

Just one step on the right path can plant a seed for growth



Love &
PICKET FENCES

MANDY ROMANO

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This novel is dedicated to anyone who finds themselves attached to something that is dwindling their inner light, whether that be a relationship, job, or even a place. May you find the strength to save yourself. Not all stories need to end with a hero to save the day. A person allowing themselves to walk away from what's hurting them is the strongest thing they can do—mentally & physically. -Mandy

Playlist

Little Lion Man – Mumford and Sons

The Chain – Fleetwood Mac

Walking on Sunshine – Katrina and The Waves

Take on Me – A-ha

My Heart Will Go On – Celine Dion

Stubborn Love – The Lumineers

She's So High – Tal Bachman

Vienna – Billy Joel

Mr. Brightside – The Killers

Good Girls Bad Guys – Falling in Reverse

TW: This book includes scenes that deal with suicide and domestic violence. Please take this into account if these are triggering to you. Reading should be a safe place; no book is worth causing you stress. <3

Prologue, Del

Twenty-one is an important age. It is the age every twenty-year-old anxiously waits to reach. Then you turn twenty-one and your invisible timeline speeds up so fast that you begin to doubt the rate you're moving through life. Without thought, you decide that you're behind. That everyone is moving forward and then there is just *you*.

The weird part about all of this was that people considered me to be ahead in life, and I guess I understood why—to an extent. Compared to the people I grew up with, I was one of the few to leave my small town. I guess that was all it took to be successful nowadays. There's an odd stigma that's associated with never leaving your town, I wasn't sure why, but now that I had, I was considered to have been 'flourishing,' even though I felt far from.

After months of picking at my inner thoughts, I came to a different conclusion. I realized that there is no timeline on when to achieve goals, and not everyone shares the same goals so how can we pick out an age we should be triumphant by? A doctor is successful but so is a singer. One takes years to achieve while the other can happen in a day. They are two vastly different examples of success. And two vastly different timelines.

Look at Stan Lee. He did not write his first hit comic, "The Fantastic Four," until he was thirty-nine. Vera Wang was forty when she entered the fashion industry, and Henry Ford was forty-five when he created the revolutionary Model T car. There is no expiration date for creativity. And

here I was, a twenty-one-year-old *New York Times* bestselling author, feeling behind? Feeling like a one hit wonder? And that's exactly why I am now standing in the center of a massive city feeling like I have two green antennas sticking out of my head and a glowing finger.

Oh yeah, I guess that was the point I was trying to get at. And the timeline theory was created on the plane ride here in a way to reassure myself that I had time to figure my shit out. And to distract myself from my fear of heights and lack of Xanax. I could thank my publicist for that.

Thanks, Scarlett.

If it weren't for her persistence, I may have never moved to the setting of my next novel. I probably would have been standing in a cow pasture right now with both hands on Angus the cow's utter, squeezing milk out. And if I had known she would've strongly suggested I do move after I sent her my book proposal, I would've made my book somewhere more tropical like Ibiza or even Florida. Not Brooklyn.

Imitating a main character in one of the many romance movies I had seen, I popped up my arm and yelled, "Taxi!" The nearest yellow cab halted abruptly in front of me. My eyes widened at the fact that it worked. Raising my eyebrows, pride filled my face.

Nailed it.

I inhaled a deep breath. Looking down at my phone to check the time, seven-fifty a.m. stares back at me with an enthusiastic, "You're doing great," wallpaper I had found on Pinterest a few days ago. It's weird how something so simple can make me feel so encouraged. But lately a lot of things

have been weird. I blamed it on the last-minute change in lifestyle.

My focus is drawn to the side of me, away from the Pinterest quote when I hear a conversation between a scrawny man and a red-haired girl who are walking quickly away from the sounds of sirens. She wears a thick cheetah print fur jacket and leather straight-legged pants, and he wears pants that sag below his waist.

“Did you hear about the millionaire who jumped from the twelfth story window this morning?” The girl says nonchalantly as she gossips, adjusting the collar of whatever poor animal was sacrificed for that hideous coat. “Danielle said she saw the entire thing.”

“Yeah, that’s old news,” the man *laughs*. “Today, I watched someone get hit by a car.” He takes his closed fist and slams it into his open palm to make a visual aid. “Splat! He was literally run over. Crazy right? Turns out it was this man’s crazy girlfriend. How can someone be so dumb? Like there had to have been so many signs.” They found this humorous and because of that, I couldn’t control the way my nose scrunched in disdain.

Together, they walked across the street without looking both ways, continuing to speak loud enough for anyone within a five-mile radius to hear. Who was I kidding, if it weren’t for the taxis blowing their horns and cellphones pinging in every direction, Alaska could’ve heard them. I guess little-minded people existed everywhere. *Was this a promising idea?* I think to myself as the unfamiliar city was laid out in front of me like a complicated puzzle. And if there was anything in the world I hated most...it was puzzles.

A hoarse, impatient voice called out from the taxi. “You coming or what? I don’t have all day, lady. I’m gonna start paying by the second!”

Tucking my phone in the back pocket of my bell-bottom jeans, I bend over to grab my cheap luggage that was about to pop at the seams—a last-minute purchase from a secondhand shop before leaving Tennessee. I could’ve used the money I was earning to buy a new one, but material things were never important to me. I was too focused on balancing all my bags that I didn’t have time to react to the quick-moving body as she shoved into me unexpectedly causing me to lose balance, landing backward on the dirty pavement. A day’s old piece of pink chewing gum stuck to my back pocket as I pressed my palms down to lift myself up.

Wonderful.

“I am so sorry,” a girl says frantically, holding her hand out to assist me. “I just wasn’t paying attention, and I am already so late to my lecture.” I liked that she seemed apologetic. After many years of being shoved into lockers and having books slapped out of my hand, I expected everyone to view me as a loser. I guess this could be something to add to the list of pros and cons.

Pro: No one here knows me.

A small laugh escaped my mouth as I accepted her hand. I wish I had stopped myself from questioning the morals of a New Yorker, but the comment had left my mouth already. “I didn’t think people apologized for running into someone here. I kind of figured it was just a normal occurrence for the population

For a moment I think she did not hear me. Picking up my phone that laid face down on the sidewalk, she lets out a sigh of relief as she sees the lack of damage. “They don’t. I’m from Chicago.” She thinks silently for a beat then says, “I guess they don’t apologize there either though. Actually, I feel like I’ve been spit on there for the same thing. This sort of happens a lot. My mother says I make falling up the steps look easy.”

I laughed again. The girl’s face looked anxious as dark chocolate-brown eyes stared back at me before flicking away quickly. Her attention was on the taxi that continued to wait impatiently in front of me. I watched as her foot tapped restlessly matching the same beat of her fingers on her arm.

“You can have it,” I smiled tilting my head toward the agitated man who sat behind the wheel waiting for someone to fill his back seat. It had only been three minutes since I waved him down, but I guess New York time was different than Tennessee time.

“Really?” her smile curved up as she revealed straight, pearl-white teeth that contrasted beautifully with her golden-brown toned skin. Her dark straight hair was slicked into a low bun, and she wore business casual clothes: a pair of gray slacks with a loose-fitting pink satin button down and a black leather shoulder bag to match her black pointed flats. She looked minimal and effortlessly beautiful.

I nodded my head in confirmation. “Yes, I am in no rush. I’m still not sure where I’m even going yet to be honest.” I looked around at all the chaos in front of me. It was so different than the life I was used to, and since I stepped off the plane, I had been doubting my decision. Could I be the type of girl who lives in a city? Did my job matter this much to me to move so far from everything I was used to? I knew I wanted to be successful but part of me wished I could attend all the

conferences and book signings from home. Isn't that a perk of being a writer? You can work from anywhere? Man, I should've questioned Scarlett a little more than I did.

“Well, how about you share the taxi with me. I am *most definitely* in a rush, so let's go.” Urging me to get in, the girl shut the door behind us. “To Whittaker building please.” She smiled. “I'm Julianne but no one ever calls me that. Except my mother when she's angry. Have you ever seen a Hispanic mom angry? If you had you'd realize why I don't go by my full name. Anyways, my friends call me Jules.” Her eyebrows raised as she looked at me waiting for an introduction. Awkwardly, I answered. “I'm Adella, but my friends call me Del. I don't have Hispanic heritage, I'm just not a fan of my name.”

“How do you like the city?” She asked interrogatively.

“It is um—*different*. This is my first day here.”

“Well, my only advice is, do *not* touch the bars in the subway and stay updated on your vaccinations. This place is a disease waiting to happen.” Hand sanitizer quickly found its way out of her purse as she squeezed a dallop of the gel into the center of her palm. “Want some?” she asked.

“That's okay,” I smiled. I had touched worse things than that in my backyard. I wonder how many people can say they helped a cow give birth to their calf. Probably not many, but I was one who had.

Staring out the window at the never-ending skyscrapers that completely blocked the skyline, I felt a sense of calm. The first easing of my nerves I had felt in the last twelve hours, and for the first time I felt like I *could* do this.

My eyes gleamed at the diverse crowd as everyone rushed to work, unphased by the possibility that someone could be watching them. I admired it. I looked back over to Jules, who was rubbing the sanitizer intensely between her palms so quickly and focused that a stranger would think she was using the friction to start a fire. I shook my head and smiled, looking out of the taxi as it ventured farther into the concrete jungle of chaos.

Chapter One

Del, Six Years Later

The unthinkable was happening.

Six years of my life was wasted.

Six years I had abided by the boundaries I created for myself to achieve my picture-perfect future. Six years it took for me to realize that I was not able to become the woman I so desperately ached to be if I continued to find comfort within my old habits. The habits that had set me back even further than I was when my sneakers first touched the dirty pavement of New York City. An ache reached my stomach as I contemplated the 2,190 days that I spent balled up on my bedroom floor, feeling sorry for myself.

Truthfully, I did not even recognize myself anymore. I looked in the mirror and although my face looked the same, something about me was different. It was like the freckles on my upturned nose had stayed, but my legs had no longer felt the need to take relaxing jogs throughout the park. Or that my hair was still so deep brown it could be confused for black, but my hands were unable to pick up the broken pieces after each minor inconvenience that led to a week of cutting everyone off.

I had put this “perfect” idea of a future in my mind, but what does perfect even entail? No flaws? No mistakes? No bad qualities that we can learn from that make humans human? I feel my eyes roll into my head as I contemplate this thought. Shaking my head, I take it back. I was wrong to say I wanted a perfect future. Perfect is unrealistic. I just wanted one that ends with me being genuinely happy, and to me that was *my* definition of success.

Sounds easy right?

Apparently not, because here I am, in the back end of the city, sitting in a silent white room that is lined with bookshelves, where my presence quite literally represents how far I was from what you would think would be the easiest goal there is to reach.

Being able to wake up feeling fulfilled every day is a lifestyle only a few people can consistently reach throughout their lives. That feeling of winning simply by being alive. Ha! Last time I felt that—I would imagine—was when I won the race to who could reach the egg first back when I was conceived.

My attention span is shortened as my eyes burn through the never-ending beige shelves that were on display. One book catches my view: *The Errors That Lead to Success*.

Yeah right, I coughed back a laugh. Here's the thing, at one point, I too wanted to be a psychiatrist until I realized I was just as messed up as my patients would've been, so that's when I took an alternate route...writing. I have a strong belief that writers and therapists are the most disturbed humans in the world. Not necessarily in the sense that they're sociopaths or something, but in the sense that we can never tell if we are giving advice to help others or to help ourselves. It is indeed *humorous*.

The deafening silence is interrupted by the sound of a woman clearing her throat in response to my poorly hidden chuckle.

My white fluffy chair spun around in anguish as I swayed my knees back and forth anxiously allowing my heels to graze the carpet beneath me like an impatient child seconds before the school bell rings permitting me to go home. *Home*, what a vague word, I thought as I pictured my expensive apartment in the city.

If you would've seen me last night you would have thought "does this girl even have a clue?" I was sprawled on the couch in my Valentino dress I bought just for a conference in Manhattan. I had everything yet I was sitting like the Grinch, wallowing in self-pity, with mascara painting my cheeks from all the tears I had shed. I lived in the biggest penthouse in New York. My shoe closet was large enough to make Paris Hilton jealous, and my collection of purses could've been sold to feed an entire third-world country. And if it were up to me, it would've been. But nothing was up to me anymore. I was dressed to fit the image of the happy fiancé, and the way I spoke sounded so practiced I could've given Gatsby a lesson on pretending. I had perfected the fake smile so well that not one of the 2,000 guests from last night suspected a thing. It was the same thing every day. Wake up, stare at a blank word document, eat lunch, go to an important gala or VIP party, then fall asleep alone, just to do it all over again. The only thing that ever changed was my Starbucks order and even that was becoming a usual caramel iced latte. I felt like a non-playable character in my own life.

Pale blue-painted acrylics tapped on the arm of my chair eagerly as Loretta scribbled on her floral-designed notepad. I watched closely as she looped her cursive and then rested the pen on her lap. Sliding herself forward, she straightened her back to fix her posture emphasizing her chiseled collarbone and sharp angled shoulders.

Her hazel eyes narrowed, staring into my soul making me want to scooch my chair back and build an invisible shield that blocked out any words of advice. Instead,

I crossed my arms so she couldn't see my heart beating out of my chest from stress.

“Can I be blunt?” she asked.

I glided back further into defense. “How blunt?”

Let me just be clear, I was not worried about her hurting my feelings, I was used to that. I had signed up for that willingly. However, I feared her being right.

I intentionally came to a therapist that had not known who I was—partially because my ex-fiancé's image was too important for me to publicly go to a more conventional therapist in a more obvious location. (Therefore, I have been secretly driving myself through back alleys to these appointments to avoid the press.) And although sometimes I questioned where Loretta could have gotten her degree, I trusted her. And I hated talking about my feelings to people who knew me. That's a huge reason why Loretta was a better option than my best friend. That did end up backfiring though, because now I'd consider my therapist to be my friend, which wasn't totally unhinged since she couldn't have been older than thirty-five.

That didn't change the fact though that she had been exactly what I needed the last few years, but sometimes she would hit the nail right on the head and that would lead to days of me thinking only about my sessions.

I guess that's what happens after you spend so much of your life in school studying psychology; you become a therapist who makes your patient rethink their entire existence—even if you got pregnant and couldn't finish out your doctorate. Not that I ever would bring that up around her. She had briefly mentioned it during one of our many sessions. And

although I can tell it wasn't the path she had imagined, she seemed happy. But who was I to assume she was?

Other than Loretta, I had Jules. She was also in school studying psychology, making the only two people I confided in well-practiced mediators. And this too, is why I stand with my statement that psychiatrists are usually just as tormented as the rest of us.

My thoughts were cut off as the straightforward sentence smacked me in the face so hard, I felt a slight warmth of embarrassment in my cheeks.

“You show signs of insanity.” Her high-pitched voice belted out as if it was a completely normal and innocent thing to suggest.

I did not know what I expected her to say but that was most definitely, not it. All those years of school for *that*? Was she even allowed to say that? Maybe the discount she gave me was also a deal for her to be entirely too honest. Her invisible bullets came firing at my imaginary barrier sending it crumbling down like she had just arrived inside the Trojan horse unexpectedly.

Did my *therapist* just call me insane?

“Excuse me?” I gasped at her insensitive statement as she looked at her notebook and jotted something down. What could she be jotting down from a two-word sentence?

1. *Reacted negatively after expressing my concerns about her insanity.*

Looking up at me through her glasses that sat on her freckled nose she studied my insulted expression. She was nonresponsive to my dismissive attitude. Loretta was completely and utterly unphased as she sat confidently in her pale pink bodycon dress that touched just below the knees. Her legs crossed neatly, and her blonde hair was pulled into a claw clip so tight I could assume she had a massive headache. I don't know though; the headache assumption could also be from the weight of her massive pearl earrings that she wore daily.

Picking up her coffee, she sipped thoughtfully.

“Insanity,” she continued, “is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results.” My puzzled look of concern dwindled into nothing as I repeated this in my head trying to interpret the meaning. Steam from the coffee lingered in the air as I watched it slowly disappear, still baffled.

“Do you think you are insane?” She asked, with the oversized, Bible-quoted mug still held in the air, causing a cramp in my wrist just by watching.

I had unconsciously sunk down in my seat, pouting when I answered. “Um—I hardly would consider myself to be insane. I mean maybe I do tend to show *some* symptoms based off *your* definition—but insane?” My eyebrows raised as I stayed defensive. “No, I am not insane.” I confirmed after an obvious inner debate with myself. The angel on my left shoulder told me to accept the advice while the devil on the right tells me to haul ass out the door.

“How could my definition apply to your life?”

I knew where she was heading with this, and I did not want it to get there. Rubbing my forehead, my mind continues to debate.

Propelling myself off the seat, I began pacing in place. “How do I leave something that has taken up so much of my life? Something I have grown to know?” I shoot back, avoiding what I perceived to be her judgment but could be mistaken for a genuinely sympathetic look.

“*You* have created goals for *yourself*, Adella. Is there anyone who could achieve these goals for you?” She continues to study my face already knowing the correct answer.

I sigh “no,” like an intolerable teenager whose mother just proved them wrong after a day-long debate. A feeling I knew all too well from high school, and one that I had *not* missed.

“Is there anyone else currently in your life who can pull you out of this slump? *Or* is there anyone who is putting you further *into* one.” Her eyes filled with accusation unknowingly.

I thought for another second and held the urge to roll my eyes back, “no,” I answered again, “and yes.”

She finally sets her coffee down along with her notebook and ballpoint pen, indicating for me to seat myself again. After following instructions, she leans into me with her elbows rested on her thighs, a serious expression on her face.

“Adella, you’re unhappy because *you* choose to be. We have had these sessions for almost two years now, and I believe you know what needs to be done. Don’t you think you

have had enough? I cannot make this decision for you, Adella, but I think it would be best if we discontinued our sessions. You have improved so much in accepting the things you struggled to accept before. It's your turn now to take the next step and leave the things that are holding you back. I know this can be a hard concept for you to grasp, so I'm going to explain it with a situation. Let's pretend you're tied to an anchor and you're on a boat in the middle of a storm that's sinking. I have the shears in my hand and all you need to do is reach me and grab them. You need to accept my help so that we can detach you from this weight that is sinking you further and further down. I need you to take the shears, Adella."

Could shears even cut a rope that thick? What a stupid metaphor, by the time we'd be done hacking away at it, the boat would've already sunk. I pretended it makes sense though because I appreciated the deeper meaning of it.

"Do you think it could get better?" My silver-green eyes caught hers. I wanted a genuine answer, but I should have known she would answer my question with a question.

Ugh, why did I sign up for this? Maybe I am insane. Paying a woman to just confirm what I already know in more scientific poetic terms?

"Let me ask you this. Do *you* think it will get better? Or how about this, *has* it gotten better? You have asked me this question quite a few times, and I have only seen you for a fraction of the time you have been with him, but you have been asking yourself this question for the last *six years*. Is it worth it? Is *he* worth all the pain and self-deprecation? If he cared about this relationship, he would have suggested couple's therapy, not just therapy for you." My silence was enough of an answer as I found it difficult to find the right words. The obvious disappointment appeared on my face in red as I stood up and thanked Loretta for today's session.

“Take care of yourself, you have my number. If you want to continue sessions, we can definitely do that, but I need you to take this time to start working out things for yourself. View your life in a way that is understandable to you. Imagine you are reconstructing a book with a few flaws that can end it from being a top best-seller, now just apply that to your life, only your life is that book and you only get one copy. Find solutions in a way that is easily understood and familiar to you.” Loretta’s face scrunched leaving wrinkles in her forehead as she stared into me.

“Would you write a character that settled with the first guy she meets who physically *and* verbally abuses her? Or would you pick up your pencil and rewrite her story so that she leaves that relationship and gives herself the chance to have a happily ever after? It is something to think about. Easier said than done, but I believe in you, Adella Jean.” Slowly, Loretta stands as she finds her desk. “It’s easy to stay in a bad place because you’re cautious about starting over.” She went on. Reaching into her drawer she pulls something out and holds it behind her back. Seconds later, she displays a pair of shiny blue scissors.

Taking the scissors, I knew she was right. It was time to relieve myself from her metaphorical anchor. But that didn’t stop me from finding it funny that my therapist gave me a pair of scissors. Did she have a secret stash back there or something? I wonder if she used that same metaphor on all her patients.

“Do you always give sharp weapon-like objects to your patients?” I asked only kind of kidding.

She laughed. “Whatever makes the workday shorter I guess.”

“Loretta,” I said in a humorous voice. “I hope you aren’t this comical with your other patients.”

“I don’t get coffee in the morning with my other patients, and I especially don’t do margarita nights with them. I guess we can just say you’re special.” I smiled at that.

I thought for a minute then nodded appreciatively and pulled her in for a quick hug. “I’m going to miss you,” I said releasing her. On my way out, I went to shut the door but before I did, I cracked it and popped my head back into her room.

“So, coffee next Tuesday?” I asked.

“See you at eight.”

Chapter Two

Del

After sitting in my car for a half hour to resettle, I decided it was time to leave my parking spot for the last time.

I dropped the blue scissors into my center console and grabbed my sunglasses. Mumford and Sons blasted on the radio as my car slowly drifted out of the parking lot, maneuvering into the heavy flow of traffic.

Weep for yourself, my man. You'll never be what is in your heart. Weep, little lion man. You're not as brave as you were at the start. The band sings causing me to slump a little in my seat.

The expensive diamond-clustered gold ring on my left hand intimidated me as it rested on the leather steering wheel staring back at me. With my right hand, I reluctantly removed the symbol of forever and tossed it in my cup holder avoiding eye contact. A much-needed breath of air escaped my pursed lips as I leaned back and stared at the lines of cars ahead of me. All these cars held people, and each one was their own main character. I had this weird thing I always do where I like to look at strangers and see life through their perspective. Like everyone I pass has their own life with their own problems and details, and it's just so crazy to me how so many minds can co-exist at once. It's fascinating. Sometimes I see a stranger doing something and it sparks a concept for a book. And then I think, someone in the world has no idea that they were inspiration for an entire novel. Curiously, my eyes drifted out my window.

To the left of me was a silver SUV with a man driving and a woman in the passenger seat. Behind them was a

pink car seat. The wife was singing carelessly, while what I assumed to be her husband smiled, just before pulling her in for a kiss. To the right of me was a beautifully dark-skinned man who looked like he had just come back from a modelling shoot. With headphones in, he slowly bobbed his head back and forth in one of the taxis. I was humbled by the knowledge that my reality was just a speck in the sea full of lives that walked past me holding briefcases or within the dust that was left behind from the exhausts of motorcycles that sped through traffic illegally.

The traffic began to pick up pace as fresh faces appeared and the old vanished, probably never to be seen again. I gazed back to the ring. “You can do this,” I affirmed.

My last session replayed in my head like it was recorded and stored in a filing cabinet inside my brain. I considered the advice and the takeaways.

I had goals; she was right. I mean I still do have them, but after you stumble through life as often as I do, they diminish, I guess. They seem further and further out of reach.

It’s like fishing. Since Loretta’s first language is metaphors, that’s how I viewed life now—as a metaphor.

You cast your bait out into the open unable to see what is out of the eyes reach. You throw yourself out there confidently after a considerable amount of preparation, in the hopes that you will benefit from it, in this example, by catching a fish. I am at that point in my life, I have the fish hooked, it’s just reeling it in that I struggle with. My line is weak, and I feel as if it could snap at any moment and that all the work I had done to prepare for this moment could break away at any given moment.

So here I am, exasperated, on the edge of my metaphorical dock reeling in my dreams when there is an easy solution that I am avoiding. A stronger line; a stronger mindset.

Part of the fault lies with where my goals came from. I set my life out like pictures laid sporadically on a carpet as I compared my life to the great romance movies like *The Notebook* and *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*. I created this vision of what I wanted to accomplish after my grandmother inspired me one day, encouraging me to believe I could have anything I wanted if I put my mind to it.

I thought long and hard from the age of eight up until I was sixteen about what I wanted out of life. Several things crossed my mind.

I considered being a fire fighter when I was seven, but my fear of heights and ladders was enough for me to ponder the idea of being a doctor. Then I passed out after getting a flu shot when I was ten and realized I was far too queasy to be in the medical field. When I was eleven, I became addicted to *Criminal Minds* and decided to become a detective. I had that dream up until parent-teacher day when a boy's father came in and told stories of all the things he's seen while carrying his badge. I had to be excused to the hallway from how hard I cried.

I was at my wits end until a gloomy Thursday afternoon when my flip phone buzzed with an invite to see a new movie that was showing at our beat-down local theater. Being one of the not-so-popular kids in my small town, I was jumping at the thought that Amy Wells and her clique asked me to join them. I laced up my Chuck Taylors and rolled up my denim jeans before walking to the theater to meet up with the rhinestone dress-wearing group of blonde-haired girls.

The seats were dark red from being worn out due to all the people who had occupied them the last fifty years and caused an itch on the bottom of our thighs. I sat nervously as the rest of the girls giggled throughout the movie.

I remembered smelling cigarette smoke as the rom com blasted on the screen, lighting every crevasse of the darkened theater. My eyes watched appreciatively throughout the entire film while phone screens lit up beside me.

To sum it up, the movie portrayed a girl who falls in love and has her happily ever after, every young girl's dream. I later found out that Amy's mother forced her to invite me out with them, but I did not care because after two hours sitting in that theater that is now foreclosed, I discovered everything I wanted to be as a person.

I wanted to be a mother.

I wanted to fall in love.

I wanted to be someone who owned a beautiful southern home with a white picket fence, as basic as that sounded, but I didn't care. I wanted that life.

I came home that night grinning ear to ear oozing with excitement. I picked up the phone and called my grandmother. She was thrilled to hear the sound of my voice, and I could hear her chuckle echo through the phone as she said, "You will get your picket fence life, pumpkin." From that day on, I knew I needed to have my picket fence life. I even dreamt about it, and now that I am twenty-six, I had the entire thing drafted out like one of my romance novels.

Picture this.

One day I wake up and I receive an excessively enthusiastic call from my publicist, Scarlett. I became number-one bestselling romance author at *New York Times* again. Not even ten months later I get married at twenty-seven to the love of my life, Lance Michael Powell Jr., in front of all our dearest friends and family. Our white sunflower-decorated Volkswagen punch buggy drives off into the night with rusted cans dragging behind as flailing arms wave through the air struggling to catch the bouquet I just tossed from it.

We honeymoon in Venice, Italy, taking long boat rides and spending our evenings wine tasting in the hills of Europe. A month later we get a positive pregnancy test. He is *thrilled* to be a dad!

Fast forward eight years later, our two healthy kids are playing outside on our freshly mowed lawn surrounded by beautiful red and yellow tulips and a white picket fence. The kids are chasing our golden retrievers Charlie and Blue.

You can hear me from our house getting off the phone with my parents just in time to yell, “Kids, dinner is ready, come wash your hands!” in a Mother Teresa tone as I set the freshly made spaghetti and meatballs on the white lace tablecloth with my red and white picnic-checkered oven mitts still on. The kids wash up, and I welcome Lance home from work with a hug and kiss on the temple.

We eat an incredible dinner full of discussions like, “How was work today?” and “Did you two learn anything new at school?” Dinner would be over, and I would tuck the kids in and continue working on my new masterpiece of a romance novel, where the overprotective, but mysterious, guy falls in love with the innocent, independent woman. Later, Lance would kiss me goodnight and the smile would remain on my face for the next ten years until the kids go to college, and we

would have to find new hobbies as empty nesters. Life would be perfect. It would be my dream life.

Sounds *incredible*, right?

Yes, well I'd like to think that is how it could have gone if my ex-fiancé were not a two-faced lying snob who only cares about his hand-me-down job, reputation, and his new big-breasted intern, Amelia, who was used for more than just organizing files, apparently.

Okay, I may be a little bitter, but that was beside the point. I had every right to be, the man is the reason I spent two days a week in therapy sessions on the opposite side of the city, that comes out of *my* wallet. Even if it was discounted and I enjoyed Loretta. It was absolutely, violently frustrating. Was I a little hostile? Yes. Did I become an annoying level of Negative Nancy over the years? Absolutely, and as much as I wish I could deny that, at least I was self-aware. Right?

To describe where some of the frustration started, I needed to go back a little. What is that phrase they said? You can't judge a book by its cover? Yeah, well let me explain what led to the Valentino dress crying at two a.m. on my couch with a bottle of Don Julio 1942. It all started six years ago.

Lance had just taken over his grandfather's self-built law firm in New York three years before I had moved to the city. His father was retiring, and Lance was next to pull the reins. It was the most prestigious law firm taking in major cases daily right in the middle of everything.

I was an hour early to my meeting with another publisher, after hitting New York Times bestselling author for the first (and only) time. I had been up the entire night before anxious to discuss my next novel that contributed greatly to my

move to the city; therefore, I needed a little pick-me-up. I decided to make a quick pitstop at Starbucks.

It was a fifteen-minute wait in line for a coffee, but I had convinced myself coffee was the answer to all my prayers that morning. It was seven a.m., and I was already thinking the day couldn't get worse. I had involuntarily walked in the path of a taxi that splashed yesterday's rainwater all over my slacks, and my mind was doing that thing where I couldn't remember if I unplugged my straightening iron or not. I had accidentally set fire to my cheap stove after leaving sausage patties unattended and broke a heel before even leaving the apartment. Then I got a ping on my phone. The meeting was cancelled, and I had woken up at five-thirty for no reason. It was like the day had gone so far down that I could see every layer and fine detail in the lowest crust of earth. But still, I had the hope that coffee would make it all worth it.

That was when I met Lance. He was five minutes late to his meeting and simply did not care so he too decided he wanted an iced beverage.

A line of people swore and shouted as he cut in front of them to confront me about my choice in drink which I had not thought much about. It had bothered me at first that he felt the impulsive need to have an opinion on what I consumed, and part of me wished I had left because something that bothers you in the beginning is usually one of the reasons why you leave in the end. And, not that he knew, but I had spent much of my life being judged by a number on the scale in high school before joining track.

I don't know what I expected when I turned around to the deep voice, but I did not imagine it would be a man who looked like a Greek god. If you would have told me that Satan was six-foot-two with blue eyes and a smile that sparkled in the light of a coffee shop while a barista frantically pushed

through us to tame the yelling in line, I would never have believed you.

“Is there actually even coffee in that?” Lance asked staring down at my sugar-filled, white chocolate frappe that was embellished with whipped cream and caramel. Sure, it was probably over 1,000 calories but who cares? Someday I will be old and won’t be able to consume sugar at all.

“Read the sign,” I say gesturing to my order on the overhead screen above us.

“White chocolate frappe. Interesting. I feel like it’s entirely too sweet.” The way he looked down at me bothered me. It was the way several of my peers in high school used to look at me when I went up for extras in the cafeteria line. Maybe I would have been kinder if I hadn’t had a terrible morning, but I was just completely over everything.

“It’s a good thing you aren’t drinking it then, am I right?” My lips pressed together as I stood on my tip toes to investigate his bitter cup. “I do not think I will take coffee judgment from a man who likes original blend over hazelnut.”

“What are you?” he asked leaning closer, “What accent is that?”

“What am I?” I snorted quickly, recovering with a fake laugh. “I am from Tennessee, not sure how that has anything to do with coffee though?” I raised an eyebrow at him. Moving forward, I took a seat at an empty table. He followed.

He cracked a joke about how if he were my size, he would drink diabetes in a cup too, but he must keep an eye on

his physique at his age, which couldn't have been much older than me.

The comment annoyed me but for some reason I was completely intrigued by him. I am not sure if it was because the only person I had known so far was Jules, from our shared taxi ride, or if it was because a person of the opposite gender had not flirted with me for at least a couple months up to this point, but, before I knew it, I was continuing to hold conversation.

“You just skipped that entire line you know?”

“If I didn't skip, you would've been long gone by now, and I wouldn't have been able to indulge in this fine conversation we are having.”

“Our interpretation of fine is very different, I'd say.”

“And why is that?”

The way he stood made me realize he's important. He was dressed well and had a Rolex on his wrist and for some reason that made me want to ignore him more. But I didn't. “Because not only did you insult my choice of caffeine, but you just skipped an entire line of people with no thought about it as if your time meant more than theirs.”

“So, what I'm hearing is if I repay them for their time, I could maybe have a moment of yours?”

“I never—” Just as I was about to reject him, he moved quickly to the barista. Setting a wad of cash on the

counter, he winks back at me and whispers something in her ear.

“They’re all paid for,” he says to me before announcing to the line, “It’s come to my attention that I should have waited my turn so as an apology, your orders are on me today.” Something about that moment tugged at my heartstrings and before I knew it, we were out for drinks.

So yeah. That was it. I had just turned twenty-one, and he was dreadfully gorgeous and seven years older, I later discovered. My lack of relationship experience made me fall hard for his dark-blond, short, freshly trimmed hair; serious blue eyes; and that smile that ended up twinkling in more places than the coffee shop. He had a certain boyish charm to him that made me believe he was incredibly innocent; it was what made me fall in love with him.

