hand as she clutches the envelope.

“You can do this. And if you don’t hear from him, then at least he knows you’re out here, thinking about him.”

Annabeth exhales, slides the envelope in the slot, and lets go. I cup her cheeks and kiss her, letting her cry into my lips. I hold her as she sobs into my shirt, and we sway in the darkness.

When the tears stop, she wipes her face and takes a deep breath. We walk back to the cabin without my phone, the dim lights from the kitchen guiding us back as we round the corner.

“Question 21,” she starts.

“We don’t have to play anymore,” I say.

“It’s the last one, cheater.” She nudges me.

“Okay, shoot.”

She pauses in the driveway. “Love?”

I was kind of expecting this, but not at this moment. Not only do I not want to say it because Annabeth’s asking, but I also don’t want to scare her. I knew it when I grabbed her wrist at the bar, but kept telling myself I was delusional. I knew it when she strolled down the driveway the following morning, flicking her hair in the autumn breeze after telling me to get my head out of my ass. I knew it when she stared over her coffee mug at me the morning before we left. I knew it when she kissed me. Part of me still wants to kick my own ass for

thinking I'm falling for her. But it's too late. I've already fallen.

"Yes," I finally say with an exhale.

"Are you just saying that because if you are—"

"No, I'm not. I do. I love you." I wrap my arms around her waist. "Do you?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Galloway, you're all out of questions for the day. Check again in the morning." She giggles.

"No, I mean it. Do you?"

She runs her fingers through my hair and leans into me. "I've loved you since you backed into me with your car."

Chapter 10:

The Truth Comes Out

“Let me get this straight,” I say as I spoon a naked Annabeth. “You *knew* I was Myles’ friend that night?”

She snorts, realizing she didn’t tell me this the night before. “You gave me your card, idiot. I recognized your name because Myles hadn’t shut up about you from the moment you told him you were coming. He even pulled out his yearbooks! Your face was already burned on my brain.”

“I feel so betrayed,” I say, raising my hand to my forehead and sighing dramatically. “I feel set up!”

“Yeah, me too,” She rolls over to face me and throws her leg over my waist, which she’s come to do often. She traces her fingers along my chest. “I think he talked about you so much because he was hoping we’d get together.”

“No shit. Myles has been pulling this crap since we were kids.”

“Oh, really. He normally rents secluded cabins for you to have sexy times in?” A coy grin spreads across her face. I bark at her like a dog and climb on top of her, pretending to devour her neck. She squeals with delight and shoves me away.

“We should mess with him.” She declares, sitting upright.

“How?” I rub her back, coaxing her to lie back down, and she moans. But, instead, she rolls me over and straddles me. A sight I will never get sick of.

“We should pretend we had a terrible time and hate each other even more!” She leans over me, balancing on her fists. “It’s perfect.”

I squeeze her butt, growing impatient. “Can we talk about this after?”

She buries me in a kiss and pulls the blanket over us, gasping as my body begins to move beneath her.

We plot our revenge while packing up the car. Luckily, neither of us texted him while we were gone, so he really has no clue how the trip went. We decided it wouldn't make sense that we both stayed at the cabin, so we stop at a cute inn for lunch on our drive home. I grab a brochure, and Annabeth flirts with the front desk clerk while I swipe a welcome packet. We strategically place it poking out of my gym bag, ensuring that he'll see it and assume I left Annabeth at the cabin and went to sleep somewhere else. She's giggling demonically, but it's the most adorable giddiness I've seen from her since our conversations last night.

Part of me still can't believe how many people have abused this beautiful creature sitting next to me. I can't imagine what it was like growing up with such an unstable mother, let alone a nonexistent father.

Of course, she doesn't let many people in. Because when she does, it's people like Jess who end up using her all over again. The thought of it infuriates me, and I feel this overwhelming need to protect her. Forever.

“You okay?” Annabeth asks, bringing me back to the road in front of me as I pass the *Welcome to Camden* sign.

“Yeah, sorry.” I say, my knuckles white around the steering wheel. I wipe my sweaty palm on my pants and reach for Annabeth's hand, pulling it into my lap as I drive.

“Something on your mind?” She tries to meet my eyes.

“It's nothing, just a long drive.” I change the subject. “Okay, we clear on our roles?”

“Yes,” and her blissful smile fades as she furrows her brow.

“Perfect. There's the face I know and love.” I say.

“Shut up, or you’ll make me laugh!” She slaps my arm as I pull into Myles’ driveway. He comes out of the house holding Hudson.

Annabeth storms out first, huffing around to the back of the car as I pop the trunk. I stroll up the steps to him, sighing and faking exhaustion.

“You okay, buddy?” His grin instantly disappears into a look of concern.

“You really did it this time, man.” I gently slap his back and reach for Hudson. Myles hands Hudson to me, and he jogs toward Annabeth.

“What happened!” He asks with alarm.

“You’re an idiot, that’s what happened. Did you really think that was going to work?” Annabeth barks, all attitude, no laughter.

Myles stops, glancing between Annabeth and me. “I’m so sorry, I th-thought... I just—”

I crack first, a small snort slipping out of me. I look at Annabeth, shaking my head slightly. Her eyes go wide as her grimace starts to break, and she buckles over, cackling.

“What the hell is going on?!” Myles shouts. Hudson looks startled and like he might cry, so I sway him back and forth until he calms.

“You upset the baby, Myles.” I whisper loudly, basking in Myles’ confusion.

“We’re just playing with you.” Annabeth smiles and hugs him. “You did good. We had a great time.” She passes Myles and meets me on the steps, where she pecks me on the lips and takes Hudson from me.

Myles sighs and runs his hands over his face. “You scared me. Oh man, I was legit panicked.”

“Well, you deserve it!” Annabeth hollers over her shoulder as she takes Hudson into the house. I head back to the trunk and unload a few groceries.

“Here,” I hand them to Myles. “Since we’re always here.”

“You good, man? Like really?” He asks.

I look toward the house. “Better than good. Better than I’ve been in a long time.”

Once Myles’ parents see us together, Kate wags her finger at me and wraps us both in a big hug, minding a sleeping Hudson still in Annabeth’s arms. Then, she walks over to Myles and tries to discreetly give him a high five, a telltale sign of a co-conspirator. I raise my eyebrow at her, and she pulls me into the kitchen as Annabeth brings Hudson upstairs.

“I just want to see you happy, Scottie.” She holds my shoulders, checking behind me before whispering, “I knew it the moment I met Annie. I knew she was for you and that she was brought here to find you.”

And at that, I pull Kate into another, long embrace. She holds me the same way she holds Myles, like her son. I have a mother whom I love more than anyone. But for years, Kate has seen a side of me that I’d never show my mother for fear of worrying her. Kate watched me grow up, watched my struggle, housed me when I didn’t want to go home. Knowing she still looks out for me after all this time sends a lump to my throat.