His facial features resembled an older Chad Michael Murray, so can you really blame me for swooning and acting like I was made to make a man happy? The only difference between Lance and Chad Michael Murray is I did not see Lance ditching a life-changing football game for me in the first rain of the year to tell me he was mine while his controlling father and peers watched. Man, I really loved that movie. I mean I guess I had not seen Lance do anything that involved sacrifice or exercise throughout our six-year death trap of a relationship.

Lance had *always* hated dirt and sports in general. I came to the assumption he was the child in school who would stand in the corner during kickball whereas I was the one the teachers had to calm down due to screaming at the opposing team as they went to the red rubber plate. There was even a time when I had thrown a ball so hard, I hit an upperclassman in the face and gave him a bloody nose (on accident of

course). God, what was his name? Beaux. Yeah, he already hated me, but some would say he deserved it.

There was this one time where I tried to take Lance home to meet my family five years ago for my grandmother's seventieth birthday. He complained about the smell of manure and lack of satin sheets telling me he just could not expose himself to that type of lifestyle. How did he know it smelled like manure? I mean it could be described as a manure scent, but you get used to it after the first day or two. A Bath and Body Works candle and a little Febreze got the job done—usually.

You would think I would have left after that *bomb* of a red flag. He sounds terrible, right? He is worse than that, but he still knows how to charm a girl into ruining her life. I guess that was the lawyer in him, constantly having a rebuttal for every argument we got into.

If it were not for my lack of self-respect, I would have left after the red head with bangs named Shelby came knocking on our door dressed as a slutty nurse and held a first aid kit full of rubbers and an edible stethoscope. Unfortunately, she mixed up his personal office with our home address.

Poor Shelby.

Lance claimed that she was Jared, his secretary's, mistress and the mix up was just something to laugh at. I might have believed it if Shelby had not asked for Lance at the door and said she was there for an 'exam' followed by a wink that suggested it was for nothing other than a dick appointment. The door shut as fast as it opened after I told her I was his fiancé, and she looked like she saw a ghost. That was entirely reasonable considering he told her I died in an awful

accident. Was it parasailing? Or bungee jumping? Hell, if I know. I guess that was better than what he told the last girl—I was an abusive, territorial gold digger who resented the world, and he was divorcing me right away. If it were up to me, I'd eat frozen pizza and drink cheap wine for dinner compared to caviar and champagne that cost as much as a mortgage on a house. I hated being called a gold digger. I had my own money; I didn't need his.

I should have left him alone a year after meeting him in that coffee shop, I know, but it was better to get over it and live with the already known knowledge that he was a pig than to restart. Have you ever gotten out of a relationship that took about a quarter of your life just to download a dating app and ask someone what their favorite color is?

What's your favorite color?

Do you have hopes and dreams?

Do you think you would cheat on me after six years of planning a future and picking out our children's names?

Absolutely not.

I had been home for all of a minute before I noticed something sitting on the counter. I stared blankly at the beautiful sage green vase that held the prettiest sunflowers. Through blurry vision from the betrayal of my tear ducts I watched the vibrant yellow petals. They reminded me of home, which made me hate them even more. Not because I hated Tennessee, but because I missed it so much.

I wanted to tear them apart and chuck them off our six-story balcony. Lance deliberately made sure they were too

beautiful to ruin though. The top was wrapped with a small but over-the-top white silk bow with an unapologetic, “I’m sorry, I am only human. I love you, she meant nothing” half-assed note. I laugh.

I snapped a picture of the note and sent it to Amelia’s—the previously mentioned intern and Lance’s newest conquest—number that Jared secretly forwarded to me. I could not be pissed at her; she had no obligations to me. Really, her only obligation should have been to respect herself enough to know that getting into a relationship with a man who cheated during his last one was bound to just end the same way.

I scratched my head still staring at the piece of paper tucked under the ribbon. The note might have meant more and maybe I would not have sent it to his other women if he had personally given me the flowers and did not use a vase I already owned and bought myself. Or if the thirteen emails I received were typed by him and not Jared.

That man really deserved a raise. He had overseen the mending of all our fights and taking the blame for all of Lance’s secret women since he first got the job. Jared was happily married to his wife, and they had just created an adorable baby. I will say, being a romance writer makes you study people’s true intentions, and Jared’s were pure. When you study relationships to make your novels seem as real as possible, you start to see people as they are, not as you want them to be. I saw Lance as he was, I just was not ready to be in solitude for the rest of my life.

If it were not for the job that gave Jared the chance to power up in the world of law, he would have quit the day he started. I also knew Lance was a wet life-sucking rat, so I wouldn’t blame any of his employees for leaving. Luckily for Jared, he could not take the blame for the new blonde intern

Amelia. Unless Lance said that he let Jared borrow his body and that was not really him I caught on our coffee table a week ago having sloppy sex.

He should have known I was going to cancel my meeting with my editor because he made the first mistake any man makes when he cheats.

He left his phone on the kitchen table.

His phone buzzed obnoxiously for a half hour before I decided to pick it up and read the messages:

A: Hey, what are you doing tonight?

L: Absolutely nothing, and she's out of town.

A: See you at eight.

It didn't take long for me to fake a sickness and free up my schedule. I waited on the tenth-story stairs until eight.

He later told me that it was wrong of me to snoop through his phone because a relationship without trust is nothing. Wow, the audacity that man has. I could not help but laugh at how well he twisted it on to me.

It should have hurt less knowing what kind of person I was about to marry but it never did hurt less. Every lie and mistake he made just made me hate myself more. That is the sad thing about being in a toxic relationship, you find yourself hating your decisions for forgiving them more than hating

them for constantly making mistakes that needed to be forgiven.

The anger built up increasingly in my head until I lost control of myself and threw the incredibly well-bargained vase into the red brick wall next to the brand-new stove we just picked out together.

The sunflowers were no longer as beautiful as before but like everything, beautiful things are only temporary. Something must ruin it, in this case my great aim and a large target.

Damn it. I loved that vase so much, ugh.

Instead of sinking to the floor like I wanted to do, I reached for the broom. A sound went off as my phone lit up and played Fleetwood Mac's "The Chain" in my pocket.

Incoming call: Jules

"Hi Jules, are you calling to see if I'm still alive because I would not leave this wonderful world without hearing the inspirational words you're about to give me. Don't worry though, Loretta already helped me enough today with my usual bullshit." I uttered sarcastically.

"Okay, smartass. Glad to hear you aren't still moping around over the whole engagement call off with that dipshit you called a fiancé. I wonder if you could sue him for being an asshole. Is that a thing?" She paused then thought about the words that had just come out of her mouth.

“There’s only so much moping a woman can do before it’s considered insanity, apparently.” My voice tensed so I threw in a painfully fake laugh.

“Oh—it was one of those sessions.”

“Yep, it was. Don’t worry though we are still on for Tuesday at eight.”

“I was just going to ask that. It’s like you read my mind. Anyway, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine. My wonderful ex is tending to Amelia currently so why should I care?” The phone stayed pressed between my shoulder and ear as I spun around to grab the dustpan, abandoning my fake smile. “Hopefully he uses his money to pay for her therapy in a few months, because if not she will be like me struggling to pay my half of the rent since my checks are going to a psychologist. And I pay less than I should so she should really hope she makes friends with her therapist.”

“Why don’t you just confide in me for free? I am going to school to become a psychiatrist—it makes no sense.”

“Because you are sick of hearing about Amelia and Lance.”

“I am sick of hearing my best friend cry, not about Lance. The two subjects usually just come as a package deal.” I nodded, she was right, they did. “I wonder if Amelia has found his Star Wars collection at his parent’s house yet.” She laughed. “Is it too soon to make jokes?”

“My life is a joke, so be as humorous as you would like. I am living a life that you would think Shakespeare wrote. A never-ending tragedy. I might as well glue a red ball to my nose and perform at children’s parties for how clown-like I’ve been lately.”

“Aren’t clowns supposed to be happy?”

“No. that’s what the face paint is for. You draw on the smile and everyone finds enjoyment in it. It’s basically how I am now just minus the rainbow wig.”

“Oh, stop that.” Jules cut me off. “If your big life story is a man who sleeps in socks, shaves his legs, and does not eat sweets because he has an ‘image to uphold,’ then you are in for a rude awakening, Dee.”

Ugh, I hated it when Jules was right. Which is typically *always*. The man was a walking red flag and my caring friend saw it the first time she met him, commenting on how he was too good to give her a ‘nice to meet you too’ hug. Jules is an affectionate person; she reminds me of my sister in that manner, which could be why I love her so much. Anyway, since then, the two have hated each other.

There was no use in pretending since she studied human behavior and interaction. She could see through my smart-ass remarks better than anyone, and through Lance’s manipulation. He would walk into a room, and she would have to bite her tongue while he talked about how incredible *he* is and how lucky *I* was to have him. These statements usually would end with balled-up fists and a death glare from her.

“Okay Jules, what did I say about using your psychoanalysis shit on me?” I laughed as I moved toward the couch, dustpan still in hand while I sat on the arm. “I am

seriously going to have to just buy a dog and confide in him so he won't practice being my therapist."

"Fine but no more moping, seriously. That man was never contributing anything positive into your life, he is a narcissistic asshole. And don't give me that 'but I love him' because you have stopped loving that man after the first year you met him. You are attached, not in love. He's hot and maybe mildly successful but that's about it. Besides, you are hotter and more successful, so use the heartbreak to write another sappy romance novel and put something tight on that puts your obnoxiously nice body to use. Get yourself a new author in your life. Shakespeare is outdated, try Nicholas Sparks maybe?" She was about to continue before I cut her off; thank God.

Fidgeting with a loose thread on the couch, my voice was soft. "Listen, I just smashed my favorite vase, so I think that was all I needed to pause my inner-working feud with myself, what a mess. Oh, and my 'perfect' body has been binging Twinkies and Chinese the last week." I pinched the extra skin on my stomach.

"No!" Jules mocked. "Not the flea market vase that brought you so much happiness! Wow, what a crime against humanity and a waste of thirty cents. If that is not a sign to stick with your decision to leave Lance, then I don't know what is! Maybe your, 'life is better with a book' mug needs to break next?" Her sarcasm about that vase was enough for me to pick the broom up and dismiss her while swallowing back laughter.

"Okay, smartass, you are just jealous of how great my luck is at a flea market."

"I found that Harley Davidson top, remember?"

“That was a consignment shop. Two vastly different things.”

“Whatever. Go break another vase,” she said sternly.

Guilt flooded my stomach as I stared at the dustpan and the leftover shards on the ground.

“Anyway, I love you, Jul. I will talk to you later. I need to shower off the smell of a week’s long deep depression.”

“Okay, but promise me you won’t sit at home all night again watching Kate Hudson movies and crying yourself to sleep? Go out.”

“Okay.”

We exchanged another five-minute goodbye and then taking the broom, I swept up the last thing I would allow my relationship to break. Screw Lance. Screw Shelby.

Good luck, Amelia. I hope you enjoy watching Star Wars and nothing else.

Chapter Three

Del

Normally when I wake up, I feel well rested and fueled. Today, I could have been confused for the abominable snowman with how grumpy I looked when I opened my eyes. I made Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh* look happy this morning.

Hair poked out from every direction as I ripped myself out of my dirty sheets that held a stench of desperation and depression. And maybe a hint of egg roll from last night's dinner, which was just the leftovers from the day before.

Stumbling through the impressive mountains of clothes that hide what used to be carpet flooring, I enter the bathroom. Water splashed onto my face to force myself up. I had spent the entire night rummaging through drawers and closet spaces packaging all of Lance's belongings, and it showed in the even more sunken bags under my eyes.

I grabbed everything from his toothbrush to Amelia's underwear that were still in the living room after she ran out in his shirt, and I refrained from tearing every picture we had ever taken together. I'd save the picture-tearing for the holidays. Maybe Thanksgiving or Christmas. Or they'd look lovely on a nice, rounded dart board that I could hang in the living room. But for now, my energy was going toward my 'what now' plan. We still needed to decide what to do about the apartment.

He was staying with his parents to 'give me space' for the week, but there was only a matter of time until he came back in full swing. Lance had money, which was not a problem, the problem was he was too petty to leave and too controlling to let me leave. Not because he loved me, but

because he loved to make decisions for me, and I was a decent-looking floor mat for him to walk all over.

While packing last night, my mother called me. Of course, she already knew everything. I should have guessed my sister Jenna would have told them the second I hung up. My parents, Anne and Greg, live on a farm in Tennessee and are probably the nosiest people to walk the earth. My mom more than my dad. They had good intentions, but when it came to my life, they had to know every little detail. That brings us to this morning when my mom continued our conversation since I fell asleep on the phone around two.

One New Message from Mother All Mighty

M: I really think you should come home. Your publicist told you to take a few weeks off and Della just had a calf you need to meet. He is the cutest little thing.

D: You did not name a cow after me...

M: She reminded me of you, had a sort of spunk to her.

D: Okay, I will pretend you did not just tell me your cow reminded you of me, but anyway, I am not sure what my plan is. Maybe eat pierogies and watch *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*?

D: Man, I wish I were Kate Hudson. But even more I wish I was in a movie with Matthew McConaughey.

D: Is it too late to become an actress?

M: You need to get out of the house, Adella Jean. Your sister misses you. She wants you to meet her boyfriend. He is a real sweetheart.

D: Maybe I should come home and be around Jenna's perfect relationship. Great idea! I will have to plan for it.

I hoped she could read my sarcasm over the phone. I was happy for Jenna, but the last thing I needed was to see how easy it is for everyone else and how impossible it has been for me. God, that sounded even more selfish in my head. I was never this pessimistic before, I hated that I am now.

M: Next week? Yay!

D: Mom, I don't know.

M: That man already kept you from us enough. You need to be with your family.

D: I will see what I can do.

My mother was relentless. But she was also right, I needed to leave the city to figure myself out before it is too late and I am a cat lady living off only egg rolls, Kate Hudson movies, and Matthew McConaughey sex dreams. But for now, my leather couch and fuzzy blanket were calling my name.

...

The numbers on the clock were illegible from the blur that glazed over my eyes during my nap. Blinking it away, I managed to make the number clear. Eight at night. My eyes

slowly began to shut again until it hit me that I had slept for four hours, and a jolt of energy rushed through me.

I slept for *four* hours!

Looking down at my phone, I see five missed calls from Jules.

J: You better not be moping!!

J: Adella Jean. If you are asleep right now, I'm going to have a conniption.

J: ?

Shit, she was going to bitch me out if she found out I was moping again. I threw myself off the leather couch and into my bedroom. "Okay, you can do this." I reassured myself. "Just get a drink and send her a picture so she can see you moving on." My unconvinced reflection stared back at me in the mirror as my finger stayed firmly pointed toward myself. Thirty minutes later, I had on red lipstick and black slacks with my Louboutin heels and a white satin blouse. Drinks were sounding better now. I could taste the Bloody Mary at just the thought.

Ugh. Hurry up, Taxi.

...

Gino's bar was an eighties theme retro style bar with white and black tiled floors and red leather bar seats. There was a neon-lit juke box playing "Take on Me" by A-ha in the corner

next to a tiny stage for performers, and the ceiling lights were purple-tinted shining down on the scattered tables. It smelled like a mix of marijuana and pizza when you first walk through the door, but then it eventually mellows out into just pizza.

The owner himself was bartending tonight. Gino was a stocky man wearing a wife beater and had an after shave that looked like he had just retired from the mafia. If Gino were known for anything, it was minding his own 'bidness' as he would say. I came here all the time with Jules when we would eavesdrop on people who would openly discuss their crimes like embezzlement or tax fraud or even a hit and run once. For as big and scary as Gino looked, he was also shockingly kind. The man was a golden retriever when it came to his friends and family.

The bar was more crowded than usual, but I was not complaining. There was more privacy in larger crowds. I took a seat at the bar and collapsed my head into my hands, crumbling like the game of Jenga next to me.

“Rough night?” Gino joked as he poured drinks robotically and slid them down to the end of the bar to a group of people.

“Rough life.” I groaned.

“Honey, it is not a rough life until you’re a grown man who looks like me and likes men.” He laughed while his hand gestured to his body with jazz fingers. “Five-foot-ten of all this yet no one is interested?”

“You will find a nice guy, Gino. Maybe just get out some more.”

“I have a job to do.” His Italian accent was thick. “If I’m not here then there’s no place for you to whine.” He laughed some more.

Reaching behind the bar I jokingly punched him in the arm. “I am not whining! I am out for drinks.”

“Then maybe *order* something? You are holding up the line.” My head turned around seeing everyone perfectly content at their tables behind me. Those who were not seated were conversating around the bar but not in line for drinks.

“Fine. I will take a Bloody Mary, extra spicy please.”

“Spicy. Got it.”

I rarely drank a lot (before Lance), but when I did, I always regretted it the next morning. Lately, I had been using alcohol to heal. I hated that, and quite frankly had no idea where that habit came from. My family was never full of alcoholics, just casual drinkers at small parties in town. Before my parents moved to a bigger plot of land only a few miles from town, we lived on a smaller farm. The house was a white southern-style home with a wraparound porch. Ma and Pa would have these huge parties, and all the neighbors would come together with homemade dishes, loud music, and stories. Jenna and I would sneak beer into the barn and drink with the horses laughing about absolutely nothing. It was innocent then. But when I do it now, it feels like another topic for Loretta to dissect. I had considered calling Jenna a few times to talk about the negatives. She knew the basics—the engagement being called off because Lance cheated. When I moved, I didn’t consider what it would do to my relationship with her.

It was always just her and me when we were home.

We were only eleven months apart so if we did anything, we did it together. Then high school came, and things were a bit patchy—she was cool, and I was not. Half the grade had no idea we were even related, but when we were kids, things were different. I was the angel child since Jenna showed little remorse and mostly humor for all the chaos she caused.

There was the time we drove a tractor into the haystacks and got it stuck. I apologized and begged for forgiveness while Jenna laughed and told my parents, “Kids will be kids.”

We were eight.

Then there was the time we threw our own party when our parents went to a livestock auction for the weekend. Jenna was dating Cole down the street and needed a way to catch his attention, so, party it was. We would have gotten away with it too if it weren't for the next-door neighbor snitching on us constantly. She always had a stick up her ass.

Stupid Gerrie.

I wondered what the new farm and neighbors would be like. Leaving the old one was hard on us all, even if Gerrie was a bitch, she was part of our childhood. But my parents were financed off their produce and stock so moving was a necessity to their expenses. Snapping back to current time, I placed my Bloody Mary on a blue and yellow ‘it’s five o’clock somewhere’ coaster in front of me.

The first bloody Mary went down like water and by the time I was finished with the second, I was snapping an overly enthusiastic picture of me doing a funny face with my tongue out while holding the third one and sending it to Jules. She replied with:

A: That's my girl. Also, going on a date, wish me luck! He is wearing a beret, is that weird?

D: Um. Maybe he is French?

A: Guess we will find out tonight :)

D: Gross, have fun, love you.

My third Bloody Mary was almost finished when I heard the bell on the door ring as a new customer entered. The bar was even more full than it was when I arrived, so the noise level was close to deafening. People were packed so tightly that it felt we were crunched together in a rave. My instincts kicked in as I somehow heard a person pushing through the crowd. Instead of walking to the bar, their hand sat on the top of my red leather chair and spun me around forcefully. My only hope for stopping this encounter was in the back tossing dough. He may have minded his own business but when it came to Lance, no one hated him more than Gino.

“We are leaving,” The disgruntled voice shouted at me.

“Lance? What are you doing here? You need to go.” My eyes frantically searched around for anyone I could have known.

“I am not going without you. We are going home now, Adella. You made me leave my apartment and sleep at my parents’. Enough is enough with this childish bullshit.” He looked down at my naked ring finger and quickly shot back up. “Where the hell is your ring?”

Ignoring his last question, I slurred. “*Your* apartment? Excuse me? I put just as much money into that apartment as you did. I am the one who cleans and takes care of the bills, I will drop your stuff off tomorrow.”

In a fast motion, his large hand grabbed my arm and yanked at it, *hard*. If anyone around us noticed, they did a damn decent job hiding it. Lance could do whatever he wanted, and no one would bat an eyelash.

“You clean an apartment, wow. All you do is write meaningless books that your stupid ass fans buy because they have no life just like the author.” He spit out as tears rushed to my eyes and the warm feeling from the vodka dwindled away. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that, I’m just upset.”

“Get your hand off me, please,” I whispered trying not to make a scene as I slowly pushed my way outside with his shadow trailing closely behind me as if it were my own.

Slamming through the doors, the rain flooded down on me. My shirt absorbed every falling drop from the sky causing it to cling to my body, making me feel suffocated. Hovering over me was a streetlamp that lit a path to an alley, but I stayed where I was. The streets were empty with not a single taxi in sight as I squinted my eyes to search through the rain. His hand grabbed me again suddenly only this time it was harder, and his nails dug deeper into my skin.

“Where is Amelia? Did she realize you’re a sleaze with commitment issues and a—” My word vomit was halted as a hand slapped me hard and fast across my face simultaneously throwing me to the ground. Water that caught between his hand and my face made the sting even more apparent as I tried to rub a burning sensation away. The sidewalk was cold and hard on impact. I tried to lift myself but could not bring myself any further than to my knees. I was now staring up at my abuser. In moments of disappointment like these, your heart slows until it stops momentarily and all you can see is black until it slowly turns into all the hopes and dreams you have ever wanted. They become a montage until the laughs are drowned with voices of everyone who constantly told you, *you are not enough*, echoing through your head. Most of them were my own.

I pictured the life I desperately wanted with this man, and then remembered my mother’s words:

“Pumpkin, just because you have spent so much time with him does not mean you have to stay. You do not *owe* him anything. God throws people into our lives for all kinds of reasons. Lance could be one of the people that are there temporarily to teach you a very valuable lesson, you must trust the higher power and that all things happen for a reason.”

For the first time I picked myself up from the ground and looked him in the eyes. The strands of my hair were as drenched as my clothes, and I felt like my heart stepped to the side and let my backbone take over.

Without thought, I let it *all* out. *Everything*. The pain and resentment that had built up from every heart ache, every disappointment and every realization.

“You’re pathetic.” My mouth started as my eyes stayed frozen on him, burning through his body like a million flames being blown out of a torch. My cheeks grew hotter from the impact and the anger raged through my body leaving me completely taken over by the little piece left in me that was in control of defending my ground. Forcing myself to close the gap between us, I got inches away from his face, so close my breath brushed against his pursed lips. “You are *nothing* but a coward who is incapable of love. You will *never* be a man. You have spent so much of your life controlling me. You are your father. And I am not one of your clients who need you. I do not need you and I am leaving you. I am so done with your bullshit, Lance.” I hoped I was close enough for him to taste my words and choke on them. The water continued to hit the top of my head and pour down the side of my face as I shivered.

His eyes were dark and threatening, and his mouth twitched into a powerful smile. I flinched at his movement expecting him to knock me to the ground again but instead he just continued to hit me where it hurt worse, my insecurities.

“*I am a coward? You are weak. You are nothing. You will never be loved or respected because you think with your heart. Do you think someone will just drop everything and cater to only you? For God’s sake Del.*” His finger poked into me multiple times as I backed away from him shaking my head in disbelief as the rain came down harder. “You’re so naive, you put me in this position to cheat on you! How couldn’t I? You haven’t slept with me in a month and all you care about is this make-believe shit life you want to have someday. Wake up! You will never be happy if you aren’t with me. You will never be able to restart. You’re twenty-six. I know everyone I need to know to make sure you never get a book published again.”

His words stabbed into my chest like a thousand daggers all at once being twisted and turned. It was true, our

sex life wasn't amazing because every time I looked at him, I compared myself to the other women. I felt sick.

Was this *my* fault?

No, I mentally convinced myself. This had been going on even before that. Could he really ruin me? I pushed through the thoughts that betrayed my mind. This is how a gas lighter works. He finds the tiny spark of self-doubt and smothers it in gasoline, causing it to burn inside of you with self-hatred. That's how it had worked many times, but Loretta, Jules, my mother, and Jenna, they had all known that I had not been at fault for his egotistical personality.

A taxi finally came toward us with water spraying from under the wheels onto the sidewalk. Lance threw his arm up and waved it over.

“Have fun dying alone.” And with that he walked away slowly down the alley.

The taxi was cold and silent the whole ride home, just the sound of our breaths as the water hit the windshield and was followed by wipers erasing the memory of their fall. I wiped the rain off my forehead just as I had all the pain and suffering that man has caused me. Tonight, I picked myself up. No hand reached toward me to help, no Gino to swoop in and save the day in small ways like letting me step in the kitchen. No, I did this myself. I had to find comfort in being alone. Loretta had said that no one can fix me but me, and she was right.

When I got home my phone blew up with calls, texts, and apologies from Lance. I shut my phone off.

It was time to go home after six years.

...

The highs and lows were weird. I had felt capable in front of Lance, but now as I stared at my reflection, I felt anything but that. I spent the last hour cleaning myself from the incident. My face was beginning to bruise as I covered it with makeup. Just an hour after being hit. Sad eyes stared back in the mirror.

I looked damaged.

I looked helpless.

Bruises were forming up my arm in shades of blue and purple. I had considered calling Loretta but could not stomach the hurt that would appear in her voice when she heard he hit me again.

Why did he get away with this so many times? It was not my fault, I contemplated.

If it wasn't me, it would have been some other woman he would have manipulated. That hurt my heart even more. What if it is another woman? Could I handle the weight of allowing this man to lay a hand on someone else? Someone who saw hope in his eyes in a coffee shop?

All the weight of his actions continued to sink me further and further down like he had rocks bound to my feet. It was like he stared from the surface as I began to sink. I could not convince myself that it wasn't my fault no matter how much I tried. I allowed him to do it to me. I helped him tie the

rocks there and even apologized to him after he treated me the way he did so many times. Inexcusable.

I felt like I was drowning.

I could hear what Jules would say, “You cannot expect a person to respect you if you do not respect yourself.”
Damn her and her psychoanalytic shit.

He had done this to me so many times and I had kept going back. I even made sure no one knew about him hitting me, although Jules had suspected it after a black eye I claimed to get from slipping in the shower and hitting my brow bone on the wall. I slowly sank to the floor against my bathroom sink. I always found it metaphorical to lie on the ground and stare at the ceiling in your hardest moments. The only way to look was up. I know, I am so damn poetic even when I want to scream and rip my hair out. But for now, the only thing I needed to do was get on the airplane.

Tears seeped from my eyes and all my bags were now packed. My flight was at one a.m., and it was already midnight. Time to get my life together.

Chapter Four

Del

I did not realize how much I missed my small town in Tennessee until I could smell the freshly mowed grass and see the openness of the sky without ginormous buildings blocking it.

The sun was rising when I got off the plane lighting the landscape like fire that was painted in dramatic shades of vibrant pink and red, fading into a pastel yellow.

The drive was short. I stared out the window of an airport shuttle for the whole ride, mesmerized by the simple things the land offered like the tall endless corn stalks and mountains that could overlook those buildings in the city any day. It was only six-thirty when I reached the farm this morning. I had no idea what to expect. Everything had changed. Our old home had sold, my dog had aged at least five years since the last time I saw him, and so had my family.

The airport Uber twisted and turned down the long dirt driveway exposing the home I'd only seen over a phone. The house was fairly like my old one, but it was shockingly prettier with a modern twist. It was a giant white southern home with a wraparound porch and a swing seat on display that had a chunky gray knit blanket rested over the top. Blue and pink hydrangeas surrounded the layout and matched beautifully with eggshell-colored shutters. I was impressed by my mother's decorating skills. Before her decorations consisted of any object that had a picture of a rooster on it. Since then, she really upgraded.

There was a similar style in-law quarters too in the backyard near the rustic red barn and an older maroon Dodge

truck sitting next to it. I assumed it was a worker. My father had mentioned needing to hire help after he injured his back one day lifting a bale of hay, and I was happy he made that decision. It really worried me how much work he did, and I knew if it were up to him, he'd never stop. My head shook at the thought as my hands rested on my hips.

A faint sound grew with more intensity the closer I got to the end of the gravel driveway.

Was that *Celine Dion*?

Since when did my parents listen to modern music?

The muffled sound came from a mid-sized, beat-up radio that sat at the foot of an even more beat-up-looking car. I looked around to see who the owner was but saw no one. Just as I set my luggage down an adorable, midsized springer spaniel came sprinting toward me, bouncing with each step forward.

“Jesus, Sonny, I missed you too,” I said as I squatted to eye level of my old friend and hugged him. He had to have gained at least sixty pounds since I last saw him. He was eight years old now and still midsized, I was shocked but pleasantly surprised that he recognized me after all this time.

Unfortunately, my reunion was halted.

“It’s not very polite to take the lord’s name in vain.” The voice came from behind me, under the familiar blue beat-up car in which the radio sat next to. The voice was deep, stern, and slightly dreamy, but there was no face to match it considering the interrupter did not even get out from under the car to introduce himself.

“Noted. And you are?” My voice came off a tad dismissive as Sonny went running over to the mysterious car man leaving me to defend myself alone. Traitor.

“If you’re here looking for a job we aren’t hiring.” He shuffles, his cowboy boots sticking out from under the vehicle as he continues to work.

“It’s a good thing I’m not looking for a job then.” I snapped. “Nice song choice, by the way,” I gestured to the radio, forgetting that he was incapable of seeing the slight tilt of my head from under the car. Brushing that awkward moment to the side, I crossed my arms firmly.

Sliding himself out from underneath, he let out a deep raspy laugh. “You have something against Celine Dion?” His accent was thicker than mine due to all the time I spent away, and other than my own, I hadn’t heard another southern voice in person since Jules and I came to visit once five years ago. I goggled at him as he sat on the ground with his arms draped casually over his denim-covered knees. He was attractive. There was no doubt about that. Which is why my mouth grows dry as I struggle to find the words.

“I mean, no. But you don’t look like a ‘My Heart Will Go On’ type of man.” It was true. He didn’t. He looked like a Johnny Cash type of guy. A hot, buff, half-tattooed, southern, old country listening type of guy. Brushing his sweaty hair back he looked up at me with amusement. Something about his face looked familiar but I just couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Oh, really? And what if I told you Celine Dion is the only woman I’d consider getting down on one knee for?”

His lips turned up slightly in a mischievous grin. “What would you say then?”

“I’d tell you I think you were lying.”

“What is the difference between that man and me?”
His arms crossed as he narrowed his eyes.

Something about those eyes looked familiar. I decided I was probably imagining things which is why I decided to ignore it. The humidity was starting to get to me, even this early in the morning. I fanned my face as I spoke.

“Well, that man would have shaken my hand and introduced himself, I would imagine,” I answered. “But, apparently we don’t do that around here anymore?”

My question lingers as he stares.

“Apparently we don’t.” Using his jeans as a rag, he wipes his hands clean. “At least not when you have grease and oil coated on your palms. And especially not when we already know each other.”

Standing up he makes his obvious judgments. Both hands are propped on his bare hips, the veins in his arms popping when he introduces himself. “Thought for a second there you might have remembered but guess not. It was a long time ago, so I’m not so sure I can blame you.” Bending over, he picks up a wrench and swipes his finger across the rust on the side. Inspecting it he proceeds to strap the loose tool belt on his waist.

An unperceivable expression fills his face as his lips move in what I perceived to almost be a slight hint of a smile. "Nice shoes." I took back the guilt from my previous tone of voice after his dismissive comment. Then it hit me.

Remember?

Beaux? *Beaux*. I hadn't imagined it.

I did recognize those eyes.

Could it be the Beaux I met in high school? The one from Tommy Stewart's party? Now that I focused on his face, I was positive it was him. The sharp curve of his jaw, the darkness of his eyes and the thickness of his brows. Then I think of the first time I ever saw Beaux. It was tenth grade.

I was in tenth grade now, and I never imagined struggling in school as much as I have this year. Science was no longer integrated, and now it was simply 'chemistry,' and math wasn't algebra, it was now calculus. The only classes I had over a 100 in was English.

I was always good in school but after freshman year, I began to doubt myself. Jenna made life look so easy. As if her poker-straight, blonde hair that she got from my mother, and her bright-blue eyes weren't enough, she also had a naturally slim body and even more perfect smile.

Then there was me. The Jan Brady to her Marsha, Marsha, Marsha. My hair was dark brown and curly, and my eyes were green like my father. I was no taller than five-foot-three and unlike my sister who was blessed with my parents' good genes, it seemed as though I got the other half. I wore thick-rimmed glasses and chunky braces with hot pink rubber

bands. I was the sister guys talked to just to find out whether Jenna was available. And as if matters weren't already at their lowest, my parents named me Adella Jean. What kind of name is Adella Jean? Why couldn't they name me something like Rachel or Mckenna or Abby. But nope, just your typical Adella Jean, or even worse Del.

Picking up my books, I walk down the hallway toward my locker. A group of girls stand to my right. They're what's known as the 'popular clique.' The girls who decided they hated me and only pretended to like me when their mother made them. My sister wasn't necessarily a part of that group, she was social and could get along with everyone, but me on the other hand, I sat alone in the library and ate Uncrustables every day for lunch. And as good as the grape jelly in those premade sandwiches was, it was humbling being ignored by even the chess club and math rats.

"Del," Amy Wells calls out from behind me. "Let Jen know we are hosting a party this weekend. Unfortunately, there's no room for—well, you." The girls howl in laughter as I push past them. A tingle aches in my middle finger as I hold back the urge to flip her and her Barbie pink lip gloss off. But I ignore it. I tend to cope with avoidance my school guidance counselor says. She suggested I use words like, "I feel," and "it upset me," when acknowledging how other's words affect me. I told her I'd start standing up for myself, but for some reason, I felt completely inferior around them.

Twisting the combination into the lock on my locker, I open the door and barricade behind the comfort of navy-blue metal. It's the second week of school, and I'm still known as the class loser. I didn't get it. I wasn't unattractive I didn't think. I mean my face had a lot of potential features in an unconventional way, and I had joined track to lose the baby fat, so I was beginning to tone. You'd think my lack of femininity would make them leave me alone. It's not like I was competition. Why did they all hate me so much? My mother

told me last year that if I'm kind and graceful in tough situations, then I will have very few enemies. Well, if that's the truth then why do I have an invisible fifty-foot guard up to protect me from sixteen-year-old girls who use the wrong 'there,' 'their,' and 'they're'?

I exchange my books from my locker, swinging the door shut. Just as I'm about to spin around, my face hits a wall. Only it's not a wall, even though I wish it had been. Something tells me it would've been less painful. Looking up, I catch his dark eyes. Oh, lord. Not today. I'm beginning to regret the Star Wars graphic-tee I borrowed from my dad after waking up so late this morning because I watch as his eyes read the cheesy, "Luke, I am your father," line on the front.

I advert my eyes down to Beaux's feet. I feared if I looked at his face any longer, he would cringe from being in my presence.

Beaux was quarterback of the football team. His messy brown hair and massive height made him every girl's first pick. Including, Amy. The captain of the soccer team whose body matured in the sixth grade. I was sixteen and still had no breasts or curves anywhere on my body, and if it weren't for my age, I wouldn't even need a training bra. Compared to me, Amy was Barbie, and I was the door on her dreamhouse.

"I'm sorry," I say walking quickly past him before he has the chance to make a comment to me. But it didn't matter. The entire football team was shouting obscenities behind me.

"Watch where you're going, Del! Might need thicker glasses than that."

“Beaux’s got an important game Friday. Doesn’t need a freak like you injuring him.”

I wait for Beaux’s laughter but to my surprise there is none. That doesn’t mean he didn’t tease me behind my back though. Mortification settles under my skin as I walk to my class so fast, I almost miss the door. I struggle to bite the tears back. You’d think I’d be used to it by now. But instead, Jenna catches my arm.

“Are you okay?” she asks. She doesn’t let me answer until we are seating on a bench in the bathroom. I had done a really good job up to this point pretending everything was fine. But I couldn’t imagine three more years of this torture.

We sat on that bench through the entire fourth period. She held me telling me that I am everything they will never be. That I was the one who would become successful, but I didn’t know then that she would be right.

The memories I forgot I ever even had from those four years came rushing into my head like an unwanted migraine as I try to forget how I felt about him and his friends. A look of disgust replaced the confusion on my face as I recalled the younger Beaux in school who spilled Bud Light all over me after he got into a fist fight with another guy. I was drenched. He turned and all he said was “oops,” and then turned to his buddy and continued like nothing had happened. And the one who laughed at me during one of his girlfriends’ parties after she publicly humiliated me. Like seriously? Are manners nonexistent for teenage boys? Or *grown men*? God. What would he know about manners?

Other than his obvious change in size and age, he looked the same. His hair was messy and dark, matching almost perfectly to his eyes, and his jaw was covered in an

uneven but short trimmed stubble like Jake in *Sweet Home Alabama*. His boyish charm that every girl chased in high school was replaced by absolute man.

My eyes lowered down to his body that looked like something Michelangelo had sculpted himself in the Sistine Chapel. I could tell he worked for it from doing labor considering the sweat that consumed his body and the fact that his hands were large and covered in calluses and dirt.

He wore no shirt revealing a medium-sized tattoo on his ribs that looked like a bible quote and was followed by a started but unfinished sleeve on his right arm. His farmer's tan was almost comical. Beat-up denim jeans were hanging on his waist with the belt making his stomach look even more firm.

I tried to pretend not to notice the warm feeling in my gut from his eye contact as I stood confused and slightly intimidated. Okay, and maybe a little bit turned on admittedly, but that did not change the fact that Beaux was a dick and that I am never getting into a relationship ever again.

Remembering his comment about my shoes, I decided to bite back. "Excuse me, *Beaux*, not that it is any of your business, but these heels are probably worth more than you make in a week." I sounded snotty for someone whose ex-fiancé bought these Louboutin's as an apology gift for catching him with one of his conquests, but that did not stop me from continuing. "But I'm not sure what puts you on such a high pedestal that you can judge someone based on what type of material they use to cover their feet. And by the way you ruined my shirt that night with your beer."

"Oh, so you do recognize me. Thought the city changed you, but I guess it just changed your taste in clothes?" His eyes stayed slanted on my outfit. "Don't worry though, it

suits you.” The way he says that makes it hard to decipher whether it was a compliment or not.

I had realized I was overdressed; my dark-brown hair was pulled into a high ponytail that was starting to turn into my natural curls from the leftover rain and humidity. I wore the same outfit as last night because I had packed everything so frantically. I wore the black heels in question, black slacks and a white button-down top. I had worried that my change in appearance since I was last home would spark questions from my family, and now after speaking to Beaux, I’m guessing I was right to assume that. I have changed a lot since high school. I focused on running like I had in track, only I did it every day and paired it with Pilates. I learned how to diffuse my curls which took a lot of time but really made my curls look great, and I lost the braces a few weeks before leaving for New York.

Other than my parents and sister, I never felt pretty based on the way people viewed me. They called me many things. When I weighed over 140 pounds, I was too big, and when I lost it and weighed under 110, I was bulimic. Or at least that’s what Amy told everyone.

My mother though always told me how lucky I was because my big green eyes and long lashes went perfectly with my tiny pale features. No matter what my body looked like. Although, Beaux was not looking at my face right now. Was he looking at my *chest*? Before I could call him on the lack of eye contact, he bolted his eyes to mine.

He sounded completely unphased by my comment when he asked, “So why are you here? Need eggs? Corn? Milk?”

“Have you never heard of southern hospitality?” I muttered under my breath.

To my sheer and total dismay, he responded, “Have you never heard of answering simple questions?” I notice the toothpick in between his straight white teeth as he pulls it out and looks at me like *I* am somehow in the wrong. The audacity.

I gave him a glare that could obviously be comprehended by a pea-sized brain, such as his, and continued. “It is none of *your* business why I am here. Why are you touching my sister’s old car?”

He stood up. “Del? Like the cow?” He laughed. “Your sister is Jenna? How did I not know that?” The obvious amusement made me want to tackle him to the ground but instead I brushed it to the side like the well put together lady I am. You know, other than the years of therapy.

Although his statement was always an annoying one to hear, it was a common reaction from people who did not know me very well. Or from people who didn’t want to know me and just spent time following the beat of Amy Wells’ drum.

Jenna was the fun one, and I was the stick in the mud so to speak, and although we spent so much time together in private, we spent a lot of time with our separate groups in public settings, especially when we got older. There was one time I tried to go out and that ended terribly. Therefore, even some of my best friends had not known Jenna was my sister until they’d come to the house and see her on the couch watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* like she always had. God, I needed an Angel in my life, or a Spike.

But for now, I'd have only men who made me smash vases and compared me to the family cow. My arms tossed in the air frantically. I had been there for all of five minutes, and my blood was already boiling.

“Great, so every strange man from my past that lurks on my parent’s property knows me as the second-best Del, after a cow! No, Del like my mother’s second born who that cow was blessed to be named after.”

“*Second best?*” He teased.

“God, you are just as unpleasant now as you were then.” My hands wrinkle my forehead as I attempt to rub away the stress.

“I work here. That’s why I’m here.”

Disappointment hit me as I realized I was right. My parents did hire a worker. My eyes were focused on his biceps as he reached for his arm to brush his sweaty, messy hair to the side. I immediately made eye contact again until I saw him staring at the poorly hidden bruise on my cheekbone.

Quickly covering it, my defense mechanisms turned on, protecting me from another embarrassing moment.

“Another thing that’s not your business, and I would appreciate it if you would not stare. Please.” I said as I quickly turned toward the house, a defeated sigh escaping from my glossed lips.

“Never said it was.” Stopping himself from being as ass, he rubs his head again. “Ice and aloe vera should help

with that. After getting as many bruises as I have from football and fighting, I promise it works.”

He didn't sound like he was being an ass this time as he walked toward the barn. I stopped in my tracks and trailed behind him. “You won't tell anyone, right?” I ask.

“It's not my business to tell, but you better not let the person who did that to you come over here.” His voice was irritated as he took his time walking away. I considered what would happen had my dad found out about Lance's fits of rage on me. My dad, Greg, had a collection of loaded shotguns and rifles, so this concerned me for obvious reasons.

“So, you won't tell?” I ask.

“You know. We are adults now, Del. I don't think tattle taling is the way of doing things anymore, but if you think your father won't notice that at some point, well you've got another thing coming.” I felt angry at the thought of my dad discovering I had been abused for so long. He'd wish he never let me leave. My frustration was all targeted on Beaux now, and I'm not sure if it's built-up resentment from high school or just the moment but I'm mad. I had met Beaux on more than one occasion and for reasons that were unknown, we could never agree completely on anything. So, resentment was the option I was leaning toward.

There was the time our school volleyball team had a car wash, and Beaux drove through distracting the entire team leaving me to manage a row of cars alone. I knew he did it intentionally. He made eye contact with me the entire time, my cousin leaned through the passenger side wide, twisting and twirling her brown hair under a suggestive gaze. I could've sworn I even saw him wink. He was the 'hot' guy who every girl wanted, and most girls already had. When I 'accidentally'

sprayed him in the face on high pressure with the hose, that was the official start of our hatred for each other, you know, after the dodgeball incident. From there it was small things. Laughing at me when I'd mess up in a volleyball game. Racing each other during the mile in gym class. And pretty much just constantly competing. Although he looks more mature now, I could tell he was still the same guy that I knew him to be. But I hoped I wasn't the same girl who let him win every time.

Other than those times though, something did throw me off. In school I had caught him several times in the library reading during senior year, and someone like Beaux did not strike me as a bookworm. It was not until I saw Amy Wells hanging around him shortly after that I realized why he took such an interest in literature. How painfully unoriginal. Did Amy even *know* how to read? All I thought she knew how to do was push lowerclassmen in the hallways and buy pretty skirts with her daddy's money.

"If you must know, since you're so painfully arrogant and involved in my life, I tripped and hit my face on the shower. I hope it is as intriguing of a story as you envisioned." I hissed. I think it's important to note, I am a horrible liar. Even I wouldn't have believed that. I shook my head silently reprimanding myself for my mediocre performance as I waited for a reaction.

He continued to stare forward, but I could tell he had that overconfident smirk on his face. "Like you said it's none of my business. However, you would think for someone who writes stories for a living, that you could come up with a better excuse as to how that bruise appeared on your face?"

Now I was silent as he looked deep into my eyes and stepped closer to me, closing the gap between us. No words could exit my mouth in my defense.

“That’s what I thought, better hope Greg doesn’t see that.” He began to walk ahead of me as I stayed in one spot. I could cringe at the sound of my father’s name in his mouth. “And Adella, it’s not high school anymore. Any resentment I had with you then is gone now.”

“You had resentment? You are the one who made my life a living hell with your friends, and you didn’t even know me.”

He pierced his dark eyes at me under slanted thick eyebrows. “I made *your* life a living hell? It took me a week to clean egg yolk off my car.” He shook his head. “And how can you say I didn’t know you? Did you not spend every free period in the library with the same peanut butter sandwich that had the crust removed? And constantly wore oversized sweaters because you liked to be comfy when you’d write during free period?” He waited for a moment and when I didn’t reply he continued. “See you around, Adella Jean.” I did do those things, but I didn’t wear sweaters because I was comfy. I wore them so no one could call me fat or bulimic.

Chapter Five

Beaux

The new calf, Benny, was already growing and healthy. Della, the cow, was hovering over her new family member as I watched from behind the fence. Benny was mostly white, but the brown spots were still noticeable. Della had black spots making her look so much different than her baby.

Anne and Greg hired me about four years ago, and ever since, they have practically become my home away from home, so much so, that they let me live in the in-law quarters for free. They said they had no use for it, and it would give me easier access to working the land. Anne once made a quick comment on why she named Della after her youngest daughter, Adella Jean. Anne had said that the cow was tough and intimidating but undoubtedly beautiful. Damn, was that the truth. However, what I did not know was that their Adella Jean was Del from high school.

Not much had changed, she still had the same frustrating persona of always having to be right and better than everyone else. I had done a lot wrong in school, I let a lot of things slide that I wasn't proud of, but she had shown her hatred for me so many times, it became a game.

It's like the time I got my old truck washed to support the team; she sprayed me with the hose through the window then mouthed *oops*. I knew it was ammunition she had spent months collecting against me since I accidentally spilled beer on her. I heard her tell her school friend Cassie that I was a brainless buffoon with no character. I blamed that night for any assumptions she had of me.

Then it all clicked when she said her sister was Jenna, if she hadn't, I would have never put two and two together. I had seen them side by side once at a party a long time ago, but the thought had never crossed my mind. Jenna was kind to me whereas Adella was decidedly not. How on earth did Anne have *Satan* as a daughter? Her face could easily trick someone into thinking she's sweet but just watch because before you know it, you will be spitting out hose water during a charity event.

Unfortunately, she was still as beautiful as always, if not more so. She had no braces now and looked to be more mature than she had in high school. But her confident act was misleading, it was like the change in appearance still wasn't enough.

Her face was a face you would remember forever whether you just got a quick glimpse in an airport or a smile in a coffee shop, which is immediately why I shifted back to staring at her breasts to avoid eye contact after the quick first glance I had. My eyes then wandered down even lower. I could see her legs, and they were long and slender for how small she was now. Her curves fit perfectly in her overpriced clothes. I caught her about to question where I was staring so I pulled myself back together and looked in those green eyes with brown speckles. She looked high maintenance, but I knew how hard she worked in school. And how little she cared about getting the top-brand backpacks and sneakers that were in style. I don't know though, maybe the city changed her. It appeared it had, but who was I to judge?

Anne would constantly tell me that her youngest and I would get along but after school and the entire two years after that I had seen her around before she just left out of nowhere, I quickly doubted her judgment. Adella Jean's attitude bounced off mine, and she saw right through my sarcastic asshole act, just as she always has.

I could tell she was smart before she started reciting every word from the thesaurus. It was not until I noticed the bruise on her face that she decided to get defensive and then follow my footsteps. It spread across her high cheekbone and reached her temple blending into her brow bone. It was not a bruise you would get from falling in the shower. I'd know because I'd left the same mark on several guys from my knuckles.

I don't know if it was the overprotective man who worked for her parents or the guy who had a crush on her back then from all the time I'd spent competing with her and fascinated by the amount of time she spent in the library, but one of them made me want to ask her who the hell did that to her. It was not my place though and I realized that. However, I did know that if anyone ever laid a hand on my daughter, I would want to know so I could kill the son of a bitch. I wanted to march up the steps and tell Greg, but I remembered my role and that's to work and not worry about any of the Andrews women. Especially the ones who spend a paycheck on a pair of shoes. Even if she was a cute one who stomped away aggressively for being five-foot-four inches max. I felt my phone buzz in my pocket as I pulled it out.

One New Message from Greg:

G: Hey, come up to the house when you get the chance.

B: Gotcha.

I changed into a black V-neck and a clean pair of jeans then dragged myself to the house, attempting to stretch out the tightness from a long morning of work having gotten up at four this morning. It was now eight a.m., and the interior was lit up. You would have thought the president just arrived

from the glow that casted off the house as if it were a mirage of a million lights dangling down from the heavens. The house smelled like fried farm-fresh eggs and bacon. It was the most radiant I had seen the place *ever*.

“Hey, Greg.” I waved at him noticing a rare form of what I perceived to be a smile on his face. He was a great man, just not one that showed his emotions very often. If I hadn’t known the man, I would have been intimidated by his mass. However, it didn’t take much to know what we were celebrating.

“Hey, man. Get in here, we made breakfast.”

I slowly walked past the staircase into the pale-yellow kitchen to see Jenna, Greg, Anne, and Del (who you’d think was the female version of God herself based on everyone’s reactions) sitting on the benches at the old wooden dining-room table that was rarely ever touched.

I leaned back against the counter on my elbows and looked at Del. As much as she bothered me just sitting there, she was nice to look at. Damn her and her good looks. I wondered if she would tell her parents we knew each other. I had seen baby photos before, but she had changed so much that it was almost impossible to recognize her, and she and her sister hung out with two completely different crowds in high school.

“This is my Adella Jean,” Anne said hardly being able to control her excitement. “Aren’t my girls just beautiful? Wow I am such a lucky woman, two successful daughters who know what they want in life and do not need a man to support them to be happy, how empowering.” She winked at Del, who was busy flinching at the comment like it was a bullet flying at

her. “Thanks. Mom, but I hardly see being alone as empowering.”

Great, they are hinting at a break-up, it didn't take Sherlock Holmes to piece that one together. I immediately tried to picture the man who they were referring to but could only envision a rich, snotty guy with clean hands wearing a salmon-colored polo tucked beneath the waistband of a pair of khakis. Del picked at her eggs as Greg gave Anne the ‘stop talking please for the love of all things holy’ eyes. The table was awkward and quiet as the humiliation sunk into her, and I felt an ounce of sympathy for a minute.

“Oh, pumpkin. You know we love you and just want you to be happy, and—” Jenna decided it was time to cut Anne off before she could go into further details and dig herself into a deeper grave. Dammit, it was just getting interesting too. If I were with a girl that difficult, I would have probably dumped her too.

“I have so much to show you, I am so happy you're here. The Winstons just opened up their winery, and I was thinking we could drive past our old land and reminisce, maybe even take a walk down memory lane past the old theater downtown.” Jenna smiled grabbing her sister's pale, freshly manicured hand. Del and Jenna had the same smile. They looked similar only Jenna's hair was straight and blonde, and Adella's was dark and curly. Jenna was always smiling and happy, unlike her sister who was now glaring at me across the table. I looked around behind me as if to ask, *who me?* She looked back down at her plate.

“I would love to do all of that, but I have deadlines I have to meet.” I could tell she was lying. It wasn't hard to tell that this woman was a terrible liar, and part of me liked that because it means she didn't do it often.

“Well, Del, that is great, sweetie, but I figured while you’re here you could help a bit. Jenna and Jeff are leaving for the week, and we will be needing all the help we can get. How long do you plan to stay?” Greg asked.

“Well, it may be a while.” Embarrassment might as well make her face a home, because it seems to be her main reaction to her parents’ questions. “But, I don’t mind working, I can find the time. Where are you going, Jenna?” Her glance now met Jenna as she sneakily dodged the previous subject, unscathed.

“We are visiting Jeff’s family in Pennsylvania. He loves hiking and camping. I cannot wait to meet his dog.” Jenna was going into further detail about her planned trip, and Jeff’s black lab, but my ears tuned her out. My focus was on Del. She was wearing something different than earlier. A yellow button-down that matched the kitchen walls and a pair of low-waisted denim shorts with brown sandals. Her hair was no longer in a ponytail, now it was extremely wild looking. If I hadn’t already known her, I would have mistaken her for a girl I could coerce to willingly get into bed with me, but compared to my other one-night stands, she seemed to be more intelligent. The conversation must have ended at some point because Greg was trying to get my attention.

“Come sit, Beaux. Del, scooch over a bit.”

Great. Right next to Negative Nancy.

I slid onto the mahogany bench. It was so snug, I felt suffocated. Our thighs were pressed together, and the way she tried to scooch farther away bothered me.

“Beaux, could you show Del around the farm and introduce her to the animals? I have to take Greg to his

appointment because he is still scared to get a shot without a hand to hold.” She rolled her eyes and rubbed his shoulder at the same time as Greg gazed up at her shaking his head.

“That’s not why, it’s because you think my doctor is very ‘masculine and handsome’ as you have told me repeatedly.”

Anne shook her head with denial. “No, I never said that he was masculine and handsome, I *said* I could tell he was fit, and it was nice to look at it. Quit putting words into my mouth.” Behind Greg’s back she lifted his dirty plate and winked at us.

“I saw that,” Greg said abruptly.

“Oh hush. You could go to the gym if you wanted to. No need to hate your doctor because *he* is motivated.”

We all laughed at that one. It was nice being around a family that loved each other but could still mess around without taking it to heart. I wouldn’t say my family was hateful but at the same time no one would be rushing to make me breakfast if I ever came home.

“That’s okay, Ma. I can find my way around.”

“Nonsense, Beaux will show you.” Anne smiled and winked at her in the most unsubtle way possible. It was hilarious.

“How does after breakfast sound?” Greg suggested waiting for our approval. Del shook her head with an annoyed expression on her face. I watched as she grabbed a piece of

bacon and maneuvered her hand under the table only to see Sonny snatch it and start chewing. I can't help but smile.

“Works for me, I can show you the land on the tractors or we can ride the horses. I will leave it up to you?” I waited for her response, but she did not give one, just a familiar glare as if to say *why would I want to do anything with a guy who criticized my shoes.*

“Great, horses it is.” I smiled and excused myself from the table. On my way out I heard Anne telling Del that she needs to work on her posture and attitude while talking to the opposite gender.

“Honey, you are slouching at such an early age and your back is going to be so hunched you will look like Quasimodo by the time you're thirty.”

“Mom, please,” I heard her plead. “I am fine.”

“No man is going to want a hunched back, and that's only if they get past the poor attitude you just showed off.”

“Mom! Did you not just tell me it was empowering to be single?”

“Oh, fine. But Beaux is a nice boy, and you should really give him a chance.”

I waited for her to tell her mom she knew me, but she did not. Instead, she said, “He is hardly a boy.” Her voice made me grin at her referring to me being a man until she opened her mouth to my dismay. “I guess he's not a man either though.”

Keep walking.

Chapter Six

DEL

Beaux left the table in what was the longest breakfast of my life. My mother was somewhere between insulting me and chastising me for being rude to her new ‘best friend’ when the words “he is not a man,” rolled off my tongue instinctively. It was the first time I had lied to her since arriving, and I did not care. As much of a nuisance as he proved to be, he was as manly as it got.

His veins popped as he leaned on the counter gripping it firmly making eye contact with me. It bothered me how much just his stare could affect my body so I impulsively gave him a look that would hint to my disliking toward him. I saw him use this trick before and it worked every time; I refused to be as dull-witted as those who stripped down into nothing simply because of the flattering position Beaux leaned in. Okay, maybe not dull-witted, because honestly, denying Beaux was a hard thing to do. It did not help that my mother behaved as if she was an old man back in the day who was in search of selling his daughter to the first decent man she saw. Or as if I were the Bachelorette. Sorry, Mother, but I will not be passing out roses anytime soon.

Earlier when I arrived, they were thrilled. My mom cried and my dad tried to contain his excitement, but his smile was enough to give him away. Their reactions were reassurance that I made the right decision to come back to Tennessee. Before I knew it Jenna was over, and a four-course breakfast was in front of us. Oh, and my hot-but-irritating neighbor just so happened to be one of the reasons I wanted to leave to begin with. The groan I’ve been holding since my reunion with Beaux this morning slipped out as my father mentioned inviting him to join.

“Why did you invite him?” I ask suspiciously through narrowed eyes.

My mother’s face brightens up when she says, “You must meet Beaux! He is wonderful, honey. He is also close to your age *and* attractive.” She followed that with the horrible excuse of a wink that confirmed my suspicions. My mother tended to speak with her eyes as much as she did her mouth.

I scowled at her. “He is not that attractive and please, Mom, do not try to play matchmaker. Unfortunately, I already met Beaux.” I considered explaining the torture he embedded on me in high school but wanted to avoid the questions. “I met him this morning. He has no manners.” I take a bite of my toast. With a large mouthful of bread, I pushed out incomprehensibly, “Not my cup of tea.”

“Pumpkin, chew with your mouth closed when he arrives.” My dad chuckles at my mother’s relentlessness, but then softens his tone when he sees the stress on my face.

“Beaux is a nice guy. Just realize he has been here for years now and has been an immense help to your mother and me. Okay?” I nod, accepting defeat.

Jenna’s silence had me feeling uneasy since she is usually practically throwing fists to be the center of attention at the table. Had I missed that much since I’ve been gone? Relief settles in me when she sets her phone down and finally adds her two cents.

“Del, I agree that Beaux can be a little temperamental—” finally someone on my side, “—but he is a nice guy, and you should give him a chance.” *Wow, Jenna, hope your knife wasn’t ruined from the hole you just stabbed in*

my back. After a beat, I release a disappointed breath and watch as Beaux limps his way inside.

The entire breakfast feels like a trial, and I am the suspect in question. Everyone walks on eggshells at the thought of me being single, besides my mother of course who took no longer than fifty seconds to bring up the lack of relationships in my life. My annoyance heightened because I could visibly see Beaux making assumptions about my past relationship. It annoyed me even more that they are probably right.

Thanks a lot, Lance, for being painfully predictable.

Crumbling in my seat for the entirety of the breakfast, Beaux finally leaves, making the room feel less like a sauna. The moment feels good until my mother continues. I excused myself halfway through her lecture on good posture as Jenna followed behind me until we got to one of the guest rooms.

After the move, they decided to add a second spare room for when the family visited. They said it was more convenient than using it as an “in case she comes home” bedroom after I went M.I.A for so long. They’ve lived in the new house for five years now, purchasing it right after my visit with Jules, so I really couldn’t be upset that I had no assigned room.

In all honesty though, I think the real reason they made this a spare room was because it hurt to see an empty room with all the stuff they unpacked for me after the move, and after they were forced to watch my life over a phone they barely knew how to operate.

Being back felt nice other than the grouchy neighbor/enemy next door. Seeing Jenna was therapy I hadn't even known I needed. It had been such a long time since I had last seen her. Of course, we messaged and called, but Lance didn't like to visit the farm on the account that he was afraid to catch a "disease." Okay, *Lance*, the only diseases you should be worried about catching are the sexually transmitted ones.

Jenna hugged me tightly as we sat on the edge of the neatly made bed. My parents hated green and yet the comforter was as green as green could be.

"Who is the interior designer?" I joked.

"Actually, Beaux brought this quilt. He was staying in here before he got the guest house, guess they never got around to changing it."

My eyeroll must have been extremely obvious because her mood matched mine almost instantly. Before I knew it, she was calling me out, as usual.

"Are you going to pretend you don't remember Beaux?"

"Oh, I remember him alright." I perked my head up. "I remember the time he slept with Cassie just to get back at me because I took his parking spot at school. And the time he showed up to one of *your* parties and slept with our cousin...in my bed."

"That would be this mattress we are sitting on now ___"

“Ew.” I held back my up-choke reflex.

“Del, c’mon. You liked him.”

“Me?” The accusation almost made me fly backward in shock. “The only thing I *liked* about Beaux was the fact that he did not like me.”

“Are you kidding right now? Aren’t you supposed to be the smart sister?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She cleared her throat and continued to look at me through raised eyebrows. “Del. He was crazy about you.”

“Crazy? Yes. About me? Absolutely not. The man literally laughed his head off with his friends after I took a volleyball to the face in our district game.”

“Not for anything, but I laughed when you took that ball to the face too, and he asked if you were okay. Don’t deny it. I saw him ask you because all my girlfriends were pissed he was talking to you and not them. Shana used to always say she didn’t understand why he liked *you* and not her.”

“Gee thanks, Jen. And I quit after that game. That’s why I joined track. No balls to take to the face at fast speeds.”

“I am not saying I agree. I mean, have you seen yourself in volleyball spandex? I completely understand why he’d like you. But after that game I also saw why you quit,” she teased.

Shades of pink spread on my cheeks at her comment. “Okay, but what about the time when Amy threw that party, and he laughed when I was kicked out.” I remembered that day like it was just yesterday.

After my meltdown in the hallway, Jenna convinced me to attend Amy’s party. The same party she had specifically requested I not attend. I was attempting to reject the offer when Jenna used phrases like, “You only live once,” and “How often are we both going out to the same party?” The answer was never because I don’t party. And I don’t drink. Come to think of it, I’m not so sure that I’ve ever even seen a beer outside of my father’s hands.

I’m sitting in Jenna’s blue chair as it spins around. She’s staring at me like I’m a project that she’s about to dissect.

“First off,” she says tugging my glasses off my face, “How many fingers do I have up?” Squinting I answer, three. I always hated it when people did that, it was condescending, but I’d let it slide since it’s my sister and she was doing me a favor.

“Good, we don’t need these tonight then.” My glasses hit the comforter as she moves on to the next thing. “Jenna, I can’t see without those.”

“Everyone’s vision will be blurred. They’ll all be drunk, and you don’t drink so I call it fair game.” I don’t bother arguing. I know she’s giving me a makeover for my sake and not her own. It meant a lot that she had canceled her plans to pregame to make sure I felt comfortable out in public. Her sponge dabbles foundation onto my face. I feel brushes swipe along my cheek bones and nose and a smooth layer of

dust on my eyelids. Something cold follows in a straight line on my eye lid, and lastly, I feel the lip gloss coat my lips.

Like in some big movie scene reveals, she spins the chair around facing the mirror. Ta-dahhhh. My jaw drops because for the first time in my life, I look in the mirror and I feel...pretty. I dressed in a pair of jeans and a white crop top that I borrowed from Jenna, and I felt oddly basic, but also basic is what made you survive high school. Therefore, I was never so excited to be average.

Amy's parents were on a business trip, which was code for her mom using her dad's card to pay for a vacation, and her dad using her mom's innocence to hook up with his secretary in the Marriott, which is why the house smells like a distillery when the door opens.

There's a white foldout table covered in Solo cups in the middle of the room and clouds of smoke from what smelled like weed lingering in the air. Liters of soda were spread across the island, some with caps still off and others spilling onto the ground, and liquor surrounding it. How did they even get this stuff? And afford it?

On the far side of a room is a guy I recognize from the football team doing a keg stand, with other guys cheering him on. "Where are you going?" I asked Jenna.

"To get a drink, duh." She says tossing me the keys. "You can stay with me if you want." I took up her offer and followed her into the kitchen. "Thanks, Jenna," I say about to dive into a deep conversation but a girl who knows her comes running to her side. I think her name's Camden, but I'm not sure.

*“Cameron, this is my little sister, Adella Jean.”
Okay, Jen, you’re less than a year older than me.*

“Oh, Del! Yeah, I think we had third period together last semester?” The girl’s dark skinned and beautiful. Her hair’s straight hanging by her shoulders, and she’s mesmerizing to stare at, making me feel a little less than I did earlier. I wish I could admire other’s beauty without taking from my own, but after being bullied so much, it’s hard.

“Yes,” I say with no expression. “English class.”

“Oh, right. You’re like good at writing and stuff, right?” I’m not sure if it’s a question or a statement in the way she says it. It shocks me how she’s holding conversation when any other day you’d think I’m invisible. Was it my fault assuming everyone felt like I was a leech that sucked the life out of everything?

“I mean, yeah. I like it a lot.”

“Cool,” she says. “Maybe someday you’ll write a book.” I think about that as she walks away. Maybe someday I will.

“Hey, sis, wanna play pong?” I shake my head no. “Go ahead, Jen, I’m fine here,” I say leaving the kitchen and sitting on the couch. I’m alone, trying to do what I do best, being unseen, when Amy spots me. Her hair is curled, and she’s wearing a tight dress that shows off every curve. Standing beside her are Cindy, her best friend, and Beaux.

“Oh, God.” She slurs. “I thought you were just blind but you’re deaf too?” The way she asks it makes it obvious she’s not looking for an answer, so I just hold Jenna’s keys

tightly in my hand, pressing my lips together. Please don't make a scene. Please don't make a scene.

"Hey," she calls out again. "Did you not hear me earlier when I said you weren't welcome here?"

I don't notice my teeth biting into my lip to hold back the tears until Cindy chimes in. "I heard she has special needs. She's like good at school though so it kind of makes her like Rain Man." She drags her 'likeees' out making her talk like a sorority girl.

God, what bitches, I think to myself.

"What'd you say?" Amy asks, her eyes narrowed on me. Shit, did I say that out loud? She's moving toward me quickly, and everyone in the room is watching. "Call me that again, I dare you!" she screams with her freshly polished finger pointing at me. My eyes look anywhere but at her. Somehow that means they catch Beaux's. He looks sympathetic, kind of like how I imagined he did that day in the hallway. Was he on my side?

"Hey. What's going on?" Jenna says, pushing Amy back.

"Your sister thinks she's better than me."

"Okay, I can promise you she doesn't think that. She's literally the nicest person ever, I don't know why you'd even say that?" One thing about Jenna is that she has always been overprotective of me, which is why, other than today, I usually refrain from telling her things people say about me.