“Hey, hands off my woman!” Martin shouts from the living room. “You all have work to do.”

“Work?” Annabeth asks as she tiptoes down the stairs.

“I found a place!” Myles perks up. “It’s actually a smaller apartment in your building, Annabeth. It opened up last week, but I wasn’t sure I could afford it.”

“I pulled a few strings,” Martin adds with pride. “I got him a very good deal.”

Annabeth tears up but tries to look away, meeting my eyes in the process. I nod at her, reassuring her that it’s okay to cry. She nods back and lets her tears trickle down her face. Kate meets her at the bottom of the stairs and holds her face in her hands, wiping her cheeks. I never realized the connection they

had until now. They murmur to each other, both nodding occasionally, and quickly hug. Kate guides Annabeth to the couch and winks at me as she heads back to the kitchen.

“That’s great, Myles. When do we move you?” I ask as I sit next to Annabeth and wrap my arm around her.

He looks between us and beams. “Tomorrow too soon?”

The following 24 hours are a blur of boxes and bubble wrap. We all take turns playing with Hudson while the others pack. My parents come over with dinner later in the evening, and I introduce them to Annabeth. They hug her and chat together, leaving me confused until I realize they’ve met before. My dad ends up telling me that my mom has also been helping out with Hudson since Jess left.

“Wait, you guys knew?” I ask Dad, pulling him into the kitchen. The place we apparently spill secrets.

“Of course we did, Scottie. We see Kate and Martin every Sunday for dinner.”

“Since when!” I half-whisper, half-shout.

“Oh, I can’t remember.” He scratches his head. “Probably since you went off to NYU and Myles went on his first tour? Yeah, that sounds right.”

“How come you didn’t tell me?”

“I don’t know. It’s just dinner.” He shrugs.

“No, I mean, about Myles. About Jess and Annabeth. About everything.”

“Well, we didn’t want to worry you, Scottie. You’ve been so busy and stressed about work. Plus, we figured you talk to Myles more than we do...” He trails off just as my mom comes in.

All this time, I’ve been trying to protect them from worrying about me. I’m shocked and touched to find out that they’re still doing that for me too. I don’t deserve them.

“Sorry, I can come back.” She moves to leave, but I pull her into a hug. I don’t realize I’m crying until she pulls back with worry in her eyes. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“I’m so sorry.” I break down. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around. I’m sorry I’ve been so distracted and self-absorbed. I’ve missed everything. It’s my fault.”

My mom waves my dad out of the kitchen as she guides me to a chair. She sits and pulls up her chair in front of me, holding my hands.

“You’ve done nothing wrong, baby boy.” She tells me. “Look at you! Look at what you’ve done with your life. For this town. You are such a strong and determined man. I knew you wouldn’t be here long. There is no shame in what you’re doing, so don’t you be sorry for one second.” She lifts my chin. “You hear me?”

“I love her, Mom.” I say like it’s the one thing I’ve ever been sure of in my life.

“I can tell.” She wipes her sleeve on my face like she did when I was young. “And if you still feel sorry, there’s something we can do about that.”

“What?”

“Come home more. Maybe use some of that money you have to buy yourself a house here. That way, you’ll always have a reason to come home.”

I hear Annabeth laughing in the living room. I turn to see her and Kate dance around with Hudson while my dad, Myles, and Martin wiggle a dresser down the stairs, pausing to laugh and watch. I have an endless number of reasons to come home. But this, right here, is the only reason I need.

Family

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Chapter 11:

Reality Check

I'm in bed with Annabeth wrapped around me when my phone buzzes on the nightstand next to me. I groggily reach for it, snapping awake when I see that it's the office. I answer and whisper, "Hang on a sec."

I set the phone down and gently roll Annabeth over. I slip on a pair of sweatpants and tiptoe to the bathroom.

"Yes, hello?" I ask.

"Mr. Galloway? It's Lisa. I'm so sorry to call you so early. Do you have a second?" She asks.

"Of course, what's going on?" I sit on the edge of the bathtub and rub my face, dreading what's to come.

"I just wanted to let you know that the partners are discussing moving the merger up a week. They haven't solidified anything yet, but I just thought you should know. You might want to head back, just in case."

I sigh loudly. "When?"

"Monday?"

I put Lisa on speaker and tap the screen to open my calendar. It's Friday, giving me only two more days instead of eight. Then I see the orange line blocking off Sunday afternoon: The charity drive. Fuck.

"Okay, thanks, Lisa. I appreciate the heads up. Please keep me posted if you hear anything else."

"Not a problem. You take care, Mr. Galloway." She hangs up.

I splash water on my face, trying to wash away the conversation. I can't believe I have to cut my trip short. I also

can't believe it's been five weeks already. After moving Myles into his new place, it's been a whirlwind of unpacking and spending time with everyone, mainly my parents and Annabeth. She's been a frequent visitor at Myles' place and my parents' house. She often stays with me in my room, which I was uncomfortable with at first, but my parents insisted. They even tried to get Annabeth to call them Mom and Dad, but she still insists on calling them Diana and Peter. I can tell she's overwhelmed by their affection because of the tender way she looks at me whenever my mom asks.

I creep back into the bedroom and slide under the covers, nuzzling Annabeth's neck.

"Who was that?" She whispers sleepily.

"No one. Wrong number." I kiss her shoulder and try to fall back asleep. But I can't shake this nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"What are you kids up to today?" My dad asks over his newspaper.

"Well, Scott is going to help me bring more donations to city hall, then we're babysitting Hudson during Myles' shift at the Sea Dog," Annabeth replies, sipping her coffee.

"Yeah, but we have to run a quick errand first." I say, rubbing Annabeth's hand on the kitchen table.

"We do?" She looks at me and then my mother.

"That's right." My mom winks when Annabeth isn't looking. "I need that done before dinner, hun."

"No problem, Mom." I nod.

"Okay. When do we need to head out?" Annabeth stands from the table and brings her dishes to the sink.

"I'll do that sweetie, you go get ready." Mom hurries to the sink and waves Annabeth up the stairs.

I kiss my mom's cheek and thank her. She squeezes my hand. "You do wonderful things, baby boy."

As we park on Camden's main street, Annabeth looks confused.

"What are we doing?"

"You'll see," I come around the side of the car and open her door, leading her to a small, empty storefront. I approach the glass door with the "For Lease" sign and unlock the door, holding it open for her.

I flick on the fluorescent lights, and they blink to life. The space is small and needs a ton of work. But there's a small service counter in the corner, and I could immediately picture an in-house studio set up in the back. There's even a windowless closet tucked down the narrow back hallway, perfect for developing photos.

"Scott, what is this?" Annabeth asks, running her finger across the dusty countertop. I step behind it and reach for a camera bag with a bow in it, handing it to her.

"It's for you."

She opens the bag, her eyes going wide when she sees the DSLR camera staring back at her. I've thought a lot about our conversation at the cabin and noticed that she pulled out an old camera after we got home. She's been snapping pictures everywhere we go, then driving the hour to one of those 1-hour photo-developing places.