Amy's looking at me again, a drunken look in her eyes. "You think you look good or something with your sister's makeup on? You can wear her clothes, Del, but you'll never be her."

"What is your problem?" Jenna says. Anger is building in the way her fists are tightly clenched together.

"She called us bitches."

Jenna's smiling now. She looks proud of me. She's completely unphased when she says, "Well, maybe that's because you both are." Letting go of Amy, she heads toward me. "Let's leave, this place sucks anyway."

Walking toward the door, I hear Cindy's feet follow behind me. "Wait!" she says. I turn around, her face looking innocent with her arms behind her back. Her eyes are wide. "At least stay for one more drink." Pulling a red Solo cup from behind her back she dumps it all over me. It is soaking into the white shirt. I don't know why I do it, but I look back over to Beaux hoping he will say something to his girlfriend. But he doesn't. Instead, he laughs.

It's already too late when I make sense of what's happening. A mixture of Coca-Cola and rum is dripping down my face as Jenna is on top of Cindy.

"You ever touch my sister again," she shakes her head, "No! You ever look at my sister again, I will beat the shit out of you. I'm not eighteen yet Cindy, you are. Swing back and that's a case." Her voice is mocking in the way that she dangles her lack of adulthood in Cindy's face. Standing up, she forces her back down to the ground.

“Adella Jean, you need to call your mommy too?” Amy continues. I give Jenna a pleading look to just leave. They will use anything I do to make me hate my life. I didn’t need Jenna to constantly defend me. I was good at avoiding it. That was the safe way to live.

But Jenna doesn’t stop. “I’ve got my sister’s back. All you two do is lay on yours.” I can’t stop myself from laughing out loud about how my sister just suggested they spend their free time, but to my rescue, Jenna pulls me out the door. We are finally in her car on the way home.

Lifting her hands in the air, she laughs hysterically. I didn’t think she was intoxicated inside, but as we sit in the car right now with me driving, I can tell she is.

“Wooooh!” she shouts. “That was fun.” She’s biting her lip holding back more laughter, as she scuffs up my hair with her left hand. “Those girls are going to be nothing in life, Adella. Just remember that.”

I smile at the memory. I only have good memories of Jenna, and I’m thankful for her as a sister.

“You are only thinking about the negatives, Sis,” she says. “Are you forgetting the time he punched Garrett in the face because he called you a whore for talking to that guy Parker after Archie?”

“He did what? He did not punch Garrett for me,” I shook my head, “he spilled beer on me, yes, but did not punch Garrett on my behalf. What was up with people spilling their drinks on me?”

Her eyes stayed on me as if I were the dumbest person ever. “Del. Beaux was into you in school. Before Amy he always asked Cole about you. You just decided you hated him from one bad night when he was drunk. And the hallway incident.”

“He was not into me. I was a freak, and he was a quarterback. He didn’t even know we were related, Jen, and it was way more than just one night, I just gave you at least fifteen reasons why.”

“How could he know that we were related? I’d be doing a keg stand while you were in the corner hiding with Cassie, and that was in the rare case that you even went out.”

“Whose side are you on here? Beaux has been and always will be a complete asshole.” I groaned feeling betrayed.

“I love you. And I missed you so much. But Beaux changed, and he has been a lot of help. You have been gone for years, Del. Honestly, other than the fact that we texted occasionally, it felt like the family was grieving a death.”

I turned away from her cruel words. “Well, that’s harsh.” She was right though. A lot can change in a day, let alone six years.

“I’m not trying to upset you. I just mean you missed a lot. Beaux is a nice guy now. He would do anything for the family.”

I shook my head feeling a little discouraged from how much the family seemed to love Beaux. “Anyway, enough about Satan, tell me about Jeff.”

“Jeff is so great, Del. I mean I never imagined feeling these things. It is like he knows exactly what to say and when to say it. When I’m sad, he makes me grilled cheese sandwiches and you know how much I love those. He wants to move, Del.” I could not contain the worry that was swimming through my eyes. I was happy for her; she deserved a nice guy like Jeff and an unlimited number of grilled cheeses but coming from experience moving with a man you just met so soon was a bad idea.

Lance and I moved in six months after seeing each other. We went apartment hunting and picked the first apartment we found that was extremely expensive. I had just published my second book, and it hit substantial numbers giving me a sizable income, even if it didn’t make the *New York Times* best seller again. We decided to split it because I wouldn’t have felt comfortable living somewhere that was not equally mine.

The first few weeks were great living together, we had wine nights and homemade dinner. Shower sex and long cuddles in the morning. It was a dream. Until I woke up to him screaming at me because a man messaged me asking to schedule an interview on my book, “Letters to Rose.” He called me a whore and threw the lamp so hard it shattered into so many pieces it was unrecognizable. Lamp shopping became my least favorite hobby since Lance probably broke about twelve total during outbursts of rage and jealousy. I believed that it was a good thing he was worried because that meant he cared, but man, was I wrong.

“You and Jeff must be pretty serious then?” I smiled. “Just make sure he is a good guy, Jenna, really get to know him before you plan your life around him, okay?” My hand was resting on her shoulder when Jenna let out a small anxious burst of laughter.

“How is it that I am the older sister, and you are giving me speeches on rational thinking?” she blurted out, laughing harder now.

“Excuse me,” I joked, “but I am only eleven months younger than you. I would hardly consider you to be much wiser than me in your age.” We both laughed as we fell back onto the bed, crinkling the ugly green.

It was nice talking to someone who didn't treat me like porcelain after I called off my engagement, but Jenna saw me as a whole and nothing less. We used to joke that we had a mental bond where we knew what each other was thinking. Sometimes it was a flaw but most times it was a gift having a sister who could read you so well.

“I am so happy for you, and I cannot wait to meet Jeff. I hope he can manage your wildness.” I laughed. “And your constant need to watch movies with subtitles.”

We spent the next few minutes filling each other in on everything we missed the past few years. Talking about how Gerrie got remarried, and the last time she went to our old home Gerrie rushed outside to welcome her to her complete and utter shock. She mentioned how the same Cole she threw a party for that led to us being grounded for a month, was way cuter now and even told me I should go visit him at the local dive bar downtown. I told her about smashing my favorite vase and about my writer's block. We laughed as we discussed the years we spent apart.

Man, I missed her.

I shut the door behind me as I headed downstairs. Beaux sat on the couch with his arm leaning against the cushion, sinking into it as if he had been planted there for hours. His face looked tired.

“Ready?” he asked impatiently, tapping his fingers against crossed arms.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” I force a smile, trying to be nice for my family’s sake.

...

The horses were so much bigger and stronger than the last time I saw them. I loved riding horses, especially Oreo, she was my way to escape my breakdowns I would have after a bad grade on a test or after Archie dumped me sophomore year because my body was not “developed” enough for him.

I grabbed onto the brown leather saddle and pulled my leg over the other side.

“I can see that you don’t need any help.” Beaux came up next to me to stroke her mane. She looked exactly like you’d imagine, a mix of black and white, like an Oreo.

“Isn’t she beautiful.” I smiled at her and looked down at him, although it was not that much farther down since he was extremely tall. I had not noticed the extra inches he had gained until now because he was always leaning on something or being too irritating for me to pay attention.

“Very beautiful.” His eye contact locked onto mine making me wonder if he meant me or Oreo, but before I could

ask, he quickly caught himself. “The horse. The horse is beautiful,” he clarified. Figures.

“She is beautiful,” he continued. “She is probably the strongest out of all of Greg’s horses too.” He leaned into her and whispered, “You are the strongest here and yet you are the smallest. It’s always the smallest ones everyone underestimates, Am I right?” His smile was genuine the next time he glanced at me. Treacherous butterflies take over my stomach forcing me to pull my focus away. He seemed like he was about to say something until Darby, Jenna’s horse, neighed next to us. We held eye contact until I quickly averted my attention to the chocolate-brown horse. Beaux shook his head and licked his lips then turned around and grabbed a light-brown cowboy hat off the picnic table.

He placed the hat loosely on top of his head in an entirely too sexy way to comprehend before saying, “Now to the tour of the Andrews family ranch,” and flashed me a tooth-bearing smile that outshined Lance’s by a mile.

No, Del. Do not fall for it, he has bad news written all over that smug face. My mind pleaded, remember how broken Cassie was when he played her? It was a cute smug face though.

Chapter Seven

BEAUX

Up until this point, I had felt bothered by Adella's presence. But as we rode quietly through the field that led to the main harvesting stretch, I wanted to know what she was thinking even though it seemed like she was too busy staring at the overgrown wild daisies that took over the grass to be thinking anything.

At least nothing that had to do with me.

That annoyed me. It had been a long time since I'd seen Del, and the fact that she still hated me after all these years meant she really did hate me in school. For some reason, I always hoped it would just be a game between us back then. But I guess with how Amy, Cindy, and the boys on the team treated her, it was easy to hate me too. I mean, I kind of hated me for who I was in high school. It wasn't an easy time for me, like I'm sure she assumed. But it didn't mean I could be a dick.

"I missed Tennessee, you know." She sounded as if she believed I had made my mind up about what type of person I thought she was now, and maybe I had.

Her voice was soft and delicate. "In New York you can't even see the stars at night like you can here." She continued to take in the scenery. It didn't take a genius to tell she appreciated our home. Part of me felt guilty for how quick I was to tramp on her parade when she arrived, but she left this place willingly and without much thought. She left *all* of us, even if I was the last reason she would stay or maybe even part of the reason why she left.

“What is it like?” The question slipped out of my mouth without even thinking, and for the first time since she arrived, I sounded almost interested, and she sounded like she hadn’t hated me when she answered.

“It’s beautiful also, but in a separate way. You know, like how a flower is gorgeous and intimidating but so is—” she thought hard for a second.

“Something completely different?”

She snorted as if she expected a better comparison. “Right, well they are completely different but also beautiful. New York is nice, you just grow to miss what you know.”

“And what do you know?”

“Oreo,” she blurted out with a quick laugh, “Oh, and the smell of Miller Lite spilled down my stomach, and occasionally a rum and Coke.”

Her smile makes me feel some kind of way as she tries to suck it back in to avoid snorting, which I have noticed she tends to do when she laughs hard. I find it adorable.

“Are you ever going to forgive me for that?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Should I?” she glared at me.

“I guess that’s up to you. If you want to hold grudges forever, then maybe so should I. By the way, you owe me a new phone.”

“What?”

“Mine broke from your arm spasm when you accidentally sprayed me with the hose that day.”

“Oh, right. That was *totally* accidental.” She smiled trying to hide the amusement on her face.

“You always hated me, and I don’t even know why,”

Disbelief spread on her face. “Are you serious? Beaux, you literally *tortured* me in school. I seriously considered going cyber to avoid seeing you and your friends. I hate to start something right now, but you guys treated anyone different as if we were inhumane.”

“What did I do to you?”

“What didn’t you do? You embarrassed me on multiple occasions, and because of you and your friend’s hatred toward me, every other girl hated me, making me not so popular on the playground.” She looked upset as the accusations spilled out of her mouth.

“I don’t think it was my disliking that made those girls hate you.” Those girls were simply jealous that Adella Jean was the smart, intelligent girl who anyone would have been lucky to have. I still beat myself up for liking a girl like Amy. One who did such terrible things to so many people.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she shot back.

Deflecting the bullets that her eyes were shooting at me I quickly opted for a subject change.

“Nothing. Anyway, I’m glad I’m here now. Even if you still hate me. Your family has done so much for me.”

“What brought you here?” She asked. I still cannot wrap my mind around how someone looked this beautiful riding a horse as I watched her. I saw many women ride horses throughout the years, but none of them looked as if they were being photographed for *Vogue* while doing it.

Until now.

“Beaux?” She continued when I didn’t answer her question. Her eyes looked like she needed this conversation right now to distract her from whatever was causing her so much stress, and that is the only reason why I answered truthfully.

“In all seriousness, I don’t know. My parents had a ranch too, but things changed, and my mom had to sell it.” My voice dropped, and I instantly tried to brush off whatever mental images came to mind after speaking about things I don’t allow myself to speak about, then I continued. “I like to work, and your parents were so welcoming, I just could not refuse, it was a weird change because I spent so much time alone, I guess. They are great though, Anne and Greg.”

“Why would you want to be alone?” Her eyes were now pinned on me with her full attention.

“I find comfort in it, I don’t know. It’s cheesy. I just don’t believe in all that ‘you meet someone, and it’s love at first sight’ stuff. It’s more like lust at first sight, like I look at

plenty of women and would not mind satisfying them or the other way around, in the rare cases that they want the same thing. Most of the time they expect more. You meet women who think they can change a man and become the exception and *that* is when the line blurs, and I end up being the jackass for being honest. It doesn't even have to be my life for example, let's say you grow to love someone in a completely platonic way. You form a bond with them, even become friends. One of them always feels the need to catch feelings and ruin the good thing, and for what, a few weeks of thinking with my dick and eventually coming to my senses?" I waited for her smart-ass comment, but there wasn't one. Why did she stay silent in the worst times? Instead, her face looked disappointed, but she also didn't look like she was about to disagree either.

"Nothing? I thought you would be overanalyzing that. Aren't you a romance author?" I pointed out puzzled. I heard Anne mention it before and may have even taken it upon myself to buy a copy.

"Well, you just went all *When Harry Met Sally* on me, so I was processing it, but yes. Being a romance author does not mean I fully believe in everything I write." She stared down and looked like she saw herself as being an imposter in her own fictional butterfly-filled world. "My books are for entertainment purposes. You don't watch horror movies believing monsters are under your bed, do you?"

I nodded yes, and she shook her head as to say *okay, Smartass*. "Really though, majority of people who write books about beasts do not believe in them, they're just interested in it and in the same way, I do something similar. I write about love because it's fascinating, but I don't completely believe it will happen to me or everyone else."

“Are you a realist or something, Andrews?” My forehead crinkled as I narrowed my eyes under raised brows.

“Definition?” she asked as I stared blankly. “What makes you think you know the definition of what is perceived to be real or not?” The horses stopped next to each other along the lake, and she jumped off gracefully. “Not to sound poetic or anything,” she continued, “but everyone has different realities, some people find love, some people avoid it, and others are stuck in the middle of hoping for it but realizing it doesn’t exist for everyone.” She sat on an over-sized rock and stared out to the water. “So yes, I believe in love and being a hopeless romantic, but I also understand how someone could hate the idea of it or the simple fact that not everyone will experience it. *Or* if they do experience it, maybe something happens that inevitably ruins it.”

“Like what?”

“Several things. Time being the first. You could love someone but if you are at two completely different points in your life someone almost always uses time as an excuse.”

“And?” I sense there’s more she wants to say but isn’t.

“And it’s completely *bullshit*. Time does not have any influence. If two people genuinely love each other, they will cut the crappy excuses and be together. Love is when you cannot imagine how you went so long living without your partner, and you don’t even want to remember a time when you had been with anyone else. It makes you sick to picture a future without them, so when people say that timing must be right, they simply are not in love.” She sighed heavily after her TED Talk. There was a lot to unpack there, I thought to

myself. Better to just avoid it all together and stop treading on that topic.

“Have you ever been in love?” Her question stabbed into me as memories took up space in my head. It was easier to say no, so that’s what I did.

“Well, what about Cassie? And Amy? And my cousin Lana?” Her voice was sarcastic, but the mention of Amy made me scrunch my nose. “Not even Celine Dion?” Her sarcasm was obvious.

Ignoring her question, I abandoned Darby’s saddle and sat next to her still taking in her entire tangent as she fidgeted, picking the petals off the wild daisy she held in her hand. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a faint tan mark on her ring finger, it was so light though I could have been imagining it.

“Why did you really come home?”

I stared at her freckles that scattered across the bridge of her nose onto her cheeks.

“I—” she sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“How did you get the bruise?”

“I told you already what happened.” She averted her eyes away from me.

I continued to stare at her, watching as she brushed her hair behind her ear.

“I’m sorry, but it’s just none of your business.” She went to get up, but something happened to me. I was no longer in control of my impulses because without thinking I leaned forward to kiss her as her hand pushed against my chest, surprisingly strong.

“Unbelievable,” she shouted to herself. “Wow, you are good! Do you always give people tours on my family’s farm then try to trick them into enjoying your company?” Her laugh was anything but humorous when she spun around fast. “Well, listen here, Beaux whatever your last name is.” She knew my last name. I think? “I am not going to be one of those girls who thinks they can change you. I just got out of a relationship full of thinking I could change him, and I won’t be making that mistake again just to mess with you in your SpongeBob sheets,” she said in a strict tone. Silence fills the air as we both sit there uncomfortably avoiding eye contact. In high school I had cartoon sheets, which I assumed Cassie spilled about. I would yell at her for that, but Cassie moved to Alaska last year with a man she met in the military. After a beat, I finally broke the silence by saying two words.

“Toy Story.”

“What?” Her face changed from irritated to confused. She turned red as she crinkled the space between her eyebrows.

“Hypothetically, if I were to have animated sheets... they would have been *Toy Story*. And by the way, you are not my type, and I am *not* your type, so don’t worry about it.”

My heart sort of tugged at the thought of how different I must have been compared to her type, but then I remembered why I don’t allow myself to date and dropped any

revelation that I could be the type of guy to commit to a girl. The thought made me chuckle to myself. Still though, those feelings in high school that I felt for Del lingered.

“Oh, and what is your type? Girls with chains and face tattoos?” She looked to the side again nervously before crinkling her eyes, a satisfied grin formed on my face as I watched her immediately regret judging another woman for how they choose to dress. “Okay, maybe those girls are super cool, and I am slightly jealous because I wish I could pull off a septum piercing, but I am not at all insulted that I’m not your type!” She squalled, waltzing toward me fast and poking me with her neatly polished pointer finger. “I am flattered that I’m not your type.” She rampaged unable to stop babbling from the obvious anger that was continuing to burn inside of her. “I am a hardworking, independent woman, and I will be damned if I let anyone make me feel otherwise.”

I *liked* this game. Making females angry was something I was good at it. Especially Adella Jean.

“Okay you seem to be taking this to heart. You are attractive, do not get me wrong, but I need to put an end to this flirting before you get the wrong idea.” Her gaze stared blankly at me and was quickly replaced with a murderous look that twinkled in her eyes. There was no doubt that she was having dark inner thoughts of placing me in a body bag and chucking me in the pond with rocks placed inside. That’s why I continue to dig deeper into her nerves. “Don’t worry though, I’m cool if you want to take this home, but other than that, count me out.”

She snorted so loud the horses flinched. “Oh my. Priceless! You have got to be kidding me. I don’t know whether to laugh or vomit profusely! Wow. You think you have me all figured out, don’t you? Well Beaux, I will not be Cassie or Lana.” She took a deep breath “And I will not even

be one of the girls who you talk to about your other girls. We are neighbors and that is it. I am not the same girl from school you can bully, and I wouldn't even sleep with you if we were the last two people on earth and Noah came in on his ark begging for us to start reproducing to bring back life again!"

"Then we wouldn't be the last two people on earth." I point out as she catches her breath. Her eye twitches immediately when she asks, "What?"

I can tell it was a rhetorical *what*, and that she didn't want an answer, but I say anyway, "If Noah came on his ark, then there would be at least three people left."

"You know what, I take my statement back. There is no possible way Noah would even allow a man like you to start an entire civilization."

"You speak about him like you know him."

"Maybe I did!" she says matter-of-factly. "In a past life."

My arms cross unconsciously as I ease back and watch her thoughts scramble in her head. Slightly amused I answer, "Right."

Her words come out quick and firm. "I don't like you."

"Okay, now that that's settled, can we please go look at the crops now?" My voice went even deeper and sounded even more demanding.

“Whoops! Completely forgot I have somewhere to be tonight actually. How about we rain check this whole tour thing? Sound good, Beaux?” She suggested while hoisting herself onto Oreo.

“Where do you have to be?”

“It is none of your concern what my plans are for the night. Maybe you should make some of your own so you can leave me alone.” She turned around swiftly claiming the last word as if she had not already taken it. “Whoever the girl was who screwed you up so bad that you feel the impulsive need to be a jackass should be reprimanded for creating a shallow, insensitive man.”

I did not even get the chance to answer before Del Andrews rode off without me and decidedly became the biggest pain in the ass in my life.

Again.

Dammit.

I looked down at my phone to check the time as it glowed.

One New Message from Sarah (dive bar on locust):

S: Hey, I am passing through town ;) want to meet and get some drinks?

B: See u at 8.

I didn't want to meet one bit, but if meaningless sex is what I needed to not let Del goddamn Andrews torment and confuse the shit out of me, then I will suck it up and go.

...

I took my time getting back to the house.

I kicked my boots off onto the gray hardwood floor and neatly placed them next to my European oak bookshelf that had stacks of novels neatly organized by historical fiction, science fiction, mystery, and even a small selection of romance novels, one of them being *Letters to Rose*.

I purchased the book as soon as I found out Del was an author. I knew my contribution was little, but I wanted to understand how she thought, and after the conversation we had today, I was now *completely* stumped.

I made my way through the living room into the kitchen all the way over to the fridge. Pulling out a cold beer, I quickly cracked it off the side of the counter leaving a pinging sound from the metal cap landing on the floor. *I'll pick that up later.* My direction averted over to the pile of unopened mail on the counter. Most were retirement plans or state retirement bullshit, but one familiar envelope with blue cursive written on it caught my attention.

As it always did.

To: Beaux From: Mom

For a moment, the thought of opening it almost sounded like a good idea. Maybe what she had to say was

enough to fix everything.

My eyes stayed on the piece of mail a second too long leaving my mouth craving the taste of Bud Light, and the effect a few beers could do to me right now. Taking the note, I released it into the trash. There's nothing she could say to fix this. *What a waste of stamps* I thought, walking to the couch.

The gray sectional couch was in the middle of the room with an open walkway behind it. In front of the couch was a clean, black coffee table and a record player skillfully placed on it. The tv hung on the wall next to posters of notorious sports legends; Muhammad Ali was the largest next to Jackie Robinson and Babe Ruth, while Michael Jordan and Tom Brady posters were autographed on the contrasting wall. My dad and I loved to watch sports together. That's why I dedicated so much time to football. A lot of people thought I joined football for the popularity, but it was much deeper than that. I even boxed for a while before he sold the gym and a piece of his heart with it.

He was a great man but never had a backbone.

He allowed himself to get disrespected because he, like many other men including myself, became blind to love and continuously let people treat him like a doormat.

Now I just find myself avoiding any relationships that seem like they threaten my ideals.

For now, girls like Sarah would be just fine. The ones who expect less from me and know I am just a way to pass time until they find someone worth loving. Women like Del, who are strong, effortlessly beautiful, and intelligent are exactly the type that I needed to stay away from. She would find her polo-tucking, khaki-wearing, gin and tonic-sipping

man. I would not allow myself to get mixed up in one of her predictable Hallmark love stories she writes. And quite frankly, I did not want to. Shit, it hasn't even been a day yet and this pain in the ass has me overanalyzing. I slung the beer back and finished it.

Chapter Eight

DEL

In that moment, I had wished I shut my mouth and left instead of making an excuse as to why I could not finish our tour of the family farm.

I should have just flipped him off and left with no explanation, but nope, that would have been too easy I guess because I told him I had somewhere to be tonight, which wouldn't matter if he weren't Beaux.

He would *never* let that go.

Maybe he wasn't even listening, I try to convince myself. Maybe he knew I only said it because he made me sweat more in five minutes than I ever had during one of those dreadful 5ks Lance and his father made me run every holiday. Who spends Christmas in athletic gear running uphill for three miles? I did track, and I still hated it. Holidays are meant for turkey and Mariah Carey.

It only took a second for the train of stress and questions to enter my mind again. Maybe he just did not care so he wouldn't think too deeply about my night out.

Why would I say that I had somewhere to be? Absolutely no idea! It's my first night coming back. Of course I don't have plans. My mind pondered on who to ask without sounding completely desperate. My only option was right in front of my face with a heart and devil emoji next to her name, *Jenna*. I clicked on her name and began to type out a few messages before erasing them and sending:

B: Hey Jen, what are you doing? I was thinking we should go to that bar tonight if you're down for that. Okay, let me know and bring Jeff!

Not even a minute later she answered:

J: Ahh! Yay! Andrews sisters are back baby!! Should I buy Pedialyte and Advil for tomorrow, or will you?

D: Meet you at 8. Love ya.

I had to look good in case I ran into anyone I knew like Archie who was so caught up on my lack of boobs when I was sixteen that he decided to end our relationship.

I took this as a personal challenge as I yanked my makeup bags out and placed them on the bathroom sink. I was a new woman. No longer a brace face, and I was going to flaunt it. By the time I had finished, my makeup was looking pristine and flawless. Years of galas and important events had prepared me for this moment—my hometown.

Rummaging through my luggage, I threw the clothes I had packed frantically on the bed to see what I had picked during my flee from Lance.

Shit.

I forgot about Lance. Somehow my mind forgot about my ex-fiancé and the entire purpose of me coming to Tennessee to begin with. I guess the years' worth of memories before New York suppressed the ones after New York. I pulled up my emails. A sick feeling stirred in my stomach from what I saw.

Seventeen unopened messages. My heart sank into my stomach as I clicked on the first email.

Lancepowell@powellfirm.ny.law

6/18/2020

Del,

Babe, I did not mean anything I said. You know that. I was upset and angry. The thing that happened between Amelia and me is over. You just made me feel like your job was more important than our relationship and Amelia was supportive of me during that. Also, we should talk about the other night. It was an accident, and you were saying some uncalled-for things. We are both in the wrong.

Lance.

Lancepowell@powellfirm.ny.law

6/18/2020

Del,

Please answer, everyone at the firm is worried about you, including me. I fired Amelia. Jared should have never recommended her to begin with, he can be so dense. Anyway, call me on my work phone, it has been backed up here in the office. Did you tell anyone about last night? You know that I never wanted that to happen, you just kept talking back to me and I lost control. I am a good man, you know that. You are lucky to have me in your life and I do not want you to make the mistake of calling off our engagement. Speaking of which, I stopped by the apartment and noticed your ring on the counter? I am assuming you accidentally left it behind. Also, I bought you a gift. Something I know you will love. I love you.

Lance.

I do not know what he would have bought me. I already have a thousand pair of heels and a stash of forgiveness necklaces from him. What more could a girl want?

Lancepowell@powellfirm.ny.law

6/18/2020

Del,

For the love of God, could you answer? We are adults. Adults talk things through and figure it out. I don't know what more I could've done. I'm truly sorry for how things went but people are asking questions. I have a huge case coming up that I need to focus on. This isn't fair to me. Get home.

L.

That man needed an exorcism, wow. The fact that he made note of *me* hurting *him* as if he didn't gaslight me for six years into regretting all my life choices? I tucked my phone into my back pocket as a laugh escaped between my lips. I picked up my low-rise black pants and a cropped ribbed Def Leppard tank top. The pants were a little snug, but they made my butt look nice. I snapped a picture and sent it to Jules.

D: Cute? Or burn it?

A: CUTE. Who are you trying to impress?

D: My old classmates, lol. Wish me luck.

I slipped my black heeled boots on that were in the closet since the move and put gel in my hair to tame the frizzy curls from the humidity. I grabbed my purse and headed for the door remembering I don't have a car. How was I supposed to go out without a car? It's not like I could just call Timothy from the airport and ask him to take me to a dive bar this late. And I was sure Jenna was already there with Jeff because she always arrived early to places. That left one other option.

"Hey, Ma, can I take the car? I'm meeting Jenna and Jeff for a few drinks," I called out as I made my way down the steps careful not to trip.

"Hey Greg! Do you need the car?" she calls from the foyer into the living room.

My dad came around the corner with a beer clutched tightly in his hand and like a lost puppy, Beaux trailed behind him.

Shocker.

If you had told sixteen-year-old me that Beaux would someday feel comfortable enough to crack a beer with my father, I may have vomited on scene.

He eyed me up and down and flexed his jaw, looking like he was struggling to bite his tongue. I squinted my eyes at him and covered my chest with my crossed arms so that his eyes couldn't venture down in time to notice the lack of undergarments.

"I need the car to meet with a potential client in a bit. Why, where are you going?" My dad asks.

“I’m meeting Jenna and Jeff for drinks at the dive bar downtown.”

“I’m sorry, honey, but I need it tonight. We will have Beaux finish fixing up Jen’s old car for you, but for the time being there is not much I can suggest. You know the bus comes by like twice a day before five p.m.”

“I can take you.” Beaux sipped on his beer and swallowed. “I’m meeting with an old friend, so I’m going anyway.” I shook my head ill at the idea of spending a five-minute drive in a car with a man who probably listens to nails on a chalkboard for comfort. And that’s probably on his good days when he doesn’t repeat SPCA commercials and sounds of babies crying to get a good night of sleep.

“I will walk.” I smiled and tilted my head pulling myself out the door. Rain fell on me as I pulled the flannel I grabbed off the railing near the door and held it over my head. “Shit,” I mouthed, worried about my hair being ruined. All that diffusing for no reason.

“It is three miles away at least.” Beaux pointed out as he walked out the door unphased by the rain. I shook my head like I knew that. As obvious as he could be, he really won the prize when he said, “It’s raining,” and held his hand out to show the drops that his skin absorbed.

And his shirt.

And his hair swept across his forehead making treacherous butterflies invade my stomach.

Shaking my head to ignore how good Beaux looks in the horrid weather, I said, “Oh, is it?” I made my sarcasm obvious. “I hadn’t noticed. Don’t worry about the walk, I need to break these boots in anyway.” I strutted quickly down the driveway.

“Adella Jean! I am not letting you walk in the dark to a bar. Especially not dressed like that.”

Welp. There it is. I was waiting on that one.

“Excuse me?”

“There are creeps everywhere. Even in Tennessee. I am not letting you walk there.” He finally reached his truck and leaned against it pleading with me. “Get in the truck. Please.”

“Why should I?”

“Because there is nothing more uncomfortable than wet jeans at a bar all night. And besides, I’m good company.” He smirks.

I tore my head back. Looking up at him, I tightened my eyes. “Can you not be cocky for this five-minute car ride? If not let me go inside and get Advil now for the dreadful headache I am about endure from your voice.”

Amusement began to shine as his lips inched into a self-satisfying grin. “Great, so you will let me drive you?”

“You are infuriating but if it makes you leave me alone, then yes.” I struggled to climb into his truck during what was meant to be a dramatic entrance only to find his hand reaching over the center console to help me. Ignoring it, I climbed in and watched as he retracted his offer.

Beaux’s truck was surprisingly clean besides the mud on the floor mats, and for the entire day it took for him to glue himself back into my life, he looked surprisingly clean too. He did not strike me as someone who would shower before going out and applying whatever that godly smelling cologne he was wearing on, just to impress a friend. I caught the words that raced through my head and revisited to when he had said he was meeting with an ‘old friend.’ I had known all his ‘friends,’ and the majority of them were random girls he would bring from neighboring towns after his breakup with Amy junior year.

A spark of jealousy rushed through me, and my stomach hurt as I wondered if this was one of the no-strings-attached relationships, he referred to earlier.

Was he driving me so that he could meet one of his hookups?

Hell no, I thought. Now that I looked at him more clearly, he looked like he was ready for a date. He wore his denim jeans look with a quarter sleeve olive green Henley-styled tee that revealed the noticeable veins in his arm. The sleeves fit him perfectly showing every defined muscle in his arm in the right amount of light. My eyes continued to examine the sharp angles of his body as I caught the drool that almost left my mouth. I needed to call Loretta because there is no way she would let me find this conceited man attractive.

“So, you have friends?” I teased, unknowing why I was secretly hoping he would debunk the idea of him going out with a woman tonight.

“I do, are you jealous?”

“No, simply curious. I would never be jealous of a man incapable of feeling any kind of love or compassion other than when he looks at himself in the mirror.”

“I thought you said you didn’t care for my way of thinking. Have you changed your mind already, Adella Jean?”

He turned sharply around the corner and parked in the tiny lot. I saw Jenna’s new car on the other side. “Jenna is here, thanks for the ride. I hope you get action from something other than your hand tonight.” I leaned in closer to him. “Your friend sounds sweet.”

I spotted Jenna and Jeff instantly as I pushed past the door. They were sitting on the right side of the bar with two Blue Moon drafts placed on coasters in front of them. The room was full but mostly everyone was hovering over the pool tables.

Jeff was attractive; Jenna usually went for slim tall guys with daddy issues, but this guy seemed well put together. He had reddish hair and pale skin. He was filled out in his flannel and had a strong jaw and charming smile. He looked Irish. From what I could tell he had no teardrop tattoos or metal coming out of his face, so I already enjoyed him more than I thought I would.

“Del, this is Jeff.” Jenna pulled him close waiting to inspect my reaction eagerly. Jeff hugged me with the same

enthusiasm Jenna had. Jules would love this guy for Jenna, I thought to myself. He matched her energy and gave hugs? This man was the human version of a golden retriever.

Jeff looked over my shoulder while still hugging me and said, “Oh, hey, Beaux!” Great, so Jeff was one of his friends in question, damn, I almost really liked him too.