"I don't understand..." She says, and she pulls the camera out, delicately lifting the strap and placing it around her neck.

"Well, you're going to need to send your customers somewhere," I say and take a stack of business cards out of my pocket that say Annabeth Photo, with the address of the storefront on the bottom.

Her eyes light up as she stares at the card and looks around again, "This is mine? You did this? Scott, this is..." She stops, tears filling her eyes. "This is too much, I can't take it."

I grab her hands. "Yes, you can. You can do this. I believe you can do this. You've got a cavalry of people behind you, and

more will come.”

“You can’t just give me all of this.” She gestures to the store and then the camera.

“Well, I did the storefront. My parents got you the camera.”

“Wow,” Annabeth looks at me, speechless. “I’ve never... I’ve never had this.”

“I know. But you do now...” I pull her into my chest, and she weeps quietly. And in an instant, she starts jumping up and down excitedly and rattling off what she wants to do with the place. I lean back on the counter, watch her point, and run from one end of the space to the other, wondering how I could ever leave after seeing her this happy.

But I have to. My job depends on it.

I didn’t tell Annabeth that Lisa had called. I also didn’t tell her that my partners emailed me before we left, telling me about the date change for the merger, gently telling me that my lack of presence on the day might result in my lack of presence altogether. *Subtle*, I thought to myself, *I could lose my job if I don’t go back*.

I thought about staying after hanging up with Lisa, but their email immediately wiped that possibility away. And I have no idea how to tell Annabeth.

I can’t bear to tell her today. So as we walk to the car, I promise myself that I will tell her tomorrow. But then her phone rings.

“Hello?” She says in a sing-song voice.

She stops. Her face goes white. She nods into the phone but says nothing. Then, finally, she clears her throat and says, “Yes, it’s um, this is Annabeth.”

The voice on the other end continues. Annabeth answers yes and no slowly, swallowing hard. I stare at her, waiting for more.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll text you an address. See you soon.” She hangs up, letting her phone topple to the floor of the car.

“Who was it?” I ask, concerned.

She doesn't respond, just stares at the road in front of her. Finally, I wave my hand in front of her, and she turns to me, clearly stunned.

“That was my dad. He's here. In Camden.”

Chapter 12:

Where Were You

Annabeth sits opposite me at the Sea Dog in our usual booth, tapping her foot impatiently.

“Remind me why we’re here again?” I ask.

“I didn’t write a return address on the envelope. All I gave him was the town and my phone number.” She says, glancing at the door again.

“Seen him yet?” Myles wanders over, putting two beers on the table.

I felt so bad canceling on him, especially since none of them know I’m leaving, and it was my last chance for quality time with my godson. But since Myles moved, Kate has been craving some one-on-one time with Hudson, so I try not to stress about it, focusing my energy on Annabeth.

Suddenly, Annabeth’s eyes lock on the door opening. She slides out of the booth and stands. Myles looks over, sees a man in a suit walking in and looking around. Myles gives me a thumbs up and hurries back to the bar. I turn around in the booth, waiting to see if he’ll spot her on his own.

He does.

He approaches the booth, but stops a few paces back.

“Hello, Annabeth.” He says, looking more alarmed than I was expecting. She says nothing, standing there motionless. Finally, he glances over at me and stretches out his hand. “Allen Archibald.”

“Hi, I’m Scott.” I stand and shake his hand. “I’ll be at the—”

But before I can finish, Annabeth links her arm through mine and tugs me into her side of the booth. “Please, sit.” She

gestures for Allen to sit across from us.

“Right,” He slides in, looking around the bar. “Nice place.”

“It’s alright,” She states, not breaking her stare.

“How long have you lived here?” Allen asks.

“Is that really what you want to ask me?” Annoyance floods Annabeth’s tone. I stroke her hand under the table, trying to calm her.

“Right, sorry.” Allen straightens. “First of all, thank you for seeing me on such short notice. After receiving your letter, I just had to see you.”

“Does your wife know you’re here?” She bites back.

“She does, yes. She wants to meet you one day as well if you’re willing.” Allen smiles meekly, and I’m so confused. I can’t get a read on him.

“She wants to meet the daughter you abandoned? I find that hard to believe.” Annabeth scoffs, already losing patience with the conversation.

“Abandoned?! Wait. What exactly has your mother told you about me?” Allen looks confused, his brow furrowing the same way Annabeth’s does.

“That you’re a piece of shit and didn’t want me no matter how many times she’s begged you. That you disappeared into the night and never came back.”

“I’m—” Allen’s eyes well up. He shakes it off and clears his throat, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry that that’s what you’ve been told. But Annabeth... your mother never told me about you.”

Annabeth and I look at each other, stunned.

Finally, Annabeth croaks. “You’re lying.”

“Annabeth, why would I come all the way here to lie to you?” Allen tries to reach for Annabeth’s hand, but she quickly tucks it under the table.

“I have to, um, go.” Annabeth gently pushes me out of the booth, and I can see tears forming in the corners of her eyes as

she excuses herself and rushes to the bathroom.

I sit back down across from Allen, watching the bathroom door, unable to look at him. I'm shocked that a mother would tell her own child that her father didn't want her. I can feel my ears burning with rage. Rage for a woman I've never met, a woman who gave me the beautiful, fierce woman I have wrapped in my arms every morning. And now her world is falling apart.

"Stupid," I hear Allen say under his breath.

"Hey. She's not stupid." I bark back toward him.

"No no, not Annabeth. Sorry, I don't mean Annabeth," Allen runs his fingers through his thick, salt and pepper hair. "I mean Genie. Annabeth's mother."

Allen goes on to tell me about Genie's instability, her chaotic lifestyle, and her inability to receive treatment for her mental illnesses. Of course, I knew some of this, but I guess when Annabeth was young, she wouldn't have realized her mother's impulsivity was actually a symptom of something else. An undiagnosed disorder.

When Allen finally confronted Genie about getting help, she left in the middle of the night and never came back. So parts of what Genie told Annabeth were true. But Genie bailed, not Allen.

"I was devastated, Scott. I had no clue what happened to her and never heard from her again." Allen sighs, pulls a card from his coat pocket, and writes down an address that I recognize as the bed and breakfast in the heart of town. "I'll be staying here for a few days. I have to get back to the city at some point, but I don't want to leave yet. Please. Help me talk to her." He holds out the card, waiting for me to take it.

I give him a tight smile, take the card, and watch him leave. He peers back at the washroom numerous times before he reluctantly walks out the door. I spot Myles behind the bar, pulling out his phone and texting just moments before Annabeth walks out of the washroom, wiping her cheeks.

“You had Myles on watch?” I rub her hand as she sits where Allen sat.

“Yeah. I’m so sorry. I thought I could handle this.” Annabeth stares at our hands.