Beaux came over as Jeff released me and shook his hand in some weird, planned fist bump.

“Glad you came out, buddy. Are you hanging out with us tonight?” Jeff motioned to the bar.

“I’m here to meet up with someone.” His eye winked at Jeff as he whispered loud enough for me to hear him. “You remember Sarah, right?” in his deep raspy voice. I pondered for a moment, as I tried to remember Sarah. Nothing.

Jeff laughed and exchanged what seemed to be an inside joke as Beaux walked away and went to the bar to meet his date.

He sat next to a skinny, big-busted woman with straight black hair and poorly spray-tanned skin who seemed to have been waiting there desperately for a while based on the three empty Captain and Cokes in front of her. Sucking on a lime, her eyes grew wide. She was beautiful. I finally could appreciate that about someone without making myself feel small.

Her face immediately lifted from her drink to her eyes as she said something to him. She was melting in her flip flops as he pushed his hair back just for it to fall even sloppier onto his forehead. I tried to ignore how good he looked with

the messy hair look so I paid attention to anything but his effortless appearance.

Beaux didn't greet her with a hug but instead he nodded his head up at her as he would do when greeting a guy friend. She cringed but quickly forgave him as he ordered a glass of whiskey.

I was busy staring when a hand reached and tugged on my arm. For a moment, I felt my entire body flinch at the thought of someone grabbing me but when I turned and saw Jenna, my fight or flight instinct settled. The guard almost immediately went back up when I saw her pulling a man close to me.

Only this time, it was not Jeff.

"Sis! You remember Cole, right?" She looked at me and tried to wink nonchalantly. My eyes slanted as I looked at him up and down, pleasantly surprised.

I remembered Cole, but never him looking this—*masculine*.

"Of course! Wow you look great, Cole!" Wandering hands slid down my waist as he came in for a hug. My mind moved on a leash held tightly by my eyes as I scanned the bar to see if Beaux was watching. Part of me wished he had been watching but I kept my little focus on Cole, eyeing his body up a little too much.

"Wow, Del, you really look amazing. I mean, my God. You look great."

I took another quick glance and noticed Mr. Grouch at the bar staring over at me, only this time, in disgust as he downed his whiskey signaling for another round. His eyes stayed firm on Cole's hands maneuvering on my waist as he pulled me back from our hug. Beaux looked repulsed, and that didn't shock me. I am almost positive an adorable baby playing with a puppy would disgust this man.

I caught Cole's attention again. I could not get over how grown he looked. I guess you've missed a lot since high school, I thought to myself. His dirty-blond hair complemented his baby-blue eyes. He wore a flannel like Jeff's, only his was dark red and Jeff's was forest green. I noticed Beaux still glaring at Cole while Sarah coughed out high-pitched laughs during what sounded to be a story about her encounter with her hairdresser that Beaux was completely uninterested in. I became intrigued in this new intimidating side of Beaux that seemed to be jealous.

I decided to do what a woman who was told she was not a man's type would do. I showed him why I would *never* be his type. I drank shots and beer and made my rounds greeting all my former classmates, even Archie, who had shown up as predicted. Archie was now shorter than I thought he would be. He must have hit his growth spurt that year because compared to the rest of the guys at the time, Archie was tall. It could have also been his beer gut that made him look shorter too but nevertheless, the look of satisfaction on his face was amusing as I strutted away from him, leaving him behind in his varsity football jacket that was three sizes too small now. Alcohol gives a different type of confidence that you can't get sober.

An hour had gone by, and Cole and I were slinging back shots of tequila and dancing with the rest of the bar after destroying separate groups of people in pool. I was having such an enjoyable time. Cole swung me around as we danced with the crowd and every now and then I would scan the room

for Beaux just to find him making out with Sarah. Fully inhaling it as they displayed PDA carelessly in the bar.

Get a room.

In efforts to ignore the full-on make-out session and moans coming from Sarah's mouth, I called out for shots loudly as my old peers cheered.

Jenna was already annihilated by the amount of liquor we had consumed up to this point, but it didn't change the rate she was drinking, if anything it made her drink more, quicker.

After a quick bathroom break, I realized I too was, excuse my French, shitfaced. I couldn't remember the last time I was able to go out and have fun without worrying about Lance coming to find me. I wish Jules were here to see this careless version of myself, she would've loved it.

The bathroom was silent as I stared down at my feet praying to God to not let me vomit everywhere. Luckily, I did not vomit. The closest I came to it was when Archie would occasionally come up behind me and make a perverted comment that only he and I could hear. I gave him the finger and watched him walk away to go harass another innocent woman, just for her to throw her water on him and walk away leaving poor Archie searching around to see if anyone had seen. Other than my ex-boyfriend from sophomore year, I was still genuinely having fun.

Jeff and Jenna were chanting for Cole and me during our most recent win when I saw Beaux walk outside with Sarah. He looked miserable even though he had just basically made his date climax at the bar simply from first base. Part of me felt bad, and the other felt enraged by his hand. His hand

was tucked in Sarah's back pocket, and she had her body pressed against him as they walked out their door.

I had never been so mad at a left hand before.

I don't know why I did it, but I considered my options for only a second until I casually left my spot at the table. Tugging on the exit door, I went outside not realizing that Cole had followed, he must have figured it was an invitation for us to be alone which I could not blame him for assuming after the night we had.

Just as the door opened, he grabbed my face, and he kissed me. My eyes wide until I let myself enjoy it. The first man I had kissed since Lance, and I was not complaining. I threw myself into him more and more.

I blamed the alcohol, but part of me was okay with kissing Cole. He was kind and funny and had not made any creepy advances on me all night. Man, the bar was low.

I let out a quiet moan while still kissing him when a high-pitched voice said, "Why don't you kiss me like that?" to her boyfriend who was smoking a cigarette in the corner. I pulled myself off him and fixed my hair slightly embarrassed, but his hand was still placed on my lower back. He looked proud. That made me smile a little.

From the other side of the lot came another voice that made me fight the urge to abandon Cole and go hide like a coward inside.

"Del?" Beaux stood in a group of guys with his date hovering over him. He looked astronomically pissed.

Yep, run.

I turned quickly to walk back inside when he yelled, “Del!” again to grab my attention. His voice brings me back as I pinch my face together in guilt and slowly spin to face him. He isn’t yelling at me, which is a nice change from my past, but he does seem worried.

“Let me take you home,” Cole whispered in my ear after noticing the discomfort creep up my spine. “We can go back to my place.”

“Absolutely not, Cole. Del, I can take you home.” Beaux moved quickly past the crowd of bystanders. “Please. You’re drunk, and I would never forgive myself if you did something you would regret,” he pleaded with me.

“I can take her home, bro. Your date looks frazzled,” Cole interrupted gesturing to Sarah who was now rubbing up on one of the other guys in the group looking the opposite of frazzled. I tilted my head to the side as I watched her feel up her next victim.

God, why can I not be that careless?

She was exactly the type of girl Beaux would ask to go out for drinks, I realized. And exactly the type of girl Lance would have cheated on me with. And, admittedly, I was jealous of her.

“Sarah, you can’t drive. Cole seems eager to be a gentleman and offer a ride.” The girl flipped him off but did not seem to be phased by his attempt at passing her off. She let

it go fast though when she got on the back of the motorcycle with the same guy she was rubbing on.

“There. Problem fixed,” Beaux said thankful that Sarah was on her way out.

I looked at Cole who was stumbling over his words. “I have to go; it makes sense for Beaux to take me home since he lives on the farm.” I kissed him on the cheek and said goodnight, as Beaux death-stared Cole with every second my lips stayed planted on his cheek.

“Be safe, and call me when you get home.” He pulled me in for a kiss on the lips. “Oh, wait, let me see your phone.”

I located my phone from my back pocket and watched as he punched the digits of his number into my contacts and added his name. Cole was gutsy to be doing this with the grim reaper hovering over him closer and closer with every move he made on me in front of Beaux.

“Goodnight,” Cole called out behind me as Beaux eagerly pulled me away.

“Goodnight, Cole,” he answered for me before jerking his head back to me. “Really?” his lips pursed as he stared.

“What?” I slurred.

“For starters, you are drunk, Del. You need water, wait here.” I sat down on the pavement like a child as he disappeared momentarily just to reappear with bottled water.

“Here, drink this,” he said dropping the bottle gently into my lap.

“Is it alcohol?” I mumbled still sitting on the cold ground, the world spinning from the shots as I slumped over.

His patience was impressive as he softened his smile and nodded. I could tell through my drunken blur that he was lying, but it didn’t stop me from dumping the water down my throat. Reaching his hand out for the second time tonight, I accepted his help and interlocked my fingers with his as he pulled me off the ground.

Chapter Nine

BEAUX

It took everything in me to not turn around and punch Cole in the face. How dare he grab her like that?

There was a full bar of people who would have thrown themselves at Cole, but he had to pick Del. In all the times I had seen her, not once had she ever been one to publicly display affection for a crowd. But nope. Here comes Cole with his lumberjack-looking button down and Van sneakers.

Of course, why would he not?

Cole had been the only person to know my interest in Del back then. He was my best friend on the team. He had also been the only person who had convinced me she was too much of a stick in the mud to date. And that Amy Wells was my best bet.

My blood boiled as I walked her to the truck. I tried to focus on being angry at him for not being able to keep his hands to himself for five minutes instead of her who can't help being a girl every guy would desire to have.

I kept picturing his mouth on hers, his tongue intertwining as she rolls her eyes back in pleasure. His hand on her body. God, I wanted to turn around. I wanted to beat the shit out of him. I promised myself I wouldn't get into any more bar fights and that's the only reason I contain myself. The last fight I had gotten into for Del ended horribly after my five-day suspension.

“What was that?” She stopped walking and blocked the path in front of me but only hardly because she was so tiny. She sounded calm but confused. I counted to ten slowly and clenched my jaw.

“Keep drinking your water,” I directed. She shook her head and wasn’t waiting for me to explain myself. “Are you seriously confused as to why I am mad? He should have never touched you like that. You’re hammered, Del. You threw up earlier—Jeff told me.”

“Beaux, I’m not hammered. It was just a bad taste of liquor that’s all. And you hardly know me anymore, and when you did know me, you hated me, so why do you even care?” She stumbled and caught herself. “Okay maybe I am slightly intoxicated, but I wanted to kiss him, and I did. I kissed him back. You’re not my dad, and you do not own me so please stop making this confusing for me.”

“You wanted to kiss that guy? For God’s sake he drives a Honda Civic and puts gel in his hair. You have been in my life again for not even twenty-four hours and you’re already adding more work to my plate.”

I brushed my hand through my hair as she continued toward the truck. I can’t tell if the fact that she’s driving me nuts hurt her feelings or made her amused because she keeps her face away from me when she heads to the parked vehicle.

My mind clouded with gut-wrenching images that played in the back of my mind. Cole’s hands feeling her as if she was giving herself to him completely. Her moan crawling up his neck only to be released inside his mouth. That is until I pictured my knuckles imbedded into his jaw.

What a douchebag.

“I didn’t realize I was that awful to be around,” she slurred, her face changed and now she looked upset. I hated that I did that to her.

“Listen, Cole is a piece of shit. You aren’t. If I weren’t there, he would’ve already been on top of you.” I flinched at the thought of that. “I don’t trust him, Del, and neither should you. If you want to do that sober, I won’t stop you. But I wasn’t letting you leave with him driving drunk and having pervy ideas in his head when you can’t think clearly right now.”

I stared at her for a second until we got in the car and started it up. Part of me wanted to tell her what Cole had said to me that day years ago about her being a stick in the mud, but the other part realized how upset she already looked.

“I like him. He’s nice. Even in school when we used to talk, he was nice. Cole has always been the first guy to give me a chance without judging me and now I want to give him a chance. I wasn’t ready to then, but I am now, maybe.”

She looked guilty saying that aloud and almost as if she regretted saying it at all. My mind flashed as I listened to what she had said. Her and Cole *talked? I thought it was only a one-night stand.*

She continued. “I know you have cut the idea of trying for love completely, but I haven’t just yet. I deserve to be happy too.”

“Do you think you could see yourself with him? Is he the type of guy you would write about in your novels, the type you could love?” My voice lowered and turned into a

whisper. “You don’t have to answer that, actually please don’t answer it, it is none of my business.” I wondered what she was thinking.

“God, you sound like Loretta,” she groaned. Before I could question, she explains, “I don’t know, Beaux, he is sweet, and funny, and a nice guy. But I haven’t seen him in six years. I’m different now. I don’t know what I want. And the guys I write in my books are impossible to find. They don’t exist, they’re just a fragment of my imagination. But maybe Cole is the guy I meet and get the next best thing with. I’m twenty-six, I feel like I’m running out of time. And to make matters worse I can’t write a book right now to save my life. I’m just a one-hit wonder.”

The car filled with silence lingering in the air to be broken as I stopped suddenly. My foot slammed on the brakes.

A van full of teenagers blasting loud screamo music bolted through the red light forcing me to jerk the truck off the road, eventually braking again before we came inches away from hitting the tree in front of us.

I found my hand gripping her in the seat, my thumb brushing against her ribs to try to stop her from flying through the windshield. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, I think.”

I could feel her heart race through her shirt as she realized my hand placement. I pulled back quickly and apologized. Since when do I get nervous touching a girl over her clothes? I guess since I get into car accidents now with gorgeous girls who make me want to rip my hair out.

“Are you okay?” Her dark hair sheeted over her face as she pushed it back. A concerned look appeared as she examined me for scratches.

“I’m okay.” I got out to look at the bumper and then came back in. “The truck isn’t damaged so we can still get home, we are not too far. I’m sorry for putting you on the spot asking questions, I should have been paying better attention. You could’ve gotten hurt, and that would have been the last thing I wanted. I’m so sorry.”

She thought for a minute, looking at me. I don’t know why I say it again, but I do know that I mean it. “I couldn’t say it when we were kids, but I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let all those people treat you that way. That’s not who I am.”

“Beaux. I’ve been a pain the ass. I know I have. I just hate feeling this way.”

“Tell me about it,” I say.

“I hate writing make-believe people, or these lives they live that are so different than mine while I sit and watch my own life fall apart. I guess I started writing them when you guys bullied me. Someone mentioned how maybe I’d write a book one day at a party. And so, I did. I wrote a few short stories about what life could’ve been like for me in school had I been more likable.”

“You never did anything wrong, Del. Seriously. I hate that you think that. You always kept to yourself; those girls made you feel like it was your fault.”

“And I took it out on you.”

“Let’s be real, I’m no saint.”

“No, but out of them all you were the least brutal. I don’t know why I took it out on you. I think it was because I felt like you were the only person I could affect for some odd reason.”

“Well, you were right.”

“Was I the reason you left?”

“No—” she answered a little too quick. She sounded more sober as we talked. “No, I left because my publicist told me it was the best option for me to become a good author. Was it nice to leave a town that hated me? Yeah, but I didn’t leave because of any of you. I left for me.”

“Why’d you come back?” I asked. I wasn’t sure why we felt so comfortable talking now about the things we refused to say earlier. But I liked it.

“I needed to get myself out there. I needed to forget about my ex-fiancé.” *Fiancé. Ex.* My assumptions were true when I saw the slight tan on her ring finger.

“You can talk to me about it. I can’t promise I will understand or know what to say, but I can promise I will listen and never repeat it to anyone else.”

My hand now rested on her thigh, and I felt the warmth beam off her body, the gap between us was smaller now.

“I don’t expect anything from it, but it is the least I can do. Your family means a lot to me so that means you must mean at least a little to me now, right?” I played as I nudged her softly with my elbow until she laughed quietly. “Plus, I don’t see a hose anywhere that you can spray me with if you change your mind.” She snorted this time. “Seriously though. You can tell me. Hell, I doubt you will ever see me again after you leave for New York.” That sentence caused a jolt of pain in my chest.

Her voice sounded clearer as she spoke this time. “Well, it’s not anything book worthy, I guess. I was engaged and I thought I was in love with him.” She stared down at her bare finger. “It was six years. Six years and I couldn’t make him love me. I couldn’t convince him I was worthy of flowers or overly expensive shoes on days other than when he was apologizing.” She looked at me as if she were confessing that her shoes I had mocked her for were a gift instead of an investment then continued. “Or for morning messages telling me how highly he thought of me. Or for him to ask me how my day was. He didn’t even spend my birthday with me last year. I was begging for the bare minimum so much that I realized maybe I’m just not worthy of that. Maybe my expectations are too high. I guess guys who ride lawn mowers to your house to apologize and bring boomboxes to your window aren’t real. I just really thought I would have gotten my picket fence life.” The tears begin to fill her eyes. “Do you think you will get a picket fence life?” She stuttered, making me realize she is in a very vulnerable state still.

I felt guilty for allowing her to tell me this, even if she needed to say it aloud. She might regret it in the morning, but it doesn’t stop me from reassuring her. And even though she’s six years older than the last time I saw her; I can tell a lot of this pain had been there since school. The feeling of constantly being pushed to the side.

“First off, you’re worth so much more than the bare fucking minimum. Fuck that guy. He isn’t good enough for you, not the other way around. I want us to be civil, Del, hell, I will even hand pick you tulips for fun. I don’t want us to hate each other, okay? I think we got off on the wrong foot this morning. I just need to make sure you know all I can offer you is this, not that you asked for more, but I need you to know that. As much as I need you to know that your ex-fiancé is an absolute moron, and that I will never get, nor want, a picket fence life, whatever that entails.” My mouth went dry as I thought about the bruise on her face again. “I need to ask, did he do that to you?”

She sunk lower in her seat and her face went red as she looked out the window. Her head shook ‘yes’ cautiously as she continued to avoid eye contact.

“That son of a bitch,” I mumbled. My body filled with anger once again and I imagined what kind of person could ever hurt her. What a piece of shit.

“I’m sorry.” Her head stayed down and angled away from my words. “Look at me, Del, please.” Finally, her eyes searched for mine. “I will never let anyone hurt you ever again, you don’t need to worry about that guy. I’m here now. I always have been.”

I can tell she doesn’t believe me when I say it. And why should she after everything we’ve been through? But I know I mean it and somehow that’s enough for now.

I put the console up and slid over to her pulling her head onto my shoulder and stroking her shoulder to calm her down. “And if there’s anyone that’s worthy of a fairytale love story or a boombox playing outside their window or a picket fence, it’s you.” I heard her sob a little harder on my shoulder

as her body shivered into me. She needed to hear that. She stayed in my arms for a few minutes until she fell asleep, and I gently placed her back into her spot so that I could drive us home.

We pulled into the driveway not long after, and her head rested on her closed fist and the seatbelt. She looked effortlessly stunning. Her hair was gorgeous in those curls and her lips looked soft and pink. Her cheekbones were defined, and her freckles made her look innocent. I lowered myself out of the truck and scooped her into my arms.

“Can I stay with you tonight?” She mumbled.

“I can’t let you do that,” I replied, wishing I could have said yes. Unfortunately, I am one of the few respectful men, apparently. “You hate me, you don’t want to wake up next to me. Trust me.”

“Is it because I’m not a girl you would like or because I’m drunk?” she asked half asleep.

“No, because truthfully, you’re the only one I *could* like. And because you’re drunk.”

My smile softened as her eyes got heavy again. I carried her through the house and into bed. Gently, I peeled the boots off her feet and set them in her closet.

I didn’t feel comfortable changing her into new clothes, so I tucked her comforter over her and left the room to come back a few seconds later with a glass of water and a trash can.

I carefully sat next to her on the bed and pushed her hair out of her eyes. My lips just barely touched her forehead as I leaned down to kiss her goodnight. I had never felt the urge to kiss anyone on the forehead before, but here I was doing the unthinkable.

Shit.

I reached to turn the floor fan on and point it at her so she would get a nice breeze when she mumbled, “You’re a picket fence life type of guy.” Then turned on her side away from me.

I had no idea what it meant, but the way she had said it had me entirely convinced that I was nothing other than a picket fence guy.

Chapter Ten

DEL

The light flooded in the room all at once drowning me beneath my covers. I felt like I was suffocating when I flipped to my side. My head began to spin and pound like a hammer against nails as I pressed my hands aggressively into the mattress underneath me and pushed myself up. The smell of liquor escaped my pores, making me repulsed from the thought of all the liquid encouragement I had drank.

Ugh.

The glass of water on my nightstand was now being drained down my throat as I finished it all in three long gulps and blinked my eyes until the blur went away. I scratched my head.

How did I get home?

I changed into an oversized “New York City” tourist-looking pullover and put on a pair of Lance’s DC boxers that I had accidentally packed. I should have known we weren’t meant to be since he preferred DC over Marvel. Ironman would beat the shit out of Batman. Grabbing my phone, I look at my lock screen.

Five New Messages from Jenna:

J: Where did you go?

J: We ordered more shots, if you and Cole don’t get back soon, we are drinking them

J: bitch, you culd jave said bye beforew your butt xall

J: Ok I mught b drink, I live you <3

J: OH Bo??!! Herd u left without Cole. Oh well, worth a shit.

I pretended to ignore the misspelling of Beaux's name as I checked the delivered times. The messages ended around three a.m. I figured she wouldn't be awake for a while based off her messages and record-breaking number of typos.

I sat my phone down on my nightstand and noticed a little white note with red sharpie that was stuck to the bottom of the water glass.

Adella Jean,

I put Advil in your top drawer. Sorry for messing up your chance at a horrible one-night stand. I hope you get your picket fence life. If you need anything, my number's here.

B

Underneath the note was his number that I hesitated to add but figured I would need it eventually since we would be working together. I created his contact: "Beaux the skeptic."

I popped Advil in my mouth and dragged myself downstairs, contemplating catching the next bus to the airport.

Hope you get your picket fence life.

Shit, I wondered what else I told him. And then I remembered. All of it is like clockwork. Kissing Cole, the teenagers speeding down the street, and Beaux.

My disappointment in myself swallowed me whole just for a slight urge of relief to bring me back to life when I saw my parents at the table without Beaux. He must be asleep still. I went down the stairs the rest of the way and slid onto the bench.

“Good morning, pumpkin.” My mom smiled.

“Wow, you look beautiful this morning,” Dad said sarcastically holding a newspaper so close to his face that it was arguable whether he was even behind it or not. It was confirmed a second time that he was there as soon as he reached down to pick up his coffee mug that read “Super Dad.”

“Rough night?” he continued as he took a sip and set it back down. Dad was never a morning person until he had his black coffee and daily news. I swear he stood at the door every morning looking like an excited dog when their owner came home after a long day of work as he waited for the paper boy. The other day when I walked through the door was the only time I saw him not hiding behind a newspaper.

“My night was fine, thanks for asking.”

It wasn't a complete lie.

“I saw Beaux drop you off. That was considerate of him.” Mom sounded happier than Jenna when she gets a grilled cheese.

“Yeah, he chased all the men away from me in some self-righteous act of what I can only assume was being controlled by his ego. God, I feel like I’m sixteen years old again.” I complained, although I knew it had nothing to do with ego. It seemed genuine and he had said he wanted to be friends, or maybe he said civil. I can’t remember his exact wording. Glimpsing down at the glass of orange juice my mom poured for me, I decided I should go thank him for making sure I got home okay and maybe even take up that offer to tour the farm today.

“I knew I loved Beaux for a reason,” Dad expressed. “If Beaux doesn’t approve then neither would I.”

“Okay, Dad.” I stood up and headed upstairs as my mother called to me. “Aren’t you hungry, dear?” I ran back to the kitchen and kissed her cheek. “No, Ma. Thanks though, love you.” Her face blushed and she made a proud mom’s face. That was never a hard expression for her to show her kids, even still now that we’re twenty-six and twenty-seven.

I ran upstairs and pulled on a pair of light-blue denim overalls, with a yellow- and green-striped baby tee underneath it. I put my black Converse on and tied my hair up in a curly bun. Quickly, I applied mascara and ran back down the steps to find Beaux.

God, where was this even coming from? I hated Beaux. Hated? Hate? I always have, so why am I praying for him to walk through the door?

“Oh, honey, you look adorable!”

“Thanks, Ma. I’m going to head to the barn and take Oreo for a ride.”

“Okay, baby; can you stop in town and grab some groceries first, please? It would be a significant help. Oh, and your grandmother will be here this weekend to celebrate Jenna’s birthday before she leaves for her trip, so make sure you get the good brands, you know how she is.”

I grabbed the shopping list from her hand and the keys from the counter and jumped in my dad’s work truck.

I felt rushed. And anxious about what the day would hold. I was curious to see what our relationship would consist of now. Before pulling out of the driveway, I skimmed across the yard. His truck was in his driveway, but the lights were all out, and he was nowhere to be seen. Pulling my head forcefully away from the window, I headed down the road.

The grocery list was longer than I had imagined. I pulled into the parking lot and grabbed a cart. There was a farmers market set up in the lot full of fresh flowers under white tents. Red roses, yellow tulips, and pink peonies caught my eye. In the corner was a large abundance of sunflowers.

A burst of sadness ran through me as I remembered the apology flowers laying in shattered green shards of glass from my flea market vase. I snapped a picture of me with the tulips and sent it to Jules captioned with: *Wouldn’t these tulips look pretty in a green vase? Damn me for breaking the world’s prettiest vase.*

I put the tulips in my cart and began shopping off the list. I spent more money than I had hoped but ended up with a

full cart of groceries. I got some Mini Wheats and Lucky Charms too for myself, and a single peanut butter meltaway. I remembered in high school that Beaux had a secret obsession with them.

Fundraising was always my least favorite thing to do. My mother was terrible at remembering the pick-up date of whatever we had sold that month for track, so I usually just worked down at the theater and gave a donation to avoid having to make sales.

Then Coach G told us we were selling peanut butter meltaways. Those weren't only my favorite candy, but the easiest thing to sell because it was a fast exchange. You pay, you get it instantly. Typically, I'd eat the entire box of thirty and just throw a bunch of quarters I found around the house in a change bag, but when I walked toward my car at the first week of junior year, I noticed a two-door truck pull up beside me. Looking to my right, I see Beaux. I wonder if he's going to make a comment about the yolk he found on his car last week. A gift from Cassie and me after a midnight trip to the grocery store.

Not only had he slept with my cousin, but he also slept with my best friend the day after. I wasn't sure what happened that caused me and Beaux to hate each other so much. Last year I had thought maybe he was on my side. That he sympathized with me. But I was wrong. I guess it could've been last fall at Amy's party that started it, or when he and I got paired up to work on an assignment in English. It shocked me that he took AP classes. I guess I was making assumptions that he was a meathead because he spent so much time playing football but for some reason, he became miserable and anti-social junior year. He told his friends he was working after school, but I had seen him at the hospital on my way to volunteer. I sometimes dressed up as Jasmine with a group of girls from drama to entertain the kids in pediatrics. And when I saw him walk in, it only filled my head with questions.

I never mentioned it to anyone though. That next day in class was awkward. He looked at me and asked me why I was dressed as a Disney princess the other day. I wasn't even aware he had seen me. I explained to him about how I volunteered, expecting him to explain why he was there, but he never did. He was nice to me that day. But then, as we got ready to present our project, he was a no-show. He showed up to school every day after not caring that I lost points because of his absence. He hadn't even apologized once. Then before I knew it, he was hand in hand with Amy Wells in the hall again.

I hadn't spoken to him since, other than the occasional silent fights we've had, like the accidental bloody nose I gave him in gym last week. Which was definitely an accident. I'm a lot of things but violent was not one of them. Rolling his window down, he calls my name.

"Hey." I looked up expecting him to yell about the eggs, but he didn't. "Can I get a peanut butter meltaway?" It confused me as to why he asked me rather than Kaleb who did track and football. But it's a fundraiser and I wasn't going to say no.

Opening the box, I pulled out a peanut butter meltaway and handed it to him, accepting the dollar bill from his hand. I stuffed it in my baggy and pushed my glasses up the length of my nose. "See ya," I said walking away. "Wait," he called out. "I'm not with Amy anymore." I look up at him wondering why he's telling me this. I give him a slight head nod. "That's good?" It came out unsure.

"Yeah. I'm not quite sure why I told you that. I guess because you hate her and you'd kind of understand." He looked upset.

“I never hated her, Beaux. She hated me. I hate no one honestly, not even you.” He shook his head in understanding. That night, he friend requested me on Instagram. I stayed up wondering what it’d be like to have another friend. Then Amy found me the next day at school. She laughed in my face by my locker. “I saw you talking to Beaux yesterday,” she said. I keep my eyes ahead as I sort through my books. “He called you a freak last week. Just so you know. I wouldn’t want you thinking he liked you or something.” And with that, she walked away, and I blocked my new ‘friend.’

As I pulled in the driveway, rain began to slowly trickle on the old dirty windshield.

“There goes my plan for today,” I groaned as I lugged myself from the driver’s seat.

“Good morning, Adella Jean.” A contagious smile appeared as Beaux opened the back door of the truck.

“Good morning, Beaux—”

“Jones.” He finished. “My last name is Jones, and my middle name is Henry after my grandfather. Before you ask, the answer is yes, I am slightly disappointed that you forgot.”

“Well, Beaux Henry Jones, your mother has great taste in name picking.” His face turned down the slightest bit at that comment but not long enough for me to make anything of it.

“You look nice today, Del.”

I tried to hide my cheeks as they blushed by grabbing as many bags as possible. Abandoning Beaux with only two, I headed toward the house.

“So, Beaux, I was thinking our first non-date as civil neighbors should be that tour we rain checked? Although now it looks like we may not be able to rain check for today.” I bite my cheek watching rain spill on the windshield in tiny droplets.

Bending down, I reach into one of the many grocery bags that covered the counter and pulled out the peanut butter meltaway. “Also, I got this for you as a small thank you gift for last night. Anyway, what day is today?” I asked myself before looking and seeing Monday on my home screen. “How’s tomorrow?”

His eyes focused on the candy bar, and he thanked me. “Peanut butter meltaway? Takes me back to high school.” I liked that he remembered, it made me feel like I was less invisible than I thought. A cold shiver ran through me as his shoulder touches mine as we set the bags on the table. “Tomorrow, I have work to do and same for Wednesday, but Thursday could work?” he offered.

I shook my head trying to look okay with the fact that I would have to wait two whole days to spend time with him. Listen to myself, two days? I just spent six years away from this man, two days is nothing, I reassured myself.

“But...I do have to go collect the eggs from the chicken coop, want to help?”

“I don’t know,” I said looking down at the imaginary watch on my wrist. “I am pretty busy.”

“Come on,” he said tugging me toward the coop.

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The days seemed to drag on until Thursday finally came. I saw Beaux work, and then go to his spot just to reappear the next morning and do it all over again.

Around noon Beaux walked to the house. He stopped at the door watching me pull my muddy boots up past my shins, as my elbow dug into my ‘books save lives’ hoodie that dropped just above the knee. “Are you ready to go now?” he asked. I nodded my head in response as I yanked the rest of my shoe on and followed closely behind, the scent of his cologne lingering in my nose, warming my stomach.

Oreo was even more relaxed today than a few days ago. She picked at the vibrant green leaves on the trees we passed and occasionally would take breaks looking back at Darby. Our first stop was the cows. I jumped off Oreo and strutted over to the area where I could see about ten full-grown cows stretching and lying down, some were eating or caring for their calves, but most were just standing there blankly, smacking their lips.

Leaning over the splintering fence, I watch as Beaux guides a finger, pointing in a crowded space. “That one’s Betsy, and those over there are Buttercup and Gertie.” He pointed at the cows like an excited child as his finger switched directions every second. His arms looked amazing in his white V-neck that had dirt stains smudged on it carelessly. His hair was messier today. He moved along the fence and pointed again. “And that is Della, and next to her is her calf, Benny.”

“So, you’re the famous Della I’ve heard all about,” I called out to the cow, joking. “You must be pretty spectacular.”

Without even a second of hesitation, Beaux answered. “She is.”

An unsubtle smile crept across my face. I looked over my shoulder at Beaux as he admired the cow and her calf. He had a sweet side. I don’t know why he tried so hard to hide it. Had he always had one and I just never gave myself the chance to notice it? Or was this new with age?

“You really love them, don’t you?” I asked, still smiling.

He redirected his focus back to me, pursing his lips in slight happiness. “Huh?” The brown in his eyes looked like gold as they filled with curiosity.

“The animals.” I nodded my head toward the cows as again as they roamed freely in the sunlight.

Shrugging his shoulders, he smiled. “I guess I do. I don’t know how to explain it, but they are my safe place. And sometimes I feel like they love me too, sounds weird but they’re just not assholes like everyone else.” He awkwardly laughed fidgeting with the grass he yanked from the ground. I like how comfortable I feel around him. Sometimes when I’m around Beaux I wonder what could’ve happened if I felt this way around Lance. Or why I had never felt this way around him, even before he became abusive. It was almost like everything I thought I felt with him was extremely minor or nonexistent compared to how I felt around Beaux.

“I can tell they like you.” We shared a soft smile and for a moment I could tell we had placed our swords down and waved the white flags.

For now.

“Okay, ready to see the chickens?” he asks before excitedly taking off. It was odd seeing him in such a fun mood. He seemed like he enjoyed being around me today, and I liked it.

“Can we stop speed walking? Or can I at least get a head start?” I called out behind him already out of breath.

We spent the next couple of hours observing the animals. He showed me the chickens and hens, the pigs, the ducks, the goats, and occasionally a couple stray cats. He also showed me the garden. After a while, our butts ached from the saddle, so we stopped and rested next to the lake for a quick “picker upper” as Beaux described it.

“I dare you to go in.” I teased looking over at the window-clear lake in front of me. The fresh earthly odors and powering breeze made the peaceful, chilled water look that much more admirable.

Beaux stood firm grinning ear to ear exposing a dimple on his left cheek. He held the smile like a statue as he unbuckled his belt and let his jeans drop past his knees exposing boxers with tiny lassos on them.

“Beaux!” I laughed covering my eyes.

He pulled his shirt over his head so now a pile of clothes and shoes were tossed on the ground beside him and all he wore were his boxers and cowboy hat, his body looked robust, and his abs were tanned and defined as he bent to make his pile of clothes neatly put together. I laughed even harder when he flexed his arms confidently and then his pecks.

“Go, you chicken!” I teased.

“Hey, I am not a chicken.” Removing his hat, he studied me. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

He laughed, bowing with his hat still in his hand in a chivalrous way. Tossing the hat at me like a frisbee, he jumped off the rock into the transparent lake. A few seconds later he reappeared out of the water. Droplets running down his face. Taking his large hands, he pushes his hair back, out of his eyes.

“That felt great.” He strokes his arms back, gliding through the water for a moment. “Are you coming in today or tomorrow?” He teased. I considered this for a moment. It’s just swimming. No harm can come from that. Right?

I yanked my boots off and gestured for him to turn around with the swirl of a finger. I stripped until I was in just my hot pink underwear and tee. My hair fell out of my bun as I removed the scrunchie and jumped into the water, splashing Beaux. The coldness felt like a refreshing shock as I slicked my hair behind my ears with my fingers. The sun reflected off our faces as we swam in the water splashing each other like we were in high school again. I had never felt this freedom in my life. Letting the sun warm my face, I take it in. The world is open around me as birds hover. It’s silent other than the sound of the water around us. So much of my life was spent inside of a penthouse. Others dreamed of being rich but, in this

moment, right now, lying in this lake next to Beaux, I was the most content I've ever been.

“Okay, so what is your favorite color,” I asked as I floated on my back soaking up the water. Here I was making the small talk I *dreaded*.

“Well, it used to be navy blue but as of a few minutes ago it's definitely hot pink.” I feel his eyes stare at the pink that reflects under the ripples of water.

“You looked! I thought we were done with the pervy comments?” I laughed as I swatted his arm. Covering my undergarments under the water, I splashed him again with a strong wave of water that forced him to shake his hair dry like a dog.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” he shrugged.

Waving my flag in defeat, I continued, “Okay, your turn. Next question,”

“Okay, okay. No need to be bossy. What is your biggest pet peeve?” he asked.

“Easy. People who chew their food loud and with their mouth open,” I answered with no hesitation.

“That's actually an illness, it's called misophonia, described as a reaction to specific sounds.” He sounded intelligent and it impressed me.

“So, Beaux, what I am hearing is you are a loud food chewer, aren’t you? I knew there was something off about you.”

“Oh, so other than the way I chew my food, I *am* cool, right? That is what you’re saying?”

“I just meant other than the other obvious flaws that bother me and every other woman. But chewing food loudly? That’s a deal breaker.” I couldn’t help but continue to smile.

“What can I say? I was raised in a barn.”

I studied his face wondering how I had known him for so long but never really *knew* him to be like this.

“I never thanked you for the other night.” My voice tensed.

“What about the peanut butter meltaway?” He smiled. “But really, don’t thank me, I don’t mind making sure everyone gets home safe.” His jaw clenched and his bare, hard chest flexed in the sun, still submerged in the water. He swam closer to me leaving a small gap between us. My breathing was faltering with each inch he got closer. The heat reflecting off his body and grazing mine.

His tone is low and suggestive. “Especially if that person is you.”

My skin flamed with a brush of heat as the gap between us closed and his hand pushed the stray curl behind my ear leaving chills with the touch.

He stared at me so intensely, I was convinced he knew exactly what I was thinking and as if he'd heard me. He acted exactly as I'd hoped.

His hand stayed on its spot on my head and grabbed my hair softly, pulling my head back until his lips were just barely skimming the softness of my neck. Anticipation slid down my throat. I gulped.

Wow.

The feeling I had craved so bad was finally satisfied as Beaux pulled me in for a kiss. His tongue slid against mine as we completely accepted each other for the first time. I moaned into his mouth as my hands felt the curve of his body. The firmness of his torso. Then, of course, at the worst possible timing, my mind betrayed my body and made the thought enter my mind during arguably the best kiss of my life. My mind raced, caught between wanting to keep going and wanting to wait. But I knew I couldn't enter another relationship that had no commitment. For all I knew, Beaux could have a date right after I left him. I couldn't go through that again. And besides...

What happens after this?

Pushing away from him despite everything the tingles in my body were telling me, I said his name as I turned around.

“Beaux.”

My back pressed to his stomach as I felt his deep breathing against me. “Beaux, I can't do this.”

“What’s wrong?” His mouth was left looking like he wanted more.

“I have thought about this for so long,” he continued, his hand gripping my jaw gently.

I spun around and held eye contact, his eyes were taking every part of me in. I thought about what he said about not committing to women. And I refused to be a hook-up.

“But you didn’t, you hated me?” I hesitated to say it, but it was too late. I think I was looking for a way out, and although I knew Beaux would respect my wishes of slowing down, I let the past infiltrate my decision now. And I let the dismissive tone come out of my mouth like I always had.

Beaux took his hands off me fast, but I could still feel the spots where his touch burned through my skin. I regretted saying no instantly, but before I could change my mind he was apologizing and avoiding eye contact, scrambling out of the water to his pile of clothes. Whatever guard I broke down went back up within a matter of seconds.

“Beaux, we can’t do this. We’re good now, remember? It would be too complicated if we let this friendship get out of hand, you want one thing and I need something completely different.” I reminded him.

He agreed. “Yeah, you’re right.” His voice sounded like he was trying to reason with himself. “Actually no, you aren’t. I was crazy about you when we were younger. I know you knew it too. Everyone knew. You blame me for our relationship in school, but *you* are the one who talked shit on me to Cassie, I heard you.”

“Beaux. Wait. What? You liked me?”

Disbelief cast on his face. “Why do you think I came to the car wash? Why do you think I was suspended for five days? I punched Garrett because he was being an asshole making assumptions about you. It pissed me off and I couldn’t control myself. Why do you think I hate Cole so much?”

I shook my head taking in his words. My arms crossed to cover my wet shirt as I noticed the pain in his eyes but the pain in my heart made me refuse to believe him.

“You did not come to the car wash for me. You slept with my best friend *and* my cousin! And Cole did nothing to you.”

His voice came out thick with emotion. “I told Cole I liked you, Del! I told him in the locker room after that football game. Remember? You blocked me on everything, and I asked you why and you pushed away from me like you always did! I told Cole and he told me you were a stick in the mud and that I would be dumb to ask you out. Then I found out you two talked? I figured something was going on when I overheard Cole in the locker room bragging about the night you two shared. It pissed me off so yeah, I was childish and slept with people to hurt you. And I’m sorry for that.” He avoided eye contact and brushed his wet hair off his forehead.

“Cole would not do that. And Cole and I *never* slept together.” I was telling the truth but a part of me doubted that Beaux was. I guess my judgments of Beaux hadn’t fully changed like I had thought. Maybe he was still that same heartless bully from high school.

“Yeah, well that’s not what I heard, but it’s none of my business, you never cared so why should I?” He shook his head angrily before walking away. “I need to go. I had a good day Del, let’s just pretend like none of this ever happened. I will see you at the house later.”

“Oh.” The space between us was enough to split two counties now as I moped in my spot. “Okay then,” I stuttered in shock.

My head swayed back and forth trying to comprehend everything that had just happened. What the hell?

And just like that our swords were back on each other’s throats. What was it with this lake? It seemed like it was our new battleground.

Chapter Eleven

BEAUX

I could still feel her slim yet curvy body on my hands. The crevasse between her ribs and her hips. The softness of her pink lips, and the sound of her whimper stayed trapped in my ear.

Did I want to continue living the life of a guy who would inevitably be alone forever? Did I want to come home to someone I could love every day? Damn it. When did I become such an asshole? Women like her would never love a guy like me. That was obvious based on the entire year I had spent obsessing over her in school. She was beautiful and smart. Kind and motivated. What did I have to offer? Trust issues and sex?

Maybe she did deserve Cole.

My head pounded as I contemplated my future on the ride back. I left her there standing in shock alone in the water. God. “Why am I such a dick!” I ask throwing my hands up. I let every ounce of hurt take over me. I could not stop picturing Cole in the locker room bragging about his conquest. Had he lied? Had I hated her all this time for no reason?

I could hear my father’s now faded voice from an old memory I had pushed away for so many years.

“Son, things may have not worked out between your mother and I like we hoped, but we still do love each other. And I would not take it back for even a second because it gave us you. I just hope you don’t completely rid yourself of the idea of love, it is one of the greatest things someone can feel.” I

imagined him stopping mid-sentence and staring at fifteen-year-old me. "But it is also capable of being one of the most dangerous things to feel. It can be all consuming and it can change everything you originally thought you knew. You will lose sight of some things but also gain knowledge of the world and yourself. Promise me, if you find someone worthy of being loved, you won't push her away, son."

I continued to picture my dad as I slammed my door shut and laid on my bed feeling more confused than ever before.

...

A few days passed by. We had barely spoken to one another although I spent most of my time showing her how to operate the machinery and how to repaint the faded red on the barn. Whatever happened that day was pushed in the past, there was an awkward silence and things left unsaid, but work came first. She was unphased and in the little bit we had spoken that wasn't work-related, she was eager to bring up any other subject than that one. It shocked me that she had let it go and quite frankly, disappointed me. It convinced me more that she had never cared.

Today, she wore tiny denim Levi shorts with cowboy boots and an oversized beer brand T-shirt that was slightly see-through. Her hair was pulled back in a braid and her skin was tanned from all the time we spent outside.

The work hours for the morning would be short so everyone could help prepare for Jenna's birthday party before she left. Usually, they celebrated both Jenna's and Del's at the same time since they were only a month and a day apart but ever since the move, Anne stopped expecting Del to come back, and Del made it abundantly clear that she had not

wanted to celebrate her birthday this year. I heard Anne's voice crumble last time when Del made an excuse for why she could not visit.

“Do you think Lance's family throws her bigger parties? Oh, geez, honey. We didn't push her away, did we? Do you think her favorite cake is still chocolate peanut butter?” She sobbed as she stirred the cake batter for Jenna.

I remember hearing Greg attempt to comfort her. *“Anne, sweetheart, Del is older now. She is no longer a baby. She must experience the world and meet people and if she finds the time to come back God willing, then great. But we must be happy and supportive of her.” He took her in for a hug.*

“You're right, but she will always be my baby, you know that.” Greg gave a smile in return that could be taken as an agreement.

One thing I loved most about working for the Andrews was that they always showed nothing but love in their household, for each other, for Sonny and me. I understood how Del found it so difficult to come to terms with how love worked. She has spent her entire life with the most loving people in Tennessee yet the only guy she chose to love gave her nothing in return.

She stayed optimistic though, how could she not be so optimistic with such amazing role models. Since her arrival, I grew to understand Adella Jean as being the girl from high school who was out of reach, the absent daughter who left her family with no good reason. Part of me did not like her for leaving Anne to make her own assumptions for why but the other part respected her ability to chase after something she

wanted so badly. Never once did Anne and Greg or Jenna mention anything about a *fiancé* to me.

There was the one night a few weeks ago when Jeff had come over for the first time for dinner and Anne pulled out scrapbooks filled with playful images of Jenna and Del in their younger years on the old farm.

There were pictures of them sitting on a tractor, and riding ponies taller than them. And pictures of them cutting a cake that was half vanilla on Jenna's side and half chocolate-peanut butter on Del's side. But my favorite picture was one of Del covered in mud holding a baby duck. Jenna groaned and said, "Wow, wonder what Del's pretentious boyfriend would say if he knew she had a side that wasn't clean and pampered," before tossing the picture back in the pile and changing the subject.

She was too young in the photos for me to put two and two together, but that was all I had ever heard of a man in her life. Until the night in my truck.

My parents were never in love, no matter what my father would say. I grew up in a household that felt like a prison more than a home. I found myself sneaking to the library during one of their nightly arguments and that was when I started reading. I started when I was twelve and it is still an escape for me. I kept reading a secret. My mother hated the librarian, my father's ex-lover before they had met. Her insecurities were the root of all the trauma that came from our ranch. The librarian would let me check out more books than allowed though and even keep some since she knew my dad as being Daniel her first and last love up until he died. The cancer tore through him in a matter of months, and it almost became too hard to be around because the man who I saw hours before his death was not the man who I grew up with. He became ill-looking and hopeless. He tried to stay strong around me

although I never could around him. I would sob until my mom eventually ripped me from his arms and told me to get my schoolwork done. I channeled all my anger into football and boxing shortly after that, until I started talking to Amy on the fourth of July hanging out with Cole and his girlfriend—who he later cheated on.

I tried to hide the fact that Cole was such a dipshit when I word vomited a few days ago. The last thing I needed was for her to mention it to Cole and for him to deflect using Amy's and my relationship. After Amy, I let myself go. I knew that, and so did everyone else. I had a body count of twenty-five after I found out about Amy using me and Del 'sleeping' with Cole.

My man whore phase ended momentarily when Amy asked me out for something other than a quickie in her dad's Cadillac. Her smile was innocent and radiated sunlight. I found myself spending days with her. Days became nights and nights became weeks. I showed her my collection of books, and we would stay up late talking about everything we could think of. I look back on it now with a newfound perspective.

Amy may have been something that ruined so much for me, but at the time, she was exactly what I needed so I would never take that back. Even if she turned out to be just like all the other girls who heard my name through the grapevine and wanted to prove to her friends that she could change me in some bizarre unfair bet that she ended up winning. Later that year Amy ended up falling in love with a new guy. Cole.

I walked the path to the house as everyone moved frantically making pasta salad, deviled eggs, potato salad, and anything else they could scratch off the list for tomorrow.

“Hey, Beaux, could you grab some lemons from the fridge so I can make some fresh lemonade?” Anne asked. I walked to the fridge as Del came around the corner fast.

“Adella Jean.” I nodded my head at her as she reached into the fridge to grab lunch meat. “Your hands look like working hands.” I point out glancing down at the calluses.

Del smiled. “Hey, Beaux.” She slipped around the island to grab the bread. A vanilla scent caught my nose as she walked past me. That was new. Usually, she smelled like one of those expensive scents from Macy’s.

“Del, pumpkin, did you invite those people I told you to?” Anne questioned.

“Yeah, Ma. Jenna’s coworkers are coming, and Grandma said Pop-Pop would be down even if she had to force him out of the house.” Her smile lightened as if this was a normal thing her grandparents did.

“Great, dear. How about Cole and some of the guys so Beaux and Jeff aren’t stuck drinking beers with Dad all night?”

My head perked up. “Greg don’t listen to her.” I nervously laughed. “I would much rather drink a beer with you than any of *those other guys*.” My voice sounded like it was directed to Del.

“Good, because I bought enough beer to make the town air smell and taste like a beer distributor.” Greg joked. “It’s going to be a three-man job.” He raised his coffee and looked over his reading glasses at me. “Count me in,” I joked.

I sweat at the thought of Cole's name being announced so openly. This was the first time Cole had been mentioned since our falling out, and I was nervous to see her reaction. I kind of hoped she wouldn't have one in all honesty.

"Cole said he can come." She shouted over to her mom who was now letting Sonny out to use the bathroom. "I don't know about the other guys just yet. But play nice. Cole is a nice man, and I am sure Jeff would appreciate seeing him."

"Good thing it's not Jeff's birthday," I mumbled, and Greg winked at me.

"You're right, but it is Jenna's." Her smile was upturned as if she found amusement in my suffering. Whatever. Letting out a defeated breath I choose to shut up.

A half hour passed, and everything was finished. The sandwiches were done, and Del stood up impressed with herself as she admired the perfect triangular cuts. I wondered if she had someone who cooked for her back in New York. Did her ex cook? I hadn't known much about him other than the fact that he was an abusive narcissist based off what she had said. But were there good times that she would decide she missed? My mind scrambled and I sat up, straightening myself.

"I have some writing to do, no distractions please." Her eyes were now on me but in a kind way. "See ya." Her hand rubbed my back shoulder in a way that suggested she was friend-zoning me as she made her way upstairs.

“Wow, son. Did Del just brush you to the side?”
Greg snarked.

“Oh, don’t worry about her, honey, she doesn’t know how to pick the good ones just yet.” Anne reassured me. And for some reason I liked that I had her parents’ blessing.

Something about that comment settled the nerves in my stomach from the thought of Cole coming to the house tomorrow with a button down on. Maybe I could pretend to be sick and avoid the party all together. Shifting in my seat, I decided that would be entirely difficult.

Chapter Twelve

DEL

I seemed to be satisfied with the last few days. Things between Beaux and I were strange for a while, but after the awkward preparations today for Jenna's birthday, we kind of swept it under the rug. I could tell our conversation about the invite list annoyed him earlier, but if he and I were going to be just friends, then he would have to deal with me being with other guys. Nevertheless, I spent long hours with Beaux since the fight.

We spent all day Friday and Saturday working. And Friday was a *long* day. We painted the barn a vibrant shade of crimson and planted seeds through the vegetable gardens. We harvested the tomatoes and zucchini first before moving on to working with the animals. I watched as he scooped cow manure to the side.

I spent time together with Della, the cow, too. She was a nice animal to be named after. I admired the way she watched over her calf, Benny. Halfway through Friday my mother messaged me telling me to invite a list of people, one of them being Cole. I thought about it for a moment and realized that if I wanted Cole to come then I had no other reason to not ask him, so I messaged Jenna.

D: Hey do you have Cole's number?

J: What happened to Beaux? Did you two not leave together the other night and end up having hot steamy sex in the truck?

D: What? No. I forgot how much this town likes spreading rumors. He only took me home, hinted at feeling obligated or something because of how close he is to the family.

J: Ouch. So, he sees you as a...sister?

D: Okay, I don't remember him saying that, so let's not go that far. But yeah probably. Not that I care.

I lied.

D: Anyways, number?

J: Beaux said you had Cole's number already.

D: You're right! God, why do we drink so much tequila? Also, why is Beaux discussing my contact list with my sister?
:0

J: BRB, can't hear you, think I am losing you in this tunnel *Crinkled paper noises*

I clicked on the number and began to type a message:

D: Hey Cole, it's Del. My family is hosting a barbecue dinner sort of thing tomorrow for Jenna's birthday if you and the guys want to come. Anne told me to pass the message along.

Not long after he answered.

C: Hey. Of course, would love to come. Is Beaux going to be there?

D: I'm not sure, probably, why?

C: I just wasn't aware you two were a thing when I kissed you until I heard someone saw you two in the truck, Lol. No hard feelings.

D: Oh my! That never happened. He just took me home. Nothing is going on between us.

I sat my phone on my lap annoyed at the pitiful people I called neighbors and peers. Was I wrong to say nothing was happening between us? I mean he made it clear he did not want *us* to be a thing. My phone vibrated again.

C: That's great news!

C: Well not that it's great but you know. Nice to clear the air. But yes, I will most definitely be there.

I was mid typing back when Beaux interrupted me.

He was good at that.

“Who are you texting? Del looks like a third wheel.” He gestured to the cow standing next to me. He interrogated me but in a way that seemed like he was just being nosey. I think his jaw clenched like it does every time he is annoyed, but I am too amused to be able to tell.

“Just a friend,” I said setting my phone down, watching his forehead crinkle at my words. “Okay, what’s next?”

The rest of the day we spent feeding and milking the cows. We finished the day putting everything away. Work was becoming easier the more I did it, and it felt like no time had passed. Like I had never stopped tending the farm. I liked it.

Saturday went the same way only as I mentioned earlier, I was forced through what seemed to be a hard conversation for Beau when my mother asked whether I got around to inviting Cole. The conversation was short but still painful, so I decided it was a great time to write. I threw on a light t-shirt and crawled into bed, pulling my laptop on my bare legs and opening the document titled: Word.x.Newbookmaybe?

The page opened as the first and only paragraph appeared:

I have an insecurity that is so consuming it takes over my life in tiny ripples that turn into tsunamis over a fleeting period of time. Unlike others, it is not an insecurity that makes me cover my skin at the pool in layers of thick fabric or constantly look away from wandering eyes that may be staring deep into my bones. I was told that I am undoubtedly beautiful from a youthful age, but that was not enough to make me feel like I was enough. Then when I was old enough to attend school, I was made to feel inferior for the same thing I was told to feel special about. I let other’s opinions shape me. But eventually that didn’t matter because with age came wisdom and, in my case, contacts and brace removal. My mother once told me that being beautiful would be a tool to help me thrive in life, and up to this point she was right. I had seen it with my sister, and I had seen it when I

grew out of my awkward stage. But being beautiful does not always make you attractive, she would say. She told me a story about a man she loved who had the most attractive face she had ever seen. 'He was nice to see,' she laughed, 'but his personality was unattractive.' Beauty brought people into your life for the wrong reasons. My mother anticipated that. She continued to teach me at an early age that looks can be deceiving and that someday, everyone will lose their color, their hips and stomach will get larger, and their skin will begin to take form of all the hardships one grows with. At that point in your life, she said, looks will not matter. You are growing with their soul longer than the face that God gave them. She had said that you learn to love the flaws of the person you wish to spend the rest of your life with because those scars are what shaped them to be who they are. That was the last motivational advice my mother gave me before I packed my bags away and flew myself closer to what would inevitably become the death of the old me.

I stopped and proofread the starting paragraph then continued typing.

Her lesson was only truly understandable when I began to understand my insecurity. I was insecure of my heart. The heart that constantly pumped blood through my veins to keep me alive for me to use all that energy it worked so hard on, on a man who only slept in the same bed with me. He was one of those monsters my mom warned me about. His face was handsome and strong, but his mind was cold and dark, a place where the bad creatures lurked. Where my light had shone constantly on him, his darkness would completely absorb it and suck it away never to be seen again. This became a pattern so much, until the sun within me dwindled into the smallest speck of a star seen with the naked eye through a cloud making it burn only slightly bright. I had given him so

much of me that I slowly lost the thing that truly made me beautiful, my pureness. I began to wake up hours after the sun had risen, forcing myself to become productive. I gave so much of my heart away to one undeserving man that my body ran through days like a robot. I only sometimes thought about the woman who raised me and taught me to respect myself as much as she had respected herself and as much as my father had as well. I do not know if it was from the guilt or from the disappointment I would see in her eyes as she gazed upon the bruised collarbones and black eyes that I allowed to form on my face. Whichever it was, it kept me away. In a way I convinced myself that I deserved it. For the first time in my life, I felt ugly on the inside too.

A few months ago, when Scarlett had suggested it was time for me to draft another book, she challenged me to write something that I understood this time.

I wanted to author a book for women that had a different happy conclusion compared to my usual spicy happily ever after. I wanted this one to be one where the woman ends up alone after saving herself from a wildly toxic relationship.

I wanted to force myself to learn what it would be like to rebuild my heart and only trust myself with it, even if I knew deep down all I wanted was that damn white picket fence.

There's something treacherous about being a hopeless romantic who only ever goes after the least romantic men. I had wasted so much of my life being someone else. In first grade it was always Del and Markie, my first best friend until she stopped talking to me in seventh grade because she became cool, and I didn't fit her image, I guess. Then Del and Cassie. Then it was me and Archie, and the same thing

happened, I was not what they needed. Then me and Lance. The only common denominator was me. I have always been there, and I am the only person who I can count on, so why do I backstab myself so much?

I saved the document and closed my laptop. I found myself falling asleep to the thought of Beaux.

...

It was about midnight when I woke up covered in sweat. I guess an intense dream about your next-door neighbor will do that to you.

Ugh.

Chapter Thirteen

DEL

I hardly slept last night after the safe place in my mind betrayed me. Brutally, like scar killing Mufasa. I craved something new now, his touch felt so far away as my eyes rolled to the back of my head. God, could I relive that dream?

No. Snap out of it.

I slipped on a pair of light gray sweatpants that I grabbed from the top of my hamper and slid my slippers over my pink fuzzy socks. I enthusiastically pulled open the curtains to reveal an unexpected view as if my night terrors weren't enough. Great. A beautiful shirtless Beaux, shining in the hot sun like Edward in *Twilight*, was pushing the heavy mower across the walkway out front.

His arms were completely flexed as he pushed, and his jeans were low enough to see a pair of boxers poking out. He wore a chain around his neck. And his cowboy hat on him was enough to make me melt into the carpet.

Shit.

His smile stung through my window as he waved toward me fully aware of what he was doing. Absolutely not. He made it clear he wanted to be sad and lonely. If he wants to spend his future sitting on his couch alone, sleeping with random women, then that's his problem! No more sex dreams, or daydreams of Beaux in anything other than clothes I lectured to myself yanking the curtains shut with confidence.

I turned toward my laptop that buzzed. *Thank God*, I thought, using it as an excuse to pull myself far away from the window as I plopped down onto my bed. I looked at the browser. I take my statement back, maybe I would rather deal with staring at Beaux's obnoxiously flawless, uncommitted body. Anything beats the notification from Lance on my screen.

I opened my emails again against my better judgment to see more unopened from Lance.

Lancepowell@powellfirm.Ny.law

Adella,

I hope you realize there is not a single place you can go that I can't find you. I have paid the rent on our apartment. Get home now.

I feel as though it's important to acknowledge that I can ruin you without even having to connect my name to yours. Think wisely.

Lance.

My stomach turned as I immediately exited out. I calmed myself by remembering that when it came to ruining people, Lance was filled with empty threats. I had the emails for proof, but it would not be enough. He wouldn't send out threatening emails without knowing he had a way out of it. The man had money, and besides that, he had power and reputation. Although, Lance could hire the mafia and still couldn't find any dirt on me because there was none to find.

He had threatened Jared too after he accidentally slipped up about Brenda, and that was two years ago. Brenda was the fifth girl Lance cheated on me with that I knew of. I had to go meet with Scarlett to plan my next book in New Jersey, and Lance said he couldn't make it because he had too much on his plate. Well, it was not until three days later when Jared asked me if I loved the necklace Lance bought me.

He went on about how the sapphires were encrusted into it. To be clear, I *never* received that necklace, but Brenda did. I knew Jared was aware that I was not the recipient because of how much detail he gave me about the tacky overpriced piece of jewelry, but I respected him for risking his job to make sure I knew the man I was about to marry. I convinced myself that I was lucky either way because, while Brenda was only getting necklaces, I was getting a ring. It was almost like I loved the idea of being his first choice even though I was the opposite of that.

Why was I so naive?

Desperate to get my mind off everything horrid in my life, I called Jules. She's easily the only person who can truly make me feel better about my awful decision making and besides, I needed some guidance on what to wear for Jenna's party.

"My gram is coming so I need to look nice but also conservative," I explained.

"Okay, I understand that, but how does one look like a woman of God but also look hot enough to make both your dates fight for your attention?"

"I do *not* have two dates."

“Del, you have two dates. What will happen if Beaux goes all crazy on Cole again?” Jules’ question irritated me, but I would be lying if I said I didn’t think about that same thing already. What would I do if Cole decided to get handsy after a few beers? Would Beaux even care?

“Okay, I have no idea. Beaux doesn’t care about me like that. Besides, I invited Cole to come with his friends. Not a date. Technically I have zero dates.” I reassured myself with a deep breath as I folded the clothes Jules rejected over FaceTime.

“Who do you want to be your date?” She pushed the subject further, starting to poke at my anxiety.

“Jules. Shit. I called you to feel better and quite frankly you are making me panic more.”

“I love you. I will stop, let me see that dress back there.” She directed me to grab the article of clothing hanging neatly on a hanger—an adorable pale orange sun dress that came just below the knee with a casual leg slit and floral pattern on it. I paired it with brown cowboy boots that had a unique stitching. My hair was pulled into a loose, messy, wavy bun with pieces stringing down my face.

I stared into the mirror for about thirty minutes after my phone call with Jules. All my intrusive thoughts were pushed to the side for once because I felt pretty. It was like the day Jenna gave me a makeover. I felt the same way I had then.

Walking down the stairs, my boots clink on the kitchen floor as smells of barbecue fill my nose.

My mom stood at the stove stirring the mashed potatoes as she maneuvered around to look me up and down. “You look absolutely beautiful as always.” My mom smiled. “Come over here and help me carry the cold dishes outside, honey.”

...

The guests started arriving around three. I couldn't help but scan the crowd looking for the only face I cared to see. His dark eyes and messy hair were nowhere to be spotted as I made my rounds waving and welcoming guests. Was he not coming? My heart spazzed at that thought. It was still incredible to me that I somehow managed to push all my problems to the side and form an entirely new one.

The thought of being alone brings me back to junior year prom. Jenna went with her ex, Ronnie. And I went alone. She insisted I join the two of them, but I really didn't want to have to wait until they were ready to leave, so I drove separately. If it weren't for my mother's relentlessness, I'd have been snuggled up on my bed in a strategic pile of cozy blankets watching Gossip Girl, but now I'm dressed up sitting in my sister's old beat-up car outside of the school contemplating my next move.

I didn't want to go in. I knew that. Which is why I stayed still in my car seat. Maybe I could just hide out here and pretend to have gone. That was a good idea, right? Just as I reach to turn on the radio, a fist lightly knocks on my window giving me a slight heart attack.

“Jenna! You scared me.”

“You are coming inside,” she said firmly. I knew there was no way out of it now. “You aren't missing out on my

last prom because of those girls. I won't let it happen. So please, come with me."

"Where's Ronnie?" I asked.

"He's only my date for the pictures." She laughed adjusting the strap of her hot pink dress. "I will not be getting back together with him, trust me. But that means you're my date, so come on." She flashed me puppy dog eyes that I couldn't refuse, and I nodded. Stepping out, I let my ice-blue dress graze the ground. It haltered in the front and fit in a mermaid style. "Ahhh!" she shouted.

"What? What?" I ask looking for a serial killer or a fast-moving vehicle. But there's nothing. "You look incredible!"

"Oh, Jenna. I appreciate that, but you need to stop giving me heart attacks if you want me to go in there." She rolls her eyes and pulls me in. The gym is decorated in an 'under the sea' theme. Couples are everywhere. Dancing, drinking punch, and even arguing out in the hallway. I tell Jenna to go take more pictures with her date and then I find a seat away from the blue lights.

"Hey." Cassie smiles. She looks pretty in her black short-cut dress. Her hair is in a low bun, and she has a smokey eye look going on. "I heard Cole was asking for you earlier," she says nonchalantly as if that wasn't a big deal.

"Cole?" I talked to Cole a little in our science lab. He was nice to me. But he hung out with Beaux and Amy, so the level of trust just wasn't there. "Yeah," she says smacking gum in her mouth, causing me to cringe. "He said he had to talk to you."

“Oh,” I say. I stood up, scanning the gym, curious to see if she was telling the truth or not. Cassie was known for overdramatizing things, so I took a grain of salt with everything she told me. “Where did you hear that from?” I question.

“I don’t know? Maybe Tate Myers?” Tate was a problematic girl in our grade. Doing everything to get attention, which is why I lose the excitement and sit down. To my surprise though, I got a text on my phone from an unknown number only ten minutes later.

‘Meet me in the hallway.’

I had seen several horror movies that made my brain scream ‘No! don’t go’ but in all reality curiosity overpowered that. And besides, a psychopath in the hallway would probably be easier to get along with than the 300 in this gymnasium.

I’m in the hallway near the water fountains when I see Beaux. He’s dressed in a black suit, and he’s the last person I expected to have messaged me. “Hey, Del.” He sounded caught off guard making me wonder if he had even sent the text. “You look...great.”

“Thanks,” I said crossing my arms. I look around for anyone else it could be, but we are alone.

“So?” I ask waiting to hear why he pulled me back here.

“I just wanted to apologize,” he says. “It’s about to be senior year, and I really think we should just let all of this

go.”

I shake my head getting ready to accept, but before I can, Amy and Cindy push out of the bathroom, Tate standing with them. “Oh my God. This is too cute,” Amy says. “Awh, did you think he messaged you? The plan was to make you think it was Cole. But a win is a win, right?” Cindy asks. Pulling out her phone she hands it to me. Amy drapes her arms over Beaux’s shoulders and hangs there for a minute still laughing. “I’m so sorry you had to sit here with her. We just wanted to show you this,” she says. Pulling out her phone, she reveals a photograph of me taking that volleyball to the face. I wouldn’t care normally, but then she swipes, and it’s a picture of me freshman year with a nose strip on and pimple cream. The only person who had this photo was Lana. “Where did you get that?”