“You did so well. I’m so proud of you. No one saw that coming.”

“Which part? Oh yeah, the part where he tried to throw my mom under the bus.” She scoffs, reaching for her lukewarm beer sitting idle on the table.

“Annabeth. He told me what happened, your mom, all of it. I feel like he might be telling the truth.” I say cautiously.

“I know,” Annabeth says. “I think the worst part is that I’m not surprised. I mean, I am, but she’s never taken on any blame. I just never thought she’d do something like this. To me.” She tears up again. I slide into the booth next to her and pull her in tight, wanting to squeeze every ounce of pain from her.

“What’s that?” She points to the card in my hand.

“Oh. Allen is staying at the Regent’s B&B. He wants to see you before he leaves.”

“Super. And the day was going so well.” She shoots up, looking at me alarmed. “Oh God, Scott. I’m so sorry. Other than Allen, this has been one of the best days of my life.”

“I get it, don’t worry,” I say, and her body relaxes. “So, what do you want to do?”

She takes the card from me and flips it over a few times. “I want this finished.”

Allen sounds surprised when I call him from the car, not twenty minutes after he left. Within minutes, Annabeth and I are standing in front of Regent’s Bed and Breakfast. Being the first house on a side street off of the main road, I can see Annabeth’s storefront in the distance. Locals hustle around us, dragging tables, boxes, and bags to the giant field in the park, preparing for tomorrow’s event. Annabeth doesn’t seem to notice, standing frozen as she stares at the inn’s door handle.

“You don’t have to go in...” I start to say, but the door swings open.

A disheveled Allen stands before us, panting. His dress shirt is untucked and slightly unbuttoned, his tie loosened. His hair once slicked back, is now coming undone from his constant ruffling.

“Annabeth,” he exhales.

“I can’t come in.” She looks at her shoes.

“Oh- Of course. One second, “He disappears and returns with his jacket, closing the door behind him, “We can walk if you like.”

“I’d like to sit.” She says, gesturing to a bench at the edge of the park, facing the road. He nods and walks across the street. I begin to follow, but Annabeth holds me back. She hugs me, kisses me, then nods for me to stay.

I squeeze her hand one last time as she turns and jogs to catch up with Allen. I hustle across the road in the other direction, settling in at a table at the local cafe, a perfect view of the bench a few yards away. After the barista comes to take my order, I text Myles to tell him where we are.

I’m surprised to see Myles pulling up behind my car next to the B&B a few moments later. He spots me and jogs over. “Anything yet?”

“Nothing yet,” I say, then take a sip of my latte. “They haven’t said a word to each other.”

“Jeez. Poor Annabeth. I’m pissed at her mom.” Myles shakes his head and goes inside to order.

I watch Annabeth closely as she turns to Allen and speaks. I can just make out their figures, but not enough to see if she’s angry or upset. I squint, hoping that’ll help. She’s gesturing a lot, waving her hands and pointing at him. I should be over there, holding her hand, being her calm in this fucked up storm. I’m about to stand when Myles comes out clutching a hot cider and sits across from me.

“Ohhh, she speaks. Or yells?” He tilts his head.

“Yeah, I’m not sure. But I should go over there.” I grumble as I bend to get up.

“Hey, hey.” He reaches for my arm and pulls it, so I sit back down. “You don’t need to save her. She’s got this.”

“I know. I just- I want to save her. She’s been through enough.”

Myles finally looks at me. “You already have. More than you know, man.”

I stare at my best friend, seeing the truth behind his eyes, understanding exactly what he means. Both of them have experienced a huge, unexpected loss. They’re grieving someone who chose to leave them. Only Myles was left in his hometown. Annabeth needed to rebuild herself in a new place with strangers. Strangers who have now become her life. Annabeth doesn’t need saving. She saved herself. But she closed herself off in other ways that I never realized. As I watch her finally touch Allen’s hand, I imagine how hard that must be for her, but how easily she does it.

She looks up, and I swear I can feel her eyes smiling at me, thanking me.

I didn’t save Annabeth. But, I helped her trust again. Love with her whole heart again.

Allen pulls Annabeth from the bench and holds her shoulders as he speaks. I can see her nodding as she holds his hands in place. They embrace, swaying slightly. They hold each other for a long time. When I finally glance at Myles, he’s tearing up.

“Man, being a dad has made you soft.” I tease. He’s about to throw his empty cup at me but stops when he notices I’m crying too, the love we both have for Annabeth swirling between us.

Chapter 13:

Getting to Gone

I can already see Annabeth across the street showing her dad her storefront when I pull up for the charity drive. My parents pull up behind me, and I help my mom unload a few boxes, distractedly carrying them to a nearby table. I watch Annabeth as she gestures to the windows, pointing at things and hopping up and down as her Dad points and nods in agreement. She unlocks the door and they disappear inside.

Myles and his family are already here, Hudson strapped to his chest, fast asleep, in a baby carrier. I give him a side hug and help Kate lift a particularly heavy bag onto a folding table.

Within a few hours, coats are hung, pants are folded, and numerous pots and pans are organized on tables under popup tents. I can hear the high school jazz band tuning their instruments under the gazebo. The cafe across the street has additional tables set up, including a portable cart set up next to numerous other food carts. I hear the honk of a local food truck as it pulls up next to the park.

I'm about to text Annabeth when I see her jogging toward me with her new camera wrapped around her neck, Allen following closely behind.

"That's quite a spot you picked, Scott." Allen shakes my hand and nods.

"Thanks," I smile at Annabeth, who bobs in agreement and kisses my cheek. She snaps a photo of Myles kissing the top of Hudson's sleepy head, then takes off toward the funnel cake cart.

"When are you going to tell her?" Myles whispers in my ear. I had to talk to someone about how to broach the subject with Annabeth, so I told Myles last night while we were at his

parents' house. But of course, Kate overheard, so now everyone knows. Except Annabeth.

"Soon," I say, admiring her as she takes pictures of three kids grinning from ear to ear while enjoying their churros.

As usual, the drive is showing huge success. But as the hours tick by and the sun starts to set, I grow more and more nervous. Not just because I'm leaving, but because Annabeth still doesn't know.

I ended up talking to one of my partners, who agreed to allow me an additional week of vacation once the merger is finalized, about two weeks away. So I will be back soon. I just haven't brought myself to tell Annabeth. She's been so happy about her father, the store, and, well, me. I didn't want to ruin it for her.

The bonfire is crackling to life when my dad comes and stands next to me. "So. What time do you leave?"

"I actually scored a decent red-eye flight in a couple of hours." I say.

"What about your car?"

"It's a company car. I'll borrow another one once I'm back in the city and fly back for this one."

"Makes sense," He says and turns toward the fire.

"Look, if you have something to say, say it, Dad."

"I just don't think you should be jumping on a plane just yet. And if they're threatening to fire you, then, to be honest, fuck them." He huffs.