“Well, Lana was kind enough to send it to Beaux after the night they shared. I don’t know though, I’m thinking about putting it in the yearbook, what do you think, Amy?”

“I think that’s a great idea.” Adjusting the glasses on my face, I look in front of me. “You know what? I don’t care. Please do what you want with it. You might look at that in a few years and see how much of a loser I was, but at least I can grow out of that. You two will always be bitches.” I look over at Beaux who looks in shock from what just happened and how fast it escalated. “Apology not accepted.”

Then I left my junior prom. Alone again. Looking from the parking lot at all the people dancing who were granted normal high school memories. I wasn’t going to feel bad for myself, at least not in person. I went home and wrote. I was never alone when I had my pen and paper, and that was all I needed.

“This is so great.” Jenna wrapped her arms around my shoulders from behind as she excitedly jerked me back and forth in a cradle like motion. “I saw the Jell-O shots, should we go take some and wreak birthday havoc on everyone?” I could smell the vodka on her breath and half the party had still not arrived. At least she was having fun. I wondered what things would have been like if Lance had been more like Jeff. Standing by the grill with our dad, laughing as he casually sips on a bottle of beer, occasionally checking out Jenna as she twirls around in the arms of random women. He looked satisfied, like her happiness was all he needed. Why couldn’t Lance be like that? Instead, we would arrive at parties while he would stare at the pretentious list of wine before selecting the worst option. I had PTSD from Lance’s sniffing, swirling, and swishing during every glass.

My mind came back to the conversation. Laughing, I smile. “We are celebrating *you* today, not me. But yes, we can most definitely do Jell-O shots.” I turned and hugged Jeff as he made his way toward us, leaving his spot by the grill. Examining the lanterns and balloon décor that took hours of preparation, he meets my eyes. “Wow. This is truly impressive. You and Anne really killed it.” He tried to sound interested, but guys did not get as bent out of shape over their birthdays as the Andrews women do. I turned around searching for those deep-brown eyes once again only to be caught with a pair of sky-blue ones.

“Hey.” Cole smiled at me.

Nerves I had convinced myself I would not get arrived, forcing my awkwardness to slip out. You’d think that being twenty-six would have made me better at talking to the opposite sex, but instead, it made me worse. “I’m so glad you could make it, there’s beer in the cooler and tons of food, help yourself.” I pointed over to the glass patio table that was covered in wrapped dishes full of delicious smelling food. Realizing I was still anxiously pointing I dropped my hand

down to my side. Sliding my palm up and down my arm, I flashed a squinty smile.

“Is there anything I can help you with? You seem distracted, or maybe just overwhelmed.” He went on as if he didn’t notice the weird tension that drifted in the air from the whole bar scene. I feel like I should be grateful for that though.

“I was planning on starting a fire.” I checked my surroundings and when there was no Beaux, I headed toward the fire pit with Cole at my side.

Maybe I could just get through the night without having to worry about physical altercations or who I was picking to be my date.

Ugh, where are those Jell-O shots?

Chapter Fourteen

BEAUX

One by one, cars filled the driveway as guests arrived for the barbecue. It wasn't hard to spot Jenna from the safe place in my home that hid me from the overwhelmingly large crowd. Her tongue swirled in the plastic container as she swallowed a red Jell-O shot, and her eyes shot up at me as she waved me over enthusiastically. Faking a cough, I wave back before pulling away and directing my eyes to the group of girls she stood by. A bottle of Tito's passed between their hands as they all chugged and shouted like a bunch of sorority girls. Wasn't this supposed to be family friendly?

The third glass of whiskey seemed like a good idea until curiosity killed the cat; I was the cat in this situation and what Del was doing was the curiosity. I stared out the window, my lips finishing off the glass as I looked for Adella.

My plan was undoubtedly to stay in and fake an illness. I decided on strep throat, but that would take too long of a recovery time and there was far too much work to be done still on the farm.

I figured it would be too suspicious if I just said I didn't feel well without a proper diagnosis, so I began searching through a list of common and short-living illnesses when I saw Cole's car pull in. Fucking great. I looked up from my phone and through the window. He straightened the collar on his light-blue button down, tucking it into his jeans. Fingers combed through his hair while he absorbed himself in the side mirror of his Honda Civic.

What a douche.

I watched as Sonny ran to Cole and wagged his tail enthusiastically. *Traitor*. My eyes followed him down the pathway to the patio and stopped on Del who looked stunning, as always. She wore a sundress that hugged her waist perfectly as she swung around to her sister. She socialized with Jenna and the group of girls as I watched, worried about Cole's presence.

Cole wasted no time as he located her and headed toward the fire pit together. Alone.

I rolled my eyes, forcing myself away from the window and grabbed a beer can from the fridge, while picking up a brand-new book off the to be read shelf. *Letters to Rose* stared at me, so I flattened it out erasing the reminders of its beautiful author who is currently ruining my life.

I was almost halfway through page ten of *1776*, when I heard a hesitant knock on the door. My disappointment spread on my face like an untamed rash as I saw Jeff standing in the doorway with a half-filled bottle of Jack Daniels. It was nothing against him, I just would have rather seen Del standing there, a twisting combination of mischief and innocence forming in her smile before running into my arms as I led her to the back room. The fantasy is cut short though—because it's still just Jeff.

“Hey, man, thought maybe we could have a drink or two on the back deck if you don't mind.” Jeff came inside and threw the whiskey on the table. “I don't know if I can stand another one of Jenna's coworkers calling me John, who I am pretty sure is her ex-boyfriend.” He laughed, looking a little uneasy and maybe even worried. I remembered John, he had tattoos of dinosaurs on his chest and gages the size of a quarter in his earlobes. Not a bad guy, his parole should end soon if I remembered correctly. I laughed quietly to myself.

“Listen, man, Jenna has *never* been this into anyone. I have only been here a few years, but Jenna has never made eye contact with someone like she does you.” I reassured him while pouring the whiskey in iced glasses. The last thing I needed was another glass, but it was the only cure to what I was feeling in this moment. “Greg loves you so you’re practically already family.” I walked out of the open doors to the deck and handed him the whiskey as he leaned against the railing on his elbows.

“I am in deep, man.” If you could visibly see a man’s heart fluttering, Jeff’s would have been flying out of his chest into Jenna’s arms by the hopeful look that lingered in the pupils of his eyes. He looked as satisfied as a kid licking a lollipop for the first time. “I really am in deep. It’s like I feel without when she isn’t within ten feet of me, and her smile can lift me up from my lowest points.”

His smile faded as his head fell into his hands and he looked over to me desperately for more reassurance. I leaned against the railing gulping my whiskey watching Cole help Del who was trying to lift a heavy log. How painfully predictable. My eyes rolled into my head again.

“Have you ever felt like this or am I just a moron?” He looked serious.

I tried to answer without sounding like a dick. I don’t know why I answered truthfully but I did. “Amy Wells.” I took a deep breath and rubbed my chin. “I met her when my dad was sick. She was the first girl I completely let in after Adella rejected me unknowingly. Turns out that dickwad down there, Cole, told Amy one day during Phys Ed that she would never be able to get the notorious Beaux Jones to fall in love, and she saw it as a personal challenge. Little did they know, I was already in love, and Amy was the girl that was supposed to heal the pain from the previous one. I wasn’t okay, you

know?” Jeff’s eyes filled with sympathy, and I hated it. “Anyway, I don’t believe in all the love bullshit anymore like I used to. I think the only person someone can love is themselves. I saw it in the way my mother treated my father and then in the girl who everyone acted like was an angel.” He continued to stare at me in disbelief. “Even if she did nothing but play with me.”

“You’re full of shit.” He laughed. I looked at him like he had three eyes and a purple tail. “I had no idea you and Del even knew each other prior to her homecoming and yet you still look at her like you are completely captivated by her, that’s why you’re reading on your couch alone during a party, right?”

Damn him.

I chugged my whiskey and walked back into the house grabbing my unfinished beer and chasing it. “The words were starting to blur together anyway.”

Ignoring my comment, Jeff continued. “Fuck Amy Wells. You are a grown man now. You cannot let one girl from over ten years ago continue to make you look like an ass.” His words pissed me off, but I needed to hear them. “And have you even tried to explain all of this to Del? Something tells me she wants to hear it.”

I considered the option. The idea of making myself vulnerable to another person scared me. It wasn’t Amy that I was in love with, it was the feeling of being able to confide in someone who I thought wanted me for me. I stayed silent as I firmly gripped my beer thinking of the heartache and disappointment I felt from the few women in my life before working for the Andrews.

“Well, man, I’m going back to the party, I think you should come with me. Besides, Cole is a douchebag, and he’s flirting with Del right now, so maybe get the bookmark out of your ass and put on some shoes.”

He smiled back at me looking satisfied and walked back out the same way he came in. He was a good guy, and if I were Greg, I’d be blessed to have someone like Jeff with my daughter.

I peered off the deck once again and saw Jeff quickly locating Jenna. He spun her around enthusiastically as she placed her head in the crevasse of his shoulder. He looked so happy. And so did she. Maybe love was real. Not like Nicholas Sparks real but like two people who accept each other for everything they are and were. Jeff looked terrified moments ago and yet he just ran toward the thing that had so much power to break him. I found myself gaping until I saw Cole reach his hand out to Del and pull her in, joining the dance floor.

Her dress flowed magically with the air, and her bun was so loose if she spun around any harder, her curls would fall down her back and cover her face like a dark sheet. I watched as the sisters abandoned the guys and danced together with Anne and their grandmother, Rose, the same Rose in Del’s first successful novel. My stare lingered back to Jeff as he eyed Cole head to toe and walked to Greg who was grilling burgers. I loved that guy.

Jeff became my closest friend within five minutes, and even more now after watching him make Cole look like an idiot. Dragging myself from the couch, I put on my boots and walked out the door to the house.

“Beaux!” Anne called out. “We were looking for you earlier! Get over here and dance with us!” Pushing past Cole, I took Anne by the hand and spun her around.

“Oh dear. I’m going to pop a hip trying to keep up with you.” Reaching next to me, she drags Del beside us, away from Cole, interlocking our hands as she takes her mother’s place. Her bun bounces in the air as I dip her and scoop her back up all in one motion.

Her forehead crinkled in disbelief as she let out a butchered sounding laugh. “So, you like Celine Dion *and* you dance?”

“Absolutely fucking not to the dancing part, but I would rather embarrass myself than watch that dick for brains spin you again.” My hands locked tightly around her waist as we swayed back and forth, the song changing from “Walking on Sunshine” to “Stubborn Love” by the Lumineers.

Closing the space between us, the world seems to dwindle into just the vigorous sunset behind us, the overgrown grass crunching beneath our feet and the sounds of each other’s heavy breathes filling the emptiness we both had held onto for so long. Her eyes were a silver-green shade in this light, and her lashes seemed to have grown even longer, which I thought to be impossible as she blinked, mesmerized by the moment. She was the kind of beauty you admired always.

“You aren’t too awful I guess.” She motioned to my feet as we danced slow, letting the song take us away to another world. I had mentioned earlier that I don’t dance, but the problem was there isn’t a thing in the world I wouldn’t do for this extraordinary human. I hadn’t realized it as clearly before but now as we stood here, I realized I would go to the

depths of the earth for her. Therefore, when it came to swaying my body back and forth, it was the bare minimum.

My father used to say there are many moments in the world that you wish could last forever, but there's always one moment that will sweep you off your feet and make you disappear in it as time flies. As we stand here fully clothed, dancing in the orange hues of light that deflects off the sun and makes her silky dark hair glow from behind her, I realized this was my moment.

She was my moment.

“I’m sorry.”

“For?” Her eyes flooded with an expressive look, one that is new. Not confusion, or shock or hatred or anything negative, to my surprise.

“For everything in school. I had a big crush on you back then, not that I had done anything about it. I blamed you for putting me in the position to like another person who ended up really screwing me over. I don’t know, it was a hard time for me, and I think it was easier for me to pick you out to be the antagonist when really it was always just me.”

“You were never the antagonist of my story, Beaux. Were you an asshole every now and then? Yes, but we all are on our bad days. I mean I sprayed you in the face for God’s sake. And then laughed!” She rolled her eyes in amusement as she snorted behind her hand. “God. We are just as childish now as we were then.”

“You have probably the most contagious laugh I have ever heard. You are like the human version of the sun, I

swear. And I don't know how to explain it. It's such a weird thing to say, I know. But like... I don't know." I felt embarrassed by the lack of sense I was making.

Her eyes glazed as her lips turned up. "Try." She's clearly amused now as we stay pressed together dancing, the softness of Wesley Shultz's voice filling the gap between us as he sings, "*It's better to feel pain, than nothing at all, the opposite of love's indifference.*" Swaying to the music I think before I answer.

"Well, I wake up every morning searching for you. That sounds cheesy as fuck, but it's the truth. And you have this radiant glow that is so hard to forget. You shine your light, leaving a little glow on every person you touch. You're just incredible. God, I remember that kid, what was his name? He wore the big, black-framed glasses that were like three inches thick."

"Devin," she calls out instantly.

"Yes! Devin. I'll never forget the day that Devin sat alone by himself at lunch. Everyone mocked him, even me truthfully. But you weren't like that. You sat right next to him that entire lunch and three lunches after. You seemed to genuinely have a good time with him. Never once did I think I would be jealous of Devin Hoffen. But that week I was. Then the guys started to talk to him. You really made such a big difference to him."

"He wanted to be an astronaut." Her head tilts up past me as she takes in the world around us. "He was such a nice guy. It's a shame. He died last year, car accident. Didn't have many friends, but I kept in touch, and his mother called me to let me know while I was in New York. I feel like if

there's any place on earth that would have made Devin happy though, it would have been somewhere up there."

A lump-sized gulp is stuck in my throat as I take her features in. She is a dream. She is a miracle. She's art. She's kindness. She's everything. My thumb strokes the softness of her cheeks as she leans into my hand. Her freckles looked darker today, I was certain that they were what gave her that innocent look—well, that and the adorable dimple on her right cheek.

"I wish you saw yourself how I saw you."

"You didn't always see me this way."

"I found the dork look adorable." His lip tugs into a smile that pulls on my heartstrings. "No, but seriously. You just were a lot smarter than I was, and I didn't want to ruin things for you. Like the time I skipped our project...I had no idea we would lose points. I just didn't want to sound stupid in front of you. But I've always seen you as being enough."

"Knowing you see me that way is enough for me."

"It's not enough for me. I want you to look at yourself and feel whole. I want you to know how absolutely one of a kind you are." Glancing around I notice the clouds covering the sun indicating night. No one is around us now as we sway alone. "One second," I say. "Cover your eyes." Del lets out a puff of air in hesitation as "She's so High" by Tal Bachman plays. Obeying her hands cover her eyes.

"Are you going to put a bug in my hand or something?"

“Are we four? No, I don’t have a bug.” I laugh.

Plucking wild dandelions from the grass, and some random purple flowers, I hold them out in front of me. “Okay, open.”

Her eyes sparkle as she pulls the messy, handpicked bouquet into her. A small gift to show her that she deserves flowers in every situation, not just as an apology. I lean to push her hair behind her ear, but instead, I feel the warmth tingle through my body as her lips land on mine. A sweet, short kiss that fills me with butterflies and emotions I hadn’t felt, ever. She pushes up on her tiptoes as her arms wrap around my neck. I take her in, completely, like she’s oxygen and I’ve been drowning under water with no time for air. If I had to guess, I would say it was at this moment that we became something. I’m not sure what, but it was something. Our souls merged in a deep unwritten, untold yearning for each other that neither of us could deny anymore.

Pulling away she had a playful expression painted on her face. “Come on.” She pulled my arm, flying past the house and up into the field. Dropping into the weeds, she laid on her back, her hair wild around her. “Do you think I should go back?” she asked.

“Back where?” I question, plopping down beside her. Turning onto her elbows, her head hangs above me.

“You know, the city. Do you think I should go back?” A hopeless breath left her mouth as she stared down at me looking for an answer in my facial expression before I got the chance to speak.

“Do I think you should go back to New York?” I let the question hang in the air for a beat before pulling her on top of me. “I think that would simply be the death of me. Therefore, my answer is fuck no.”

“So poetic.” She laughed as I dipped my mouth back onto hers shushing her.

Her tongue swirled into mine, tasting like honey as she rolled on top of me. My hands maneuvered under her hair and behind her ears pulling her even closer to me.

“No one has *ever* felt like you do on my body,” I whispered in her ear, the heat from my breath filling space between her neck and shoulder. Slipping the strap on her shoulder down, her bare skin showed.

We held eye contact as I pulled her into me harder now. Her skin is like butter melting onto mine. She moaned into my mouth as I pulled the dress the rest of the way off her body. The moon illuminated the field making the moment feel like I’m floating. I traced the curve of her body with my mouth, leaving kisses down her neck, over her shoulder and against her stomach. My hair felt a tug as she wrapped the messy strands on my head in the space between her fingers. God—how did I get so lucky?

For the first time in my life, I made *love* with a woman I cared about. Something I had never thought I’d allow myself to do.

Chapter Fifteen

DEL

I had the single best sex I had ever had tonight. There was no denying that. I was slightly cautious that he would just leave me there after I put out for him, but instead, he invited me over. There was no awkwardness as we made our way back, which settled me even more. The only thing I felt was the need to be with him again. Our bodies intertwined. But that would need to wait. We grabbed plates of food from the party as we headed for the door.

The in-law quarters were nothing like I imagined. It was clean. No, it was *spotless*. Pairs of boots were lined next to the door neatly.

The kitchen was just to the left with a bar connected to the granite counter tops. I passed the bookshelf on my way through. At least sixty historical fiction books sat on the first case. My eyes wandered as I noticed the selection of romance books. I picked up *Pride and Prejudice* until my eyes caught a glimpse of a familiar deep-red cover. Was that my book? Before I could pick it up, he shut the door behind us.

“Hm. Interesting choice.” I held *Pride and Prejudice* looking at the tabs all throughout it pointing at quotes, sliding my finger down the spine and opening it to a random page.

My eyes stopped on one quote that was highlighted:

Every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required.

Interesting, I thought.

“I like to read sometimes.” His face turned red as he sat along the bar and sunk his teeth into his burger.

“I like that you like to read.” I grabbed my book from the top shelf, flipping through the pages and looked at him intensely. “Did you like it?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t read it.”

“So, then why did you buy it?”

“Not sure. Amazon sent me the wrong package?” He joked.

My fingers caught the pages as I continued to flip through it. “I don’t believe you.” More of the colorful tabs pointed out in every direction with notes like the last book. Annotations filled the pages, much to my surprise.

“You’re an amazing author. Your words are powerful and not bland, which I loved. I just didn’t want to make your head bigger.” He laughed. “Seriously though, the book was amazing.” A smile was locked into my face as I plopped down next to him and yawned. “I’m exhausted, but Jenna seemed happy, don’t you think?”

“I think you are a great sister to Jenna. I feel like sometimes you feel the need to take on burdens of an older sister even though you are younger. You really are such a light in that house. Before you came home things seemed dull, and your help on the farm has been exceptional.” His words

burned through my skin sending waves of fire through my veins forming a pink that reached my cheeks.

“Trust me, Jenna did more for me growing up than I could ever repay her for.”

“Well regardless, we are glad you’re back.”

“I don’t know about all of that. Everyone seemed fine without me, they really are so appreciative of you, Beaux. I am very grateful for how much you have helped them while I was gone. I wish you could see yourself like how they do, and how I do.”

His head lifted. “How do you see me?” He stared into my eyes hoping for a satisfactory answer.

“Well, for one, you’re intelligent. You called me a walking thesaurus I believe when I got home, but you just described my work ethic as being exceptional rather than simply good.” I smiled uncontrollably in response to his contagious grin. “That must mean something, Beaux Jones. And I can tell you are still hopeful as much as you may disagree. I caught you smiling at Jenna and Jeff earlier as we danced. In that moment I realized you still believe in love even if it’s a small sliver. Besides, you own books like *Little Women* and *Price and Prejudice*. And you have my book. But the thing I wish you could see the most is how great of a man you are. You told me earlier you wished I saw myself like you did, but it goes both ways. You are not the man someone brings home once and then forgets about like you think you are. You are the man that women look at and plan a life with and the man that other men dare to compete against because there’s no point.”

“What about Cole?” His eyes were warm but cold as he looked deep within me. He looked as if he was searching for reassurance.

“What about him?”

“He has no issue competing with me over the things we want.” Butterflies swarmed my stomach as his eyes stayed glued to mine.

He pushed his plate to the side, his eyes hungry on something else now, that same look from earlier sucking me in. Lifting me on to the countertop with his strong hands he slid his fingers up my arm slowly and traced my collar bone as my legs vibrated just by his touch.

His hand pressed on my hip bone pinning me on the countertop as I found his mouth and pressed my mouth against him moaning into it.

“Beaux,” I let out through a muffled breath.

“You are so perfect.” His lips grazed my stomach through the fabric. I closed my eyes and let myself go, giving him my body and complete permission to do whatever he wanted with me.

My back arched with his pull as my chest pressed against his. His cold hands slid up my thigh and under my dress as I let out a soft moan. Never had I felt this way with Lance and here I was feeling it twice in one night. It was like my body craved him. Like I was addicted to something I had only just got a taste of. Another whimper leaves my mouth.

Without thought, or maybe with too much thought, he lifts me from the counter and keeps his lips on mine the entire way to the bed. Ripping his shirt over his head, I could see every line and indent on his skin that I couldn't see earlier from the darkness.

“Tell me you're mine,” he said.

“Confession?” I say aloud with a huge lump in my throat.

“Of course, what?”

“I have wanted to do this since high school. You irritated me, but there was always something there. I have always been yours,” I admit.

He grins the best grin a man could ever have and pushes his hair off his face, pulling me into his chest. “Well, you're the only one that's got me.” After that we showed just how much we appreciated each other for the second time tonight.

I turned to look at him as he looked down at me and kissed me softly on my lips pulling the navy-blue sheets over our bodies. I never thought Beaux would be a cuddle after sex guy, but he claimed my body and dragged me against his immediately after. I began to fall asleep with my head pressed between my neck and shoulder.

My body ached for him and the warmth from his touch made me feel safe and understood, even more now just lying here than when he was on top of me minutes ago. It was with complete certainty that I decided no one would ever be able to have my body again after Beaux.

...

We slept peacefully until the sun came up. My head was resting on his chest as my legs wrapped around him. The sheets balanced over his lower half leaving just enough out in the open for me to admire.

“Good morning.” His lips pressed into my temple, as he moved from underneath me. “I didn’t want to wake you up, but I figured you would like coffee?”

I nodded my head pulling the sheet over my body, wrapping it around me to cover my bare skin.

“Hazelnut?” he asked, making me fall even harder because he’s a hazelnut over original blend type of man. The first green flag in my book.

“That sounds amazing.”

I followed him to the kitchen with his sheets dragging behind me. “So what?” I ask. “You got rid of the *Toy Story* sheets in hopes you would be successful in seducing me?” I joked.

“I got rid of the *Toy Story* sheets because the SpongeBob ones were supposed to come in time and didn’t, so unfortunately all I was left with were the sad blue ones and a very angry email to Amazon.” His hands wrapped around me as he kissed me again. “You’re even beautiful with messy hair and tired eyes.” He stares at me. “I am a lucky man.” My heart skips a beat. *He’s* lucky. Words I always wanted Lance to say, but he never could. He is lucky.

The Keurig beeped signaling that the coffee was ready pulling us apart as I watched a shirtless Beaux reach into the cabinets and pull out a green mug. The same green he had chosen for the comforter at my parent's house. My eyes were distracted by the slight flex of his arms as he handed me the mug and replaced the empty spot with his, waiting for the Keurig to work its magic again.

It felt nice having someone next to me when I woke up. And even better having them there for breakfast. Lance would be gone by the time it was seven, and I never made it a big deal because I knew how hard he worked. But this, this was a feeling I was missing out on.

Sipping thoughtfully, I reached for my phone.

One New Message from Jenna:

J: Hey sis, Jeff and I landed safely. I won't have much service this week so I will message you when we get back!"

I smiled. Look at us. Happy with people we would have never expected. Jenna with a man who was good for her, and I was with a man I thought I hated but truthfully always kind of liked. I was happy, but my mind reminded me that something bad almost always happens to take this high feeling away from me.

As Beaux looked back at me with a sleepy look, I decided this would be the worst heartbreak I would experience if something bad happened. There was genuine feeling here whereas with Lance, it became a business deal almost. Just an object he could carry around to look good. But if things went wrong with Beaux, where would that leave us? Would he leave

the farm if things ended? Would I? My parents loved him. Jenna loved him. He couldn't leave, he has helped so much. I would leave if it came down to it, they had lived without me before so they could do it again?

Sucking in a deep breath, Beaux's hands find their spot on my waist pulling me toward his room.

Okay, maybe I could overthink this later.

Chapter Sixteen

DEL

I left his bed around nine in the morning still in disbelief that he wanted me to stay with him the entire night. I have to say it was odd waking up in bed next to a man I have grown comfortable with. And that was exactly how I felt. Completely and utterly secure. Was this because we drew a line to stay as friends? Or did that line break when he woke up this morning after he saw every crevasse of me.

I got déjà vu from sneaking back to my house before my parents would notice I was gone. It felt like senior year all over again—minus the whole sleeping with my ex-enemy thing. My fingers combed through my hair quickly as I struggled deeply to look as if I did not just have the best night of my life. After mildly fixing my hair, I had to erase the smile that I was convinced was permanently drawn on my face like a prank in a middle school sleepover. I stroked my grin down trying to look like my usual miserable self in the morning.

Creeping through the house quietly on my tip toes, I snuck past my parents who were lying on the sofa watching *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

After making it up the stairs by carefully avoiding the squeaky boards that had gotten me busted so many times before, I finally made it to my room and crawled into bed.

The night replayed repeatedly in my head as I allowed myself to fall deeper and harder than ever. I pulled my laptop that was tucked under the security of my pillow and began to write, feeling more motivated than ever.

After spending time in a new atmosphere, I found myself focusing on the things I was going to do rather than the things I planned to do. I was making goals for myself. I began to read again, and to write. I walked by myself in fields of wild daisies and dandelions and along high grasses where the ripples stretched with every rock I skipped in empty ponds. I painted on canvases and sipped cheap red wine that made me feel better than any expensive bottle could in my previous life. And I sipped it without sniffing, and swooshing. I cooked myself microwavable dinners and ran my own bath water. I had realized my past life of money and luxury was nothing compared to this. I could afford everything but my own happiness. I could not buy this feeling of self-realization or the newfound security I was gaining with myself. For once I could not imagine dwelling on the fact that I had done it alone. I found joy and gratitude in being alone. I even gifted myself flowers from the farmers market instead of wondering why I was not the kind of woman men wanted to buy them for. Who was I? That seemed to be the question I would constantly ask myself and now I knew. I was the kind of girl who would rather wear denim jeans than a pant suit or would rather spend time with family than half of Wall Street. I erased the pattern that I had embedded in my brain, and I was proud.

However, it would be completely irresponsible of me to tell you all the high points without telling you all the low points that allowed me to reach the high. With the good comes the bad and the ugly. The other night I woke up in fear of what might happen. In fear of arriving in my old city and being forced to face the things that had controlled me. It is true when they say you cannot get a rainbow without rain. That's exactly how I view life now. In order to become happy, I had to realize what I was gaining and losing. In those moments of solemn I had to come to terms with the fact that I had always been alone since I moved. That is why I moved, right? To become independent. I had been more alone in my previous

relationship than I was now. In a relationship with someone who did everything but love me, my mind had abandoned my body out of pure embarrassment of my poor decisions and left me with a man who made me feel as if I would always be alone. I felt betrayed.

Deep down, I knew he was not what I needed, but as I mentioned earlier it's hard to restart and there's no promising that restarting will make things easier. But I did restart and gradually the attachment slowly faded as I parted. And truthfully that is all it was. An attachment. I had been told it so many times before but only now am starting to believe it. I will not lie and say it was easy. It was not easy. Sure, he was undoubtedly the villain of my story. The monster who left prints on my body represented his lack of patience, and lack of maturity. The bumps and bruises that represented my lack of self-respect and ignorance when it came to ignoring advice from the people around me who were not blinded by his charms. The antagonist who beat me down mentally until I was only a fraction of a person, until he tricked me into believing the only importance, I would have in my life is by being the wife of a man, an insecure man. I had allowed someone just as weak as I was to win, without any kind of fight.

I would never forgive him. That was true. However, I would come to terms with the fact that everyone is a villain in someone's story. He just so happened to be mine. When you grow with someone, they become a piece of you whether you want them to or not. I broke the attachment, but the memories were still there. I was once asked by a good friend what I would do if my daughter had gotten into a relationship with a man who treated her the way my ex had treated me? What I would do if he threw her around and convinced her to think poorly of herself, to hear her cry herself to sleep every night?

I would tell her to leave I answered with no hesitation, and no explanation.

Okay, well what about your sister? She continued, and my answer stayed true. And your mother? Your best friend? What about your younger self? She said making a point. I found myself speechless.

I was now a new person. I had grown to be so much better simply by the change in my mindset. For the first time in my life, I was not planning my perfect picket fence future, and I was not looking for someone to love other than myself, and yet it found me, after I found myself. The all-consuming type of love rolled out from underneath a beat-up car with his charming chestnut brown eyes, and in that moment, brown became my favorite color. I started to see his eye color in splashes of water through the lake, and beautiful tall trees that grew around the land. I was falling in love. I spent so much time looking for it in the wrong places just for this incredible man to appear in the driveway of the place I had spent so much time running away from. That is the funny thing about love. You never expect it. It creeps up on you blindly and sends tingles down your spine. It gives just as much as it takes.

I know what you are thinking. How could you find yourself just to give it away again? I did not feel like I had to give him my light for him to shine. He already had his own light sparked inside of him, his own passions and personality and humor. I just felt like I lit it for him like you would a candle. Sure, I had to light it, but I felt the warmth that it gave off. I felt like he understood me and appreciated me in the least selfish way.

Sometimes my old habits would return. I doubted myself and other people's willingness to love me. Henry

had once told me that he strayed from women who thought of themselves as being the exception to men like him. I found myself wondering if I was as naïve as these past women. Was I just another woman set on becoming the only person who could captivate Henry? Or was I the life-changing exception. Where and when did one differentiate platonic relationships from romantic ones? I fixed myself finally, but would this be the last straw to break me?

I named the main love interest Henry. It felt only fitting since that also happened to be Beaux's middle name. My happy ending with my main character staying satisfied alone would have to hold off. I hoped Henry felt the same way Georgia did. But in all honesty this ending was going to be a mystery for me and my readers.

I continued writing for about two more hours. My goal was to hit 20,000 words before I went back downstairs.

I wrote about Henry and Georgia taking trips around the world together, only their relationship was platonic. The readers know that Georgia is deeply infatuated with Henry, but Henry has yet to find that out. Would Henry reciprocate those feelings, or would Georgia comfort herself as she always has in the end?

Chapter Seventeen

Beaux

We spent the next four days and nights together.

We watched movies like *Fight Club* and *Harry Potter*, while feeding each other popcorn under the same blanket. We went swimming in the lake and rode the horses over the stretches of land that surrounded us. We spent hours working, only the labor seemed fun when we did it together.

We laughed and talked about our deepest wishes and desires. I told her that I believe in sasquatch, and she told me she believed in aliens as we lied under Orion's Belt and ate greasy pizza trying to avoid getting drops on her mother's handmade quilt. Later, we got in a serious debate about mermaids.

"You believe in sasquatch but not mermaids? Eighty percent of the ocean has not been discovered yet!" she had yelled patiently in the heat of the argument, for me to say, "You'd think for the 4.5 billion years that earth has been around we would find at least one fossil if they were real," I shot back.

I found out her favorite color is yellow because Vincent Van Gogh supposedly ate yellow paint to feel happy (which I later googled and found was false but did not want to ruin it for her, so I just smiled and agreed). She found out I wanted to be a professional boxer after watching all the *Rocky* movies with my dad and that I once read that every person we see in our dreams we have seen before in real life, so I like to look at as many people as possible in crowded places.

Everything was great. Except for the fact that we refused to discuss what this was. I refrained from the topic because once we put a name on this it would no longer be ours. Family would be involved and friends, and besides, I still didn't know where I stood. Or where she stood.

Last night she left the warm comfort of my shoulder to shuffle over to my kitchen cabinets. I frowned at her for leaving my side until she held a box of brownie mix and smiled. God, I had never had better brownies before in my entire life. And it was not just because they tasted good, it was because *she* made them. She even let me lick the left-over batter from the spoon while she scraped it from the bowl in my oversized T-shirt. And now here I am frozen on my couch missing the smell of her perfume.

What was happening to me? Had the world tilted off its rotation? I reached across the cushion for my phone to message her, but as soon as I grasped it, a tweeting sound signaled a notification.

One New Message from Del:

D: Hey, I was thinking about taking a ride by my old house, just went up for sale last week so it should be empty. Want to come?

B: Of course, should we take the car for a spin?