"It's not that simple, Dad." I start. "I have a commitment to them—"

"You've made commitments here, son. I wish you'd see that and not run from it."

"I know. I know. And I want to make this... her, my main commitment. But I need to settle everything up in New York, and if I don't leave tonight—"

“You’re leaving?” Annabeth asks, startling both my father and me. I turn to face her, betrayal flashing through her eyes.

“Yes, but—”

“And when were you planning on telling me?” She squeaks, her camera frozen in her hands until she lets it fall, saved by the neck strap.

“I was going to tell you, I just—”

“I get it. Message received.” She storms away, and I hurry after her, both of our figures fading into the darkness.

“Annabeth, wait!” I chase her and almost fall when she comes to an abrupt stop, spinning back around.

“Why did you do this?”

I’m confused. “Do what?”

“That!” She points to the store. “This!” She pulls the camera off her neck and throws it to the ground, shattering the lens.

“I was trying to help—”

“This.” She waves between us. “Why would you do this? Love me and then leave me. After...” She trails off, her words soaked in sadness. My heart breaks for her. And me.

“I have to go back, but I’ll be—”

She holds her hand up. “Then go.”

We stare at each other, the only sound coming from the distant crackle of the fire.

“You want to leave so bad? Then go.” Annabeth states, turns on her heel and walks to her car. I’m frozen in place as I watch her drive off.

I feel a hand pat my back and turn to see Mom.

“Did you tell her?” She asks, already knowing the answer.

“No. She wouldn’t listen.” I sigh, tucking my hands in my pockets. “Maybe it’s for the best.”

“Maybe,” my mom says. “Or maybe you have some thinking to do when you’re back in New York.”

I wrap her in a hug. We wander back to the bonfire where everyone has gathered, the flames blazing at full force. I say my goodbyes, hugging my dad, Martin, and Myles. I swing by to see Kate, who brought Hudson home to sleep.

She's waiting for me on the porch as I pull up.

"Are you heading out?" She asks as she stands from the porch steps, wearing slippers and a robe.

"I am," I approach her, and she pulls me into another mom-hug, sensing my defeat.

"She's worth it, Scottie." She holds my face in her hands. "You're worth it."

"I'm not so sure anymore," I whisper to her, feeling crushed.

"You'll see." She smiles. She gives me a final hug before I head inside to kiss Hudson, who's asleep in a bassinet in the living room.

I stare at him, unable to move. He breathes in and out, slowly, peacefully. His eyelids twitch as he coos. I reach for his tiny fingers, and his grasp tightens around my thumb again. Minutes tick by as I watch him sleep, and when I finally let go, my thumb instantly cools, missing his warm hand. I can no longer imagine a world without this beautiful boy I finally got to meet a few weeks ago. Then it dawns on me: I can't imagine my world without Annabeth.

I tiptoe out of the room, but once I'm on the porch, I kiss Kate on the cheek and jog to my car. As I back out of the driveway, Kate nods at me knowingly, clutching her chest. I wave and blow her a kiss, my tires skidding on the gravel driveway as I race to Annabeth's apartment.

I'm knocking gently on Annabeth's door once again when a door down the hall squeaks open. It's Myles.

"She's not there, man." He says groggily, half asleep.

"Where is she?" I ask, out of breath.

“I don’t know. She said she needed time to think. But she left with a bag.”

I slide to the floor, burying my face in my hands. I can’t believe this is happening. I handled this all wrong. I should’ve told Annabeth as soon as Lisa called. I should’ve explained that I’d come back so we could figure out what we were going to do. About us. Now I’m just another person who’s left her. Only it’s worse than that. I’m another person she loves who’s left her. I wanted to save her, protect her, and in the process, I lost her.

Myles slides down the wall and sits next to me. “She’ll cool off, man. Give her time.”

I nod, telling him I hope he’s right. But inside, I feel the opposite. I’m afraid to give her time. Afraid that time and distance will harden her again, cut off from the ones she loves and building her walls back up.

I stand and help Myles up. He hugs me again and wanders back down the hall as I slug to the stairs and outside. Without a second thought, I bury the guilt in the back of my mind and drive home to pack my things. Within minutes, I’m back in the car and speeding toward the airport, anxious to leave and return to the city.

I glance out the window of the plane during takeoff, watching the bay area disappear behind me, missing everyone so much already and wishing I’d stayed.

But most of all, I wish for Annabeth.

Chapter 14:

Misery in New York

Sadly, this is the fourth morning in a row where I've woken up to feel the empty, cool sheets next to me, slowly realizing Annabeth isn't there.

I remember the first night I returned home and stood in my empty, untouched condo. I dropped everything and fell onto my bed, fully clothed. I awoke the following day, lazily showered, and dragged my ass into the office.

Lisa looked at me like I was a stranger.

"Oh! Mr. Galloway! You startled me. I haven't seen you with, um..." She gestured to my chin. I touched my cheeks, realizing I had two days of stubble on my usually clean-shaven skin.

"I'm sorry. I got in late last night and didn't have a chance to shave."

"I can help you with that, bud." James tossed an electric razor to me from the doorway of his office, across the hall from mine. He leaned on the door frame. "Conference room in a half-hour."

I nodded and crawled into my office, using my computer screen as a mirror before turning it on.

"You okay, Scott?" James asked, plopping into a seat across from me.

James and I are partners. He's seen the best and worst with me. And no matter what, he's stuck by my side through every project, including the merger. Sometimes we disagree, but we have each other's back, which is more than I can say for some of our other colleagues.

I glared at him. “I’ve been better.”

“I’m sorry you had to cut your trip short.” James said, playing with the nameplate on my desk. “I tried to get them to reconsider, but Gallagher insisted you be here.”

We both scoffed. Thomas Gallagher was a slimeball attorney that we went to school with. We often crossed paths with him during extensive negotiations like this as he didn’t stray far from the more prominent firms. Gallagher always had his ear to the ground, ready to pounce on his previous schoolmates as soon as he heard of any juicy deals that would score him a decent paycheck.

We filed into the conference room, and within a few hours, solidified our deal. Both parties were satisfied and prepared to sign off on the merger. Although I was barely paying attention as my mind often wandered back to Camden.

As I wipe the steam off the mirror, three days after the merger, four days after saying goodbye to Annabeth, I can’t help but wonder where she is. I called her numerous times every day, but eventually, her phone stopped ringing and went straight to voicemail. I also tried checking her social media, but she disappeared, having blocked me from everything. When I spoke with Myles, he said she barely says a word to him, just comes to the bar, finishes her shift, and then leaves. I call my mom every day too, and she hasn’t seen Annabeth either. Even Kate told her Annabeth hadn’t been by at all. No one knows where she’s staying.

I brush my teeth, comb back my hair, and remember to shave. I rifle through my closet, already bored by the plain suits in front of me. I might get escorted from the premises if I show up to work in the sweatpants and flannel button-down I’ve been wearing. Not because it’s against the dress code, but because I still haven’t washed them, and they’re probably developing an odor.

I stopped noticing since the lingering smell of Annabeth’s shampoo is the only reason I keep wearing them. But that smell is slowly fading from the fabric. Every morning, I gently

fold the rumpled clothes and leave them on my bed, ready to slip back into them the second I get home.

My phone buzzes as I enter my office: My mom. I reject the call, texting her to say I'll call her on video chat in a few minutes.

"Mr. Galloway?" Lisa buzzes.

"Yes, Lisa, what is it?"

"Those company checks that you requested arrived. Who are they going out to?"

"The one from the partners is going to Camden Public Library," I say.

"And the other?" Lisa asks, her voice hanging over the intercom.

"The other is going to Annabeth Photo." I pause for a moment.

"But remove my name and put Anonymous, please."

"Right. Thank you, Mr. Galloway." I hear a click as her intercom shuts off.

I move my computer mouse to wake the screen and call my parents.

"You look tired, honey."

"Good to see you too, Mom." I run my hand over my face.

"I'm not sleeping well."

"Damn jetlag!" My dad laughs.

"Nice one," I state but don't chuckle.

My mom stands up and leaves my father in the living room.

"How are you, baby?" She whispers.

"I'm fine, Mom. I'm trying to move forward. Listen, can we talk later? I have a ton of work to do."

"Okay, honey. Well, call if you need anything, okay?"

"Thanks, Mom. Love you." I hang up too quickly, and my screen freezes on her mid-sentence.

It hasn't even been a week, and I'm homesick like my first year of college.

"How's it going?" Myles asks into the phone the following week. He doesn't ask why I'm answering the phone in the middle of the day on a Wednesday since he knows I've taken a personal day.

"Fine, I guess. How are you? How's Hudson?" I want to ask if he's seen or spoken to Annabeth, but I had to stop asking that this past weekend because every time he said no, I felt worse.

"You don't sound fine. I have a three-month-old with no mother, and I still sound better than you."

"I'm so sorry, Myles. I'm a prick." I sniff my shirt again, Annabeth's scent completely gone. "I miss her, man."

"I know you do. She misses you, I can tell."

"Thanks."

"Are you still coming back next week?" He asks.

"I don't know. Probably not. She doesn't want to talk to me, so I think it's for the best if I stay away for a while."

"Uh-huh. Hey, what's your apartment number again?" Myles asks, totally off-topic.

"1808. Why?"

There's a knock at my door just as Myles hangs up.

As I open the door, I practically buckle into Myles' arms as he hugs me. "You look like crap, man."

"What are you doing here? Where's Hudson?"

"Well, when I told my mom I was coming to get you, she was more than happy to stay at my place to watch Hudson."

"Come get me?" I stare at him, confused. "I already told you I'm not coming back yet. It's all, just, too much."

Myles shakes his head and pulls a small book out of his duffle bag. "Here."

The linen book looks professionally printed. On the cover, there's a small, beautiful picture of a window framed with rustic wood. There's a heart drawn through the moisture of the foggy glass. But for some reason, the window looks familiar. As I stare through the curves of the heart, I see dense trees and a river, the same river that was at the cabin where Annabeth and I stayed.

I flip the book open and see a photo of me sleeping on my stomach, shirtless. The next photo is of me bent over the counter at the library, holding Barbara's hand. The next is a photo of my first day back at the Sea Dog, sitting across from Myles, laughing. The camera quality isn't the greatest, but the images are sharp and perfectly framed, capturing each moment beautifully.

As I flip through the book, I see numerous selfies of Annabeth and me. Some are silly, some I don't remember as she took a few pretending we were both sleeping. Everyone is in here: Me and Hudson, me and Kate, even the hug my mother and I shared in the kitchen while we were packing for Myles' move. She's even included some photos taken with her brand-new camera.

The second last photo is of my father and me, looking at each other but standing at the bonfire, our backs turned. A moment I'd rather not relive, but a beautiful photo nonetheless. The final photo is the only one that doesn't include my face: Annabeth's hand resting on mine, the brassy metal of the cafe table underneath, just moments after she reconciled with her father.

I look up at Myles with tears in my eyes. I'm speechless. I can't believe she made this. Even when I thought she hated me, she was watching me, admiring me, capturing moments I didn't realize were precious until now. I want more of this. I need more of this.

Myles just stands in my hallway, nodding knowingly. "When do we leave?"

The next few days are a blur as I hand in my resignation and pack up my condo. Even though I quit, Lisa is a huge help with organizing a moving truck and putting my condo up for lease. James volunteers to keep an eye on it while I look for a subtler and even recommends a few clients who are looking for a place to stay while in the city.

He laughed when he called me to tell me our boss threw my resignation in the trash, telling James to get me set up with working remotely. I was surprised that my boss offered this, considering he threatened my job previously. But when I finally called him, he apologized, saying he was stressed from the merger. He also told me I was his hardest working associate and wanted to keep me on the team, no matter what. But his one condition was that I come into the city twice a month, which is doable.

Mom and Kate are secretly tag-teaming the Camden housing market, sending me links to houses and cottages every few minutes. It doesn't take long for my mom to send me a new listing, a Victorian cottage in the bay area. It's a bit more expensive than I'd like, but my father goes to look at it and easily haggles the price down as it's a fixer-upper. He's a contractor and his team can renovate it with minimal hassle. Since both mine and Myles' parents gave it their seal of approval, I sign without giving it a second thought, with zero conditions and an immediate possession date.

It's Sunday afternoon, and the movers have the truck loaded within an hour. At first, I'm surprised, but then I quickly realize I have way less stuff than I thought I did—a true sign of a workaholic. I left most of my furniture since I'll need to be here one long weekend a month. Myles grabs my duffle bag and follows the movers down while I lock up.

The last thing I do is pop my trunk and put the boxes from my office in the back of the moving truck. Myles stands next to me as I watch the movers roll down the overhead door and latch it.

“You ready?” Myles slaps my back.

“More than ever,” I say as I toss the keys to James, who’s standing on the driver’s side. “No joyrides, okay? You’re driving us to the airport and taking this back to the office. Got it?”

“No promises, Galloway.” He chuckles and climbs into the driver’s seat. Myles hands me my duffle bag and gets in on the passenger side. He makes a joke to James, and they both snicker. I’m relieved to see my two closest friends getting along, blurring the lines between work and home.

I slide into the backseat and pull Annabeth’s photobook from the front pocket, flipping through it for the thousandth time as we drive. Everything has fallen into place so far. I just need to get back and settle in before Annabeth finds out.

Chapter 15:

Finally Home

Once we're back in Camden, everything moves very quickly, as it did in the city. The moving truck still won't be here for a few hours, so Myles heads home to see Hudson, and my dad takes me to the house. It definitely has potential, but it'll be a few weeks before it's move-in ready. He has already called on some contracting buddies to get started as soon as possible.