Since working on the beat-up Chrysler convertible that used to be her sister's we had officially got it up and running again. The newly painted red vibrant color was a nice touch and an improvement from the blue.

I met her outside of her house not even a half hour later, still dressed in lazy clothes—gray joggers and a Rocky Balboa tee.

“I am so excited; I call dibs driving!” She snatched the keys from my hand, jingling them in the air. Sprinting to the driver’s seat, I stared at her in fear.

“Yeah, let me just go grab padding and a helmet,” I said joking as she rolled her eyes. Jumping in the passenger seat I swiped my hand against the leather. Spotless.

“Can we put the top down?” Her eyes gleamed with excitement making it hard to say no.

“Sure, but we have to pull it back up since it’s broken, and I didn’t get around to fixing it.” I smiled. “Think you can handle that?”

Pulling her purple-tinted aviator glasses down to the bridge of her nose she grinned. “The better question is can *you* handle it?”

“Vienna” blasted loudly by Billy Joel as we backed out of the driveway almost hitting multiple trees.

“Jesus, Del!” I said as she pressed on the brakes while I held tightly to the door handle.

“Sorry, we travel by taxi and Uber most of the time in New York!” Her foot jerked on the gas. “Besides when I went to therapy. Can you believe taxis refuse to take me down that alleyway?” She asks as if I know exactly how ridiculous that would be.

“Therapy?” I questioned as we flew down the street.

“Oh, yeah. Apparently, I’m insane! You need to meet Loretta, she would have a field day with you.” She laughed.

It only took hitting a few curbs and swerving to miss squirrels until she finally remembered cars had brakes. We were ‘super close’ she said four times as we wrapped around a curve. Her hair flew carelessly in the wind, and she drove so close to the steering wheel that her stomach touched the bottom of it. She wore a white tank top paired with light-blue mom jeans and Chuck Taylor Converse. Del was so effortlessly gorgeous it made my heart jump out of its place.

“We’re here!” She smiled as we pulled down a dirt path that revealed pine trees surrounding a medium-sized, white southern house. I imagined the pictures Anne showed me weeks ago of little Del and Jenna. The land had not changed a bit. And I loved that. I loved how happy she was. I also loved the fact that the car was now in park.

We headed down the dirt path that led to a stone driveway revealing a for sale sign stabbed into the tall green uncut grass.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Her eyes grew big, and I could tell she was remembering every core memory this place had given her all at once. We continued to the back yard. It was much smaller than their new ranch but had so many good qualities. The gardens were overgrown but still had so many plants rooted and appeared to be growing healthily. Other than the chipped red paint, the barn was in good condition with no rotting wood and the trees made it so there was just enough privacy.

“This house gave me so many memories.” She walked over to a tire swing, pushing it by the old, worn-out ropes so that it swung carefully back and forth. “I broke my arm when I was seven on this swing.” She laughed. “Jenna and I were arguing over whose turn it was to push so she pushed it super hard and sent me flying by accident. She squatted down and told me she would do all the chores around the house for two weeks if I didn’t cry, I never snitched but it was easy because Ma saw it from the window.”

I laughed with her as she changed her attention to an old, metal rusted 2-D gun decoration that stuck in the ground. “And when we were thirteen and fourteen, we made a blood oath right here and promised that no matter what, we would be each other’s maids of honor.” Her smile was so contagious I found myself being excited too unconsciously. She continued to move around fast between different places as she told more and more stories before we reached the door of the barn.

“I had my first kiss right here,” she whispered standing on top of the wooden walkway right in front of the rustic barn door. Her eyes glanced down at the ground as if she could see her past self with whichever lucky guy got to kiss her first. Young me would have fought whoever he was if I had known.

“Hm,” I said staring at it, “was it good?”

“No! He kissed my chin for about 30 seconds before realizing it wasn’t my lips and then it was too late because my dad was turning the back lights on.” She snorted. “We ran into the woods to avoid being seen just for Tommy to trample on his glasses and crack them.”

“Tommy Ledger?” I laughed hard this time, almost insultingly loud.

“Hey, Tommy was a sweet boy. I heard he’s married to an underwear model now.” She winked.

“Good for Tommy.” I nodded my head with a grin. “Does that mean this spot is up for grabs?” I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her into me for a long passionate kiss. Just as our lips touched it was as if someone cued rain because we were standing in a heavy downpour while it saturated our clothes making them cling to our bodies.

“Oh no, the car!” She cried as I pulled her back onto my lips dismissing her concerns.

“It will dry,” I whispered as she fell into me more.

After a beat, we forced the door open and fell to our butts, sitting across from each other on the dirty ground staring at empty pens that I imagined were once filled with other animals that I would have grown to love.

“Tell me something you have never told anyone.” She demanded.

“Why would I do that?” I teased. “There’s a reason I would have never told anyone.” My eyebrow raised as she continued to glow. She seemed different today. Happier than usual. A small part of me hoped this new Del was the making of all the time we spent together.

“Jenna and I used to sneak beer in here during my family’s parties with the neighbors our senior year, and we

would tell each other all our deepest darkest secrets.” She watched me look at the ground while I thought.

“We don’t have beer though. How is that fair?”

Rolling her eyes, she let out a defeated sigh. “Okay, smart ass.”

“I’ve got one. Something I have never told anyone is that...I felt alone my entire life until I met you. And I’m scared I will mess it up.”

She slid across the floor so fast I was worried she would fill herself with splinters.

“Why have you been alone?” she asked, taking my hand. Her look was purposeful as she reassured me that it was okay to express anything to her, but somehow, I already knew it was. She felt like the home I always wanted but never had outside of my imagination.

“I had friends in school, but they all looked down on me. Not that I gave them any reason not to. I lost myself after my dad died.”

“I am so sorry,” she said unaware of my loss. Her eyes filled with sorrow as she frowned, resting a hand on my shoulder, massaging me gently.

“It’s okay. I loved him. He was a great man, but cancer changes people. He wasn’t the same. He was ashamed for me to see him that way, and my mom made it worse. She constantly would make excuses as to why I couldn’t sit with him. Pulling me away saying I had homework to do on a

Friday night or sending me to stay with my grandparents who hated kids. At the time she was completely unaware that my grandfather was an alcoholic and would get aggressive anytime he drank, which happened to be always. He would leave bruises on me that made me feel powerless and then I would use my anger to fight the kids at school. I spent more time boxing, hoping that one day, I would be able to defend myself. Then I joined football. And all my anger went to that.

“My dad would say ‘son, those kids at school are not worth throwing fists. But if anyone disrespects you, then know that I will encourage you to do whatever necessary.’ Not long after my dad died. I moved back with my mom who got addicted to drugs forcing us to lose the farm that held so many memories of my father, trading it in for a beat down trailer. I did not blame her for what happened to my dad, but I blame her for not letting me spend his last moments with him. I blamed her for everything that happened after that. She sent me to a monster who controlled my grandmother and on his bad days, he took it out on me. But the worst part was that my dad, my only friend, died alone. I begged her to let me stay with him. ‘No,’ she said, ‘You have to go to bed, you have school and football.’ I argued with her in front of my dad who felt terrible thinking he was the cause of my acting out, the cause of our broken family. He died feeling guilty. I wish I could have talked to her and told her how I was feeling but instead...I pushed her away. I have not spoken to her in months other than her occasional ‘happy birthday’ messages and notes that I refuse to open.” I sighed heavily. “Does that make me a bad person?”

She frowned as she leaned forward, wrapping herself in for a long hug. “No,” she said softly, “but you already lost your dad, don’t regret not spending time with your mom too. What she did was wrong, but she lost a husband, and had to watch her son lose his father. I can’t imagine how powerless she felt knowing there was nothing she could do to save him. I think at that point she gave up on saving you too.”

“Can I ask you what happened that caused you to finally leave him?” The words fell out of my mouth without even realizing I had asked. I hoped I didn’t overstep but it was too late.

“Lance?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I stuttered.

Laughing she explained.

“Well, there was Chasity first. She worked at the grocery store. Then Shelby, a red head who loved role play, and Amelia a twenty-year-old intern, Brenda—” She continued to list off names until she stopped and got serious. “I don’t know. It started with him hitting me once every now and then in an argument, he would say he felt terrible about it and buy me a gift with a large price tag. Then when I hinted about getting presents on our good days, he would tell me I was selfish and that relationships aren’t based on gifts. It wasn’t about the gifts. It quickly turned to him hitting me every other argument, and then every day. It was only once at a time I would tell myself. I would say he did not *mean* to lose control and that he just had a hard week at work. I would get mad at myself for bringing up Amelia after he guilted me into thinking it was my fault for not sleeping with him enough. It just all became too much, you know? And my best friend, really my only friend from the city, could see through him so well. I felt guilty accepting his fake apologies knowing she would see my name on her phone an hour later calling, crying just for her to continue to give me the same advice. She never once blamed me though. She always told me that the hardest part was leaving and that it was a decision I had to make on my own. I guess I am used to reading books about toxic relationships that turn into good ones, and I was waiting for something that would never happen.”

A tear fell from her eye on her already soaked shirt as she turned and wiped it away, shielding her emotions.

“We read and write these books romanticizing toxicity like it’s a prize to be won, when the toxicity we read about in books is nothing compared to the reality some people go through. I just felt so alone in my life, I tried to reason with it. I had Jules, but I felt like I was constantly disappointing her. And my family. And even my dog ran to you over me when I first arrived.” She laughed trying to cover her voice breaking.

“Hey, Sonny only came to me because I am known to carry food with me when I work.” I swiped the falling tears before they could reach her neck as she chuckled. “Del, you know you are a one-of-a-kind special right? That guy should have never laid a hand on you, and I promise it was never your fault. Look at me.”

Her gaze met mine sobbing even harder as I held her. We sat in the barn for a while listening to the rain fall against the tin roof, as she calmed herself down. Behind her back, I picked up my phone and messaged my mom typing slowly to not disrupt her. If I did not do this now, I wouldn’t find the courage to do it later.

New Message to Mom:

B: Hey mom. Would you want to get lunch this week?

I closed my phone and continued to hold her. I wanted to show her that she mattered to me, that she was not just a body or object I could take advantage of. Even if she did not love me, maybe this would show her that someone, someday, who is capable of love can treat her as I am in this

moment. And for a minute I thought maybe it could be me. Maybe I am the person who can treat her this way forever. I kissed her on her forehead as her body heated mine.

“You never have to feel alone again, Del. You have me, all of me.” I promised.

She squeezed my hand tighter. “You have me too.”

Her hand slid up my neck and cupped my jaw as I clenched at the look of her. She leaned into me slowly holding eye contact. I felt her hand grip my sleeve by my shoulder and yank on it to pull her mouth into mine. It was only in this moment that I decided to accept that I was falling in love.

...

The rain stopped about an hour before we left the barn. It was getting dark as we headed toward the car. The seats were soaked and uncomfortable but that did not stop me from calling dibs on driving. She reluctantly tossed me the keys without arguing then we moved on with fighting the car over the roof. In the end, we won.

My phone buzzed as I pulled it from my pocket with a quick glance,

One new message from Mom:

M: I would love that. How is the Waffle Shop for breakfast tomorrow?

I answered with a thumbs up and tucked my phone back away giving Del my full undivided attention.

We left the windows down as we tried to dry our now damp clothes. My hand rested on her thigh and her head sat on her arms as she let the wind hit her face out the window. I had never felt this content before in my life. I wondered if it could always be this way. If I could be the one to always hold her in her hard times, and to almost die with her every time she sat behind the wheel of a car. I felt lucky to have met her. If our story ended soon, she would one hundred percent be the one who got away.

She was the one.

The exception.

Chapter Eighteen

Del

It was so dark outside that I could barely see my hand in front of my face. The frogs croaked in the tall grasses as I struggled to walk across the yard without the motion lights going off.

I realize that I'm twenty-six years old without a curfew but there's no conversation as painful as one with family about your love life. That was what I was attempting to avoid, not so much getting caught.

I wrapped my hair into a bun as I stepped inside. The door let out a ferocious screech that snatched on me. If they didn't hear that then they definitely heard Sonny barking at me as he wagged his tail in excitement. Great, it was almost like his floppy ears heard me mention my disappointment to his greeting me prior to this because now he was coming at me in full stride almost knocking me to the ground.

"Adella Jean?" My mom called. "Is that you, dear?"

Lovely.

"Yes, Mom." I answered wiping any evidence of the day off me in one motion.

"Could you come here please?"

I walked into the living room while she sat alone on the brown leather couch watching *Jeopardy* with her reading glasses sitting at the tip of her nose. The remote sat relaxed in

her hand with her arm draped across the side of the couch. A crossword puzzle sat next to her and was almost finished, indicating she was ready to redirect her attention to something more difficult to solve—me.

“Where is dad?” I asked to reroute the subject.

“Oh, he had to go meet with a buyer, come sit down.” She patted the cushion next to her eagerly as I sunk my butt into it.

“Honey, are you and Beaux serious?”

“Mom,” I called out slightly embarrassed. “Please.”

“Pumpkin, I love Beaux. You know that and he knows that, but the man has a reputation for sleeping around. I don’t want you to get torn up if he stays as he is.” Her eyes stayed on the screen as she announced, “What is the *Saturday Night Live* show?” just for the contestant on the tv to mimic, ‘What is the *Saturday Night Live* show,’ followed by a ‘That is correct!’

“Mom, Beaux and I are friends. Besides you were the one practically throwing me to him? What changed your mind?”

She turned away from the tv and held my hand. “I was worried when you first got here you would not want to stay. I figured maybe Beaux would be reason enough for you to stay if we weren’t, but you have seemed so happy lately on your own. I am so proud of you, Adella Jean. I just want you to be happy.” I pulled her in for a hug in response to the tears that were forming in her glazed eyes.

“Ma, I didn’t leave because of anything you, Dad, or Jenna did. I promise. I just wanted to go somewhere where I had a chance to sell my novels. You know they would not have sold as well if I was living in Tennessee, and Scarlett thought it would be best to live in the setting where the next novel took place. I love you all so much and missed you all so much too. I am better now because of you.” Tears fell down her face from my words as she kissed me goodnight.

My heart felt lighter as I discussed my feelings openly for once. Today was a huge step forward. I opened my phone and saw a message from Jules.

J: I think I am in love...

D: With Sigmund Freud or Ivan Pavlov?

J: Joke’s on you, it would have been Erik Erikson, but no I met the most perfect man ever on the way to my lab yesterday.
Heart eye emoji

D: NO way! Describe!

J: He has kind of long dark hair that can just barely fit into a bun during our lab. And he is so muscular. Imagine a sexy doctor, Jason Momoa. But he grabbed my arm during class and asked me if I understood the homework, so I explained it to him...then he asked me to get coffee. We probably drank enough coffee to keep us up for all our labs the next two weeks. We talked for about three hours.

D: Ugh! I am so happy for you. Find me a sexy doctor!

J: Why would I do that? You have Mr. Sexy Neighbor Cowboy man.

D: I know. He is amazing. I think I am in love too.

J: Ah! I am going to miss you needing my guidance, but I am so proud of you, Dee. I love you.

D: I love you too. You are my soulmate.

J: Soulmates.

Today, life felt easy. Everyone was satisfied and for a moment, I experienced a glimpse of how I wished every day could be. Mom felt appreciated, Beaux felt understood, and Jules was in love. And I felt all the above. Hopefully Jenna and Dad were having good times too. I was about to fall asleep when my phone buzzed with what must have been another message from Jules, I assumed.

One New Message from Beaux:

B: I had a great day today. See you tomorrow. Goodnight, Del.

D: Goodnight, Beaux. I am glad you came with me.

I shut my phone off, placing it next to my nightstand. For the first time since moving to New York, I felt like I was sleeping on clouds.

Chapter Nineteen

Beaux

I felt nervous as I walked into the vintage-styled Waffle Shop at ten a.m. I sat in a red leather booth and examined the restaurant. The tables were beige and clean with napkin dispensers and mini white ceramic containers for creamers and sugar packets.

“Hello, welcome, can I get you started with anything today?” a friendly waitress asks as she whips out a pad of paper from her black flour-stained apron.

“Morning, could I have two cups of coffee—two hazelnuts please, but can one have whipped cream on top? And this will all be on one bill,” I requested. My mom always would request whipped cream when we came here, but I couldn’t help but wonder if she still liked her coffee that way. It had been so long since I had seen her. Did she still have the same full round face that would kiss me goodnight? Or the raspy voice that would call my name down for dinner?

A part of me hoped she would bail out when she walked through the door and headed toward our booth. She looked just as nervous if not more.

The words came out raspy like I had remembered when she says, “Hi, Beaux,” cautiously, careful to not overstep by going in for a hug.

“Hi, Mom, I ordered your coffee. A heart attack in a cup just how you like it.” Her lips inched into a smile and her shoulders rolled back as she relaxed. The waitress becomes

my favorite person as she comes over and drops off the much-needed mugs of steamed coffee on to the table.

“I missed you so much, Beaux.” She avoided eye contact. She always avoided eye contact when she felt guilty.

“Things just got hard after dad died.” I must have learned it from her because now I was staring at my coffee as I spoke, fidgeting with the handle. “I miss him so much. I try to remember small things about him like the way he laughed and the way he danced and boxed, but all I remember is him dying, I feel so guilty about it.” It was the truth, but they were words I never dared to say out loud in fear that maybe wherever he was, he could hear me.

Before all the arguing and fighting, and before the cancer, I remembered faint memories of Mom and Dad dancing in the kitchen to old country music as they cooked dinner and sipped on glasses of red wine. He would spin her around and just as he went to dip her the memory fades into nothing. Every time I think of it, a part of me vanishes with the memory.

“I know, honey. I miss him so much too. I tried to protect you from seeing him at his worst, but I never knew what my father was capable of when I sent you to your grandparents. Your dad asked me before he died to keep his memory alive of when he was healthy. I ripped you away from him in his final moments, and I will never forgive myself for that. I want you to know that he loved you so much and he was so proud of you.” She picked up her napkin and dabbed her eyes without messing up her heavy eye makeup. She was smaller now; I had assumed it was from the drugs she took to get over the pain, but she looked healthier than the last time I had seen her.

“You look good, Mom,” I said honestly.

“Did you get my notes? I am seven months sober.”
She smiled through a sob, she was proud.

“Mom, that’s amazing. I don’t know what to say.
That’s incredible!”

“They told me eighty-five percent of people relapse after the first year of recovery, Beaux, and I somehow was the other fifteen percent. I wanted to straighten myself out. I could not let you lose both of your parents.” Her eyes watered as I hugged her.

“I met someone, Mom.”

“A girl?” She joked.

“Yes, she’s beautiful and smart. She lights up any room she walks into, and she is so strong, Mom. She has been through so much and yet all she does is give and give. I want her to be the one receiving for once. I think I love her.”

I watched as her hand fell to her heart.

“You deserve it, kiddo.”

We stayed and talked for a while. She asked me questions about Anne and Greg. I told her about Jeff and Jenna, but most of the conversation stuck on the girl who became my exception.

I walked her to her car and watched as she slowly drifted out of the lot.

“Beaux?” a familiar voice calls out from behind me. I turn and face a woman, short and petite with blonde hair wearing a knee-length halter dress and big gold hoops.

I knew who she was instantly, but it doesn't change the shock in my voice when I say, “Amy?”

Squinting into the sun, the tiny blonde moves quickly toward me wrapping herself around my neck. I don't hug back, hinting for her to let go. Receiving the message she steps back, “Um—so how have you been?” she asks. “We should catch up.”

“I've been fine, thanks, but I'm actually seeing someone, so I should probably get going so I'm not late,” I answer, spinning myself in the direction of the truck. It had been years since I'd seen her, and now that I had, I realized she couldn't compare to Del. “Have a nice day, Amy.”

“Okay?” Her voice sounded distant as I walked quickly to my truck and jumped in, slamming the door and leaving her in the parking lot. I owed her nothing, I thought as I watched her get tinier in the distance. She meant nothing.

Chapter Twenty

Del

It was early when I heard a car pull into the driveway. I thought I was dreaming the excited voices and enthusiastic yells until I dragged my heavy head from my pillow and saw Jenna and Jeff unloading his truck with the help of my parents.

I looked at my phone realizing it was half past ten. Launching myself up from the sudden burst of energy, I left the comfort of my sheets.

I pulled on a random pair of blue pants that clashed with the yellow shirt I slept in and sprinted down the stairs. Jenna stood by the door with her hands in her coat pockets looking suspiciously over happy. Jeff was still outside, unloading and hugging my parents when I bombarded her with a million questions.

“How was his family? Is their dog adorable? How were the trails? Did you see bears? Tell me, did you have the best time ever? Wait no, did it go bad? Are his parents as nice as him—”

She cut me off by pulling her left hand out of her purple coat, emphasizing her *fourth* finger. On it dazzled a square-shaped diamond on a silver band. It was simple and I loved it.

Good job, Jeff.

“Oh my God! Jenna!” I could not contain my excitement.

“I know! I am getting married!” She grinned ear to ear. “I remember it was all we talked about as kids and now it’s finally happening!” Brushing my hair behind my ears, I smiled softly at her. It was happening. And I was so grateful she found someone. However, the wedding I was supposed to be prepping for right now was my own.

Being here was the distraction I needed but now that Jenna’s engaged and I’m in whatever I’m in with Beaux—I feel behind again. Like I did six years ago. Pushing my overthinking to the side, I watched Jeff drop bags down in front of me. Before he has time to react, I’m hugging him, my eyes watering from how happy I am for the two of them. They deserved it.

“Congrats, Jeff! You found a good one.” I say tugging on my sister’s arm. He looks past me and smiles at my sister who is glowing even more than she did in high school. I can see him mouthing something to her, and based off the tug of her lips, I can tell it was ‘I love you.’

Everything just kept getting better and a small part of me was worried that things were going too well here. Nothing about my situation was permanent though and I tried not to let myself get too comfortable because something *always* seemed to happen.

This morning, we ate breakfast outside to celebrate. The sun reflected on the glass table creating rainbow rays on the concrete, and the smell of bacon and sausage swirled around in the fresh air as the birds chirped. My face heated as I absorbed the rays of light. I wondered where Beaux was. His truck was not in its usual place in the driveway and hadn’t been since early this morning. I tried not to worry as Jenna grabbed my arm.

“Del, I have an important question to ask you.” She held her glass of mimosa in front of her and slid her chair closer to me until our knees were touching.

“For starters, thank you for being such an amazing person in my life. It has always been you and me. It was hard not having you here for so long, but now that you’re back, life has just gotten so amazing it has been unreal.” Her eyes watered as she went on. “There is no one else I would want to stand by me on all the most important days in my life. You were there for my first communion, and my wisdom teeth surgery as you held me down and syringed salt water into my gums.” A memory of her temper in that moment flashed making me cringe. “You were there for my graduation, and first heartbreak, and you even bailed me out of jail that one time.” My mom spun around wide-eyed and looked at us as we laughed. “I’m kidding, Mom,” she said winking at me, most certainly not kidding. “But I want you to be standing next to me for my wedding too, will you be my maid of honor?” Her smile was genuine and pure as I pulled her on my chest and hugged her. “Jenna, of course I will.”

My older sister had grown into such an amazing woman, and I was so proud to be able to witness her continue to thrive, especially with Jeff. She was living her happily ever after. He is the partner I would have written in a book for her, I thought, thinking back to what Loretta had said about comparing my life to novels.

“I want the wedding to be soon. We are planning for a couple weeks from now when Jeff’s family can come. I was thinking about doing it here at the barn, nothing too big, just our families and friends. We don’t want to spend any more time getting ready than we need to. This ceremony isn’t about the details for us. We just want to start forever as soon as possible.”

“I can do your hair and makeup, sis,” I offered. “And we can look at dresses!” I turned to Jeff who was admiring Jenna, their hands tightly interlocked under the table. “I’d love that,” she answered.

My distraction moved elsewhere as Beaux’s truck pulled into the driveway. The expression on his face was indescribable, and he wore a short sleeve white button down with jeans. Tulips sat in his arm as he made his way over to the table.

Jeff stood up and gave him a one-armed man hug, as I liked to call it, and Jenna held up her hand to show the diamond, wasting no time.

The indescribable look turned into happiness as he said, “Wow guys! That’s amazing!” He pulled Jeff and Jenna in at the same time. Looking down at the flowers in his hand, he took one single tulip from the batch and handed it to Jenna. “Congratulations, you two deserve nothing but happiness.”

It shocked me how honest he looked whilst saying that. The man who did not believe in love and affection seemed proud of his friends for taking such a leap. He handed the remaining tulips to me. “I got these for you.” His smile charmed me. “They were at the farmers market, and I know how much you love tulips.” He kissed my cheek as everyone stared in awe, unaware of how serious we had gotten, and that we were now comfortable enough to kiss each other on the cheek apparently. In front of everyone.

“That was so sweet of you, Beaux.” Jenna’s voice sounded just as surprised as everyone’s faces looked.

Jeff stood up again. “Okay, it is my turn now. Jenna has her maid of honor, so Beaux would you do me the honor of being my best man?” He laughed. “I would have never had the courage to propose if it weren’t for our conversation the other day.” My eyes shot back to Beaux curiously—conversation?

Beaux looked equally as confused as I did when he answered, “Of course, man.”

Maid of honor and best man trope? I have read these before and written them. Something awful usually always happens before the wedding that would ruin the bonding relationship between the two. It was almost inevitable.

I prayed nothing would go wrong to ruin what we had going on. I liked feeling comfortable in his arms, and I loved that he saw flowers and thought of me. Especially my favorite ones. He had changed so much, and I could not help but imagine that maybe everything had to crash and burn between Lance and me to get my happy ever after like Jenna and Jeff.

I would have to bring up the conversation between Beaux and me soon, I wanted this to be more. We did relationship things, so why couldn’t we try to put a title to it? We needed to figure out what this was, and I needed to know if his mind had changed on everything. I knew he liked me, but I was still torn on whether he wanted the same things I wanted.

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After breakfast ended, I sat on the swinging bench on the front porch admiring the hydrangeas. I tried to consider maybe adding some new characters to my book to spice it up until I

felt Beaux's presence as he came up the stairs and sat at the top of the porch steps.

"I spoke to my mom."

My eyes grew wide. That explained the weird look on his face this morning. "That's great." Moving from the swing to the bench I placed a hand on his thigh. "How did it go?"

"It was nice. She needed it as much as I did. I feel like I made the right decision to call her. I even found out she's been sober for a while now, almost a year."

"I am so happy for you, Beaux. You deserve to have a good relationship with your mom." I moved my hand on his shoulder, I felt happy that he was so happy. He needed someone other than my family. Who else would he talk bad about me to when we got in arguments? I guess he *could* do that with my mother. Or my father. Or Jenna—okay bad example.

"Thank you." His pupils grew effortlessly as he stared at me. "I would have never been able to meet with her if it weren't for you. I sincerely mean that." He looked as if there was more he wanted to say but could not bring himself to say it.

"Was everything okay earlier?" I asked. "Is that why you seemed stressed earlier? I looked for your truck, but you've been gone all morning."

"Oh, so you were looking for me?" He was grinning now.

“Psh. I wouldn’t saying looking, you know. Just a casual glance over like ‘hey, maybe Beaux’s home,’ or like ‘hey, maybe Beaux’s not home.’ You know I was completely unphased either way.”

“Oh.” He raised his eyebrows. “I can tell.”

“You’re steering away from the question I asked,” I said. “Why?”

He took no time to beat around the bush. “I ran into Amy this morning after seeing my mom.” My heart felt a slight jolt of pain.

“Oh, how did that go?” My voice was thick with disappointment as I asked. I hoped she wasn’t a reason for him to decide this isn’t what he wanted. What if he realized he still had feelings for her?

A subtle laugh escaped his mouth as if he could read my mind. “I jumped in my truck and came straight here. She is irrelevant to me.”

“So, no feelings were there?”

“Nope.” He smiled.

Resting my head on his shoulder, we stared out at the trees and the sky that was clouded with white puffs that looked like marshmallows.

Beaux changed the subject when he asked, “So, a wedding here in a few weeks?”

“It is amazing, isn’t it? They complement each other so well. I am so happy for the two of them.”

“I have to say if anyone *can* pull it off, it’s them.”

“Pull what off?” I asked.

“Marriage,” he stated. It dawned on me that even though Beaux may have felt things for me, he had already spent so much of his time hating the idea of sharing happiness with someone else. He spoke about marriage like it was an inconvenience and the way he had said it caused my stomach to tighten.

“Marriage is not all that bad you know,” I shot back.

“And how do you know?”

I know he meant nothing by it when he asked, but my mind went to the facts. I didn’t know. I was engaged but never married. And even the engagement was terrible. “I don’t, I guess.” I sounded discouraged as I said that. And the last thing I wanted to go back to was becoming pessimistic. “People can get their white picket fence life, Beaux.”

“I keep hearing you say that. What is it?” His curiosity drilled into me as I thought of a way to word it.

“You know, when you do find the person you want to spend the rest of your existence with, you start by declaring

your love and not long after that, buying a forever home to build a family. I just always thought the first thing I would want is a white picket fence. Once you have that, then you have privacy within a home, and an area for kids to grow, and for dogs to run without worrying about them getting out. I guess it's a metaphor for the beginning of a life for me. It has always been something I looked forward to. I would write books, and they always ended with this picket fence trope. It sounds dumb, but it keeps me optimistic.”

“That does not sound dumb at all.” That was all he said. We left it there lingering with the slight breeze. He now knew exactly what I wanted from life, and I was stuck still wondering what he wanted.

Chapter Twenty-One

Del

Three weeks had passed by. Things continued to stay good, but that was it. *Good*. Things were not perfect because there was no commitment to each other, or at least no commitment for *him*.

I had paid attention, and it did not seem like he was entertaining anyone other than me, but how could I be so sure? We continued our ‘situationship’ with no questions and no strings attached. Most of my focus lately had remained on Jenna, so if he was with other people, would I have noticed? My schedule ranged from Pinterest scrolling on DIY wedding decor to dress shopping. Jenna and I spent almost every second of every day together, leaving my only open hours left to work and finding time for Beaux.

I would go over around eight every night, and we would just fall asleep. Then, I’d leave by nine the next day to do it all over again.

The one night I went over, Jeff beat me there. He and Beaux sat at the table playing poker with a few of Jeff’s buddies discussing the plans for the bachelor party. Jeff and Jenna decided they wanted to combine their bachelor and bachelorette party for tonight. They said we could take a drive to a fun club called Club Indigo that was in Nashville. Jenna invited her coworkers and friends, and so did Jeff, while I called and told Jules to come, for a total of twenty people. Jeff’s family purchased tickets to fly in the day before the wedding, so there was a ton to be done.

I had spent hours cleaning the house and preparing the guest bedrooms. I had gone through a bottle of Windex and

two rolls of paper towels wiping everything down. I stocked the fridges with as many options as you could hope for and tried to manage as much on my plate as I could, but I was tired.

The wedding was only two days away, and then my life would hopefully slow down, and I would be able to focus on Beaux again. The party was in only a few hours and the only thing keeping me going over to see him was that I had to pick Jules up from the airport in less than fifty minutes. I tried to contain my excitement, but it was close to impossible. It had been a month and a half since I last saw her. Of course, we spoke on video calls and messaged, but since she and Dr. Jason Momoa started to date, the calls became less frequent. Although I selfishly wanted her to myself, I was happy she had someone while I was gone.

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The airport was quiet until Jules stepped off the plane. All you could hear from that point on was obnoxious shouting until we dramatically ran into each other's arms, arguing like a young couple over who would let go first.

The old Chrysler sat in the parking lot as we loaded her bags into the broken trunk. She packed enough stuff for a long trip to Timbuktu and back. Her bags piled to the height of Mount Everest and that was only half of them. How much was this to take on the plane?

"Is Jeff cool?" Jules started the conversation while I jammed the last of her bags in the trunk. I slammed it shut as hard as humanly possible to make sure it stuck. The last thing I needed was to go down the road fetching Jules' shoes that had fallen out.

“He is the male version of Jenna, so yes and no.” I joked.

“Man, I have not seen Jenna since before you and Lance got together, and we came to visit for the county fair.” I thought back to how long ago that was, and man was a while. “Is she still as perfect as before?”

“Even more so now, equally as high maintenance too but I love her.”

We started down the road as I caught up on everything she had missed and explained the confusing plans for Jenna and Jeff’s bachelor party tonight.

“It’s at this mid-sized night club, in Nashville. There will probably be a lot of people since the weather is going to be nice. You got my message about her request for all the girls to wear all-black outfits that match the country theme, right?”

“Yep. I brought cowboy boots and the tightest black clothes I could find.”

We pulled up to the farm as Jules’ jaw fell to the ground in disbelief.

“No offense, Del, but I really expected it to be a beat down barn in the middle of nowhere, not a beautiful southern house.” I was not sure whether to be offended or not as she hopped out and grabbed her bags. “Wow, it really is incredible, it’s like one of those overpriced AirBnBs you find outside of a city.”

“Thanks?” I said still questioning the backhanded compliment. I laughed. “I’m glad you like it, I figured you can just stay in my room since Jeff