As I hug him and thank him for his help, he whispers, "I'm glad you're home, son."

My mom has been busy all day clearing out the garage. I figured it'd be better to unpack once the house was no longer a construction zone. Until then, we'll be unloading the moving truck straight into the garage.

As we pull up, I can see my mom wiping her forehead and breathing heavily as she tries to move a table. My dad jogs over to help her lift a table, and they drag it across the concrete. Once they're done, he pulls her in for a kiss and wipes a smudge of dirt off of her nose. She giggles and nuzzles into him, as Annabeth did so often to me. After all they've been through, I can still see the love my parents have for each other.

I only hope it's not too late for me.

Everyone is exhausted and huffing as Myles, my dad, and I load the last of my boxes into my parents' garage and close the door late Sunday evening. We see Kate and Martin's headlights pulling in just as the empty moving truck turns the corner.

“Dinner?” Kate climbs out of their SUV and walks to the trunk, grabbing aluminum trays and bringing them into the house. Myles runs over to help his dad with Hudson while my dad and I slug into the house and drop down into kitchen chairs.

Everyone files in, moving between each other as we organize plates and cups before digging into mountains of lasagna. My mom and Kate take turns holding Hudson between bites, but I’m so ravenous that I finish eating first, relieving both of them of baby duty. I sway Hudson back and forth as he nuzzles into me. I stroke his soft, chubby cheek and smile as I look around the room.

“Thank you, everyone. I don’t deserve this.” I finally say. Forks stop clinking, and a hush falls over the table as everyone looks up.

My mom speaks first. “Scottie. What kind of talk is that?”

“Well, you all dropped everything to get me here. And we don’t even know if she will—”

“She will!” Kate interrupts, clearing her throat. “Oh, she will, Scott.”

I nod, turning my attention back to Hudson. “I hope so.”

I’m too wired to sleep and get up early Monday morning. The November frost covers the grass as I shiver on the front porch, sipping a cup of coffee, watching the sunrise. I forgot that Thanksgiving was coming and daydream about how amazing it’s going to be, being home for Thanksgiving for the first time in years.

“You’re up early,” My mom whispers as she shuffles out of the house, wrapped in a blanket. She sits next to me on their porch swing, huddling in close. I wrap my arm around her to warm her up.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“You’ll sleep better once Annabeth’s here.” She sighs and pulls my head to her shoulder. Even though I’m much taller

and bend awkwardly, I relax into her, feeling instantly safe.

“Maybe. If I can find her.”

“I can help with that.” She pulls out her phone and starts scrolling through various text messages. Another perk of a small town: News travels fast, and there’s eyes everywhere.

“So Betty said Annabeth’s been staying with her daughter, Carla. You know her?”

I nod, remembering Carla from that first day at the bar.

“She’s still at the Sea Dog for most of her shifts, so you could catch her there.”

“I don’t want to bombard her at work, Mom.”

“Okay.” She puts her phone down, tapping her finger on the dark screen, thinking. “Well, we’ll have to come up with something else, then.”

Myles and Kate come up with another scheme that I can only hope will work. Since she hasn’t been speaking to any of them, I’m worried that she won’t accept Myles’ invitation to go for a drive. But when Myles tells me that he convinced Carla to cover Annabeth’s shift, my stomach flips because this might actually work.

I sit on the porch of my new house, waiting. I suspect both my and Myles’ parents are doing the same thing on my parents’ porch, holding their phones, waiting.

As I walked the house earlier, I could finally see what my life could be like, living in Camden. The small den at the back of the house could be my office. It doesn’t have a door, but I’d rather have the open space. I spent enough of my life closed off in a stuffy office, isolated from everything and everyone. The kitchen and bathrooms need a full demo, but my dad assured me that that shouldn’t take long. I don’t really care. I’m in no hurry to get the house finished.

My phone finally dings, with just one word from Myles: *Coming.*

I stand up and pace on the front porch. The drive from the Sea Dog is short since they're both along the bay, but the minutes tick by at a snail's pace. I duck inside and wait by the front door, peeking through the dirty glass as Myles' car pulls up.

I watch as Annabeth climbs out, looking confused. Her hair is braided and tucked neatly into a bundle at the base of her neck. She tightens her scarf and zips her leather coat, rubbing her hands together to warm them. Seeing her again nearly knocks the wind out of me.

Myles waves her toward the door, and she hesitates, asking if he's coming with her. He says no, and leans against his car, pulling out his phone. I hear my phone chime, knowing he sent a message in our group chat that Kate insisted on creating for today.

I step back and wait in front of the winding staircase. The door squeaks open, and Annabeth squints, looking around until her eyes land on me. Her mouth falls open as the door swings shut behind her.

"Hi," I say. Annabeth says nothing, still stunned. "I'm back."

She cleans her throat and swallows. "I can see that." She looks around. "What's all this?"

"This is my new house."

Annabeth's eyes widened. She nods with tight lips, trying to keep calm and casual. She wanders from the front hall into what I think will be the living room, running her hand along the dusty mantel of the broken-down fireplace.

"Quite the place," She says, wandering into the next room and the next. I follow her a few paces back, lean on the wall as she inspects various cupboards and cabinets.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" I ask her as we reach the staircase again.

"Actually, I think I've seen enough." She turns toward the door, but I reach for her hand and squeeze her cold fingers.

"Please?"

She hesitates but eventually sighs and follows me up the stairs, still holding my hand. I lead her to a small room at the back of the house, overlooking the port. The colorful autumn trees are going bare, but the reds, browns, and yellows contrast the quiet water beautifully as sailboats float by for their final days before winter. I spent a lot of time in this room, convinced that it had the best view in the house.

“Pretty,” Annabeth says as she approaches the window. She stands there for what feels like a long time. I finally clear my throat, reach for her camera bag from behind the door and place it at her feet.

“How did you—”

“I pulled a few strings.” I say, pointing at the bag for her to open it.

“You broke into my studio?” She asks, her tone tight and annoyed.

“I asked the lease owner to let me in,” I say, referring to myself.

“I didn’t know you had a key,” she mutters. “Whatever, you can cancel the lease.”

“Annabeth—”

“No, Scott. You can’t just come back into town expecting me to fall to your feet like your family.” She snaps without looking at me.

I’m familiar with her spite, but I’m still surprised when it still stings.

“Listen—”

“NO. What did you think was going to happen! You’d bring me here, and everything would just be better? Life isn’t like that.”

“I know that,” I start, standing next to her at the window. I lift the camera bag and open it. “And I know I don’t deserve another shot. I fucked up. I shouldn’t have left.”

“Yeah, you did fuck up.” She faces me, finally looking at me with those intoxicating green eyes.

She looks down into the open bag and sees a camera with a red bow on it. I take it out and slowly wrap the camera strap around her neck, grazing my fingers along her pimpled skin.

“The book you made was beautiful,” I whisper. Annabeth looks at me, surprised. “Myles saw it in your bag at the Sea Dog.”

“Ugh, I knew it.”

“I love it.” I take her hands. “Annabeth, you made me realize I’m missing everything. Everything that’s important. I want to be wherever you are, even if you still hate me.”

“Oh, I loathe you.” She corrects me, but leans forward.

I take her chilled cheeks in my hands, stroking them softly. “I know. But I love you anyway.”

Our lips finally meet, and I can feel all of the tension finally lift from our bodies. I wrap my arms around her and lift her off the floor. Her arms squeeze my neck tightly, and we both groan as the camera crushes our chests. I gently raise the strap off of her neck and plop the camera into the padded bag on the floor.

“Hey, careful! That’s my livelihood!” She squeals.

I shut her up quickly when I pull her back, kissing her deeply. I can hear my phone chiming numerous times, a full conversation erupting in the family chat, but now that I’m holding Annabeth, I don’t ever want to let go.

Epilogue:

One Year Later

I pace across the porch impatiently, checking my phone every minute. I'm frustrated that Myles is taking so long since they should be here by now, by my calculations.

This past year has been a whirlwind of changes, but nothing else mattered once Annabeth agreed to move in. She had some great ideas for renovating our house. Once it was finished, my dad and his team quickly completed the renovations at Annabeth Photo. She had her first customer come in while Myles and I were finishing the final coat of paint. Kate helped Annabeth shoot her first wedding, and it being a small-town wedding, we were all invited. Myles and I planted her business cards at every table at the reception and every small business around town. Calls came flooding in, and within a couple of months, Annabeth traveled all over the bay area for weddings, retirement parties, and baby announcements. I helped out as often as I could, but I had to hang back for mandatory conference calls most of the time.

By late spring, Annabeth was exhausted, but happier than I'd ever seen her working at the Sea Dog. So I surprised her one weekend while she was away, having my dad and his team turn our garage into an at-home studio. We had spent numerous nights away from each other, so I wanted her to have the option of another studio closer to me. When I showed her the space, she immediately slid the doors shut, jumped into my arms, and made love to me on the sofa I had just purchased.

Her best work was definitely Hudson's first birthday. The late-August sun was hot, but periodic clouds gave her great lighting for candid shots when Hudson tore into his cake. He ended up being an early walker, and the photos she got of

Hudson rushing into his arms and Myles tossing him into the air were the most beautiful action shots I've ever seen. The delight on Hudson's icing-covered face mixed with the twinkle in Myles' eye is a love I'm now excited to one day experience.

"Are they here yet?" My mom's head pops out the front doors as Hudson whines, trying to squeeze past her and come outside.

"Not yet," I wave her back in.

She closes the door, but I can still see numerous heads peeking through the many many windows of the curtainless cabin as I face the road again, continuing to pace.

I had absentmindedly said, "I want to marry her," while I watched Annabeth chase Hudson around his birthday party, roaring like a T-Rex. He ran away laughing, but every now then, he'd turn to chase her, and she would fake being tackled and gobble him up, tickling him as he squealed. They rolled around in the grass until eventually he'd wobble up and run away again, grass stains all over his and Annabeth's matching Jurassic Park T-Shirts. I hadn't realized that Kate was still sitting next to me, also watching.

"I can help with that," She whispered in my ear and squeezed my hand.

And so, the cabin-plan was hatched. Naturally, everyone got involved, conspiring and whispering about it a few weeks before we all trekked out to the cabin where Annabeth and I stayed one year ago. Kate even called Allen, and he was so excited that he and his family flew over. It's taken every ounce of me to keep my mouth shut about Annabeth's father being in town since they weren't supposed to visit again until Thanksgiving.

I turn back to breathe in the sight of my family: My dad is spinning my mom in front of the fireplace, the flames flickering as they move to the beat of whatever music is playing. Allen hands his wife, Mary, more plates as she and their 8-year-old daughter, Holly, set the table. Martin bounces Hudson on his knee at the dining room table while Kate moves effortlessly through the kitchen, sliding trays in and out of the

oven. Now and then, one of their heads turns toward the door, checking to see if they've arrived. At one point, Kate glances over, winks at me, and smiles. I give her a thumbs up.

I hear distant tires turning onto the gravel road. I knock on the window as a warning and laugh to myself as I listen to everyone shushing each other loudly as they assume their positions and turn off the lights.

Myles pulls up to the front of the house and hustles around to Annabeth's door, opening it for her. She takes his hand and slowly lifts herself out of the car.

"Aren't we a little past these gestures, Mr. Galloway?" Annabeth teases, pointing at her five-month baby belly.

"You know you love it." I say as I take her hand and lead her up the porch steps, sitting her in a chair in front of the door. Myles hops back in the car to give us privacy, but immediately wipes out his phone and pops it onto his dashboard.

"Never a dull moment, am I right?" Annabeth points her thumb at Myles, not noticing that he's filming us.

"Well, we wanted it to be a surprise." I say as I crouch in front of her, rubbing her belly, "Hey, kid. Can you cover your ears for a second?"

"She's sleeping, so it's fine. Unless you're about to say something dirty."

I chuckle, still amazed at how Annabeth still surprises me. "No, I just wanted to make sure we were really alone so I could give you this."

I reach into my pocket and pinch the ring between my fingers, holding it out to her. She gasps and I feel our baby-girl kick under my hand.

"Annabeth, will you—"

"Yes!"

"Jeez, lady. Would you let me finish? It's like you never shut up." I chuckle, faking annoyance.

She holds her hands up. "Sorry. Continue."

I sigh and kiss her hand. “Marry me.”

She nods as tears streak her face. I slide the ring onto her finger and lift her to stand, kissing her deeply. Myles honks his horn, and before I can tell him to cut it out, my mom throws the door open, the lights pop on, and the whole family hollers and cheers.

Annabeth stares at me in utter shock, shaking her head and holding her belly as she cries. Kate hugs her first, followed by my mom, all three of them in tears as they pull Annabeth into the house.

Myles stands next to me and grabs my shoulder as we watch our families hug and celebrate. We look at each other and nod.

“So, are you excited to meet your daughter-in-law?” I joke.

“No way, Hudson’s way too good for her.” He nudges me and bounces into the house, scooping up Hudson and spinning him around as they both giggle.

I watch as Annabeth shows Kate and Mary her ring. My mom is clutching her other hand, crouched to the floor, whispering into Annabeth’s belly. Annabeth looks up at me and grits her teeth, her eyes saying, “*save me.*” I wander in and whisk Annabeth away to a chair at the table, grabbing her a glass of water just as the timer on the oven dings.

“Are you happy?” I ask as I crouch down in front of her again. Annabeth runs her hands through as I kiss her belly.

“More than you will ever know, Scott.”

The End.

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I saw the way he gazed longingly at my body as I casually walked by him in the canned food aisle, not knowing it was me.

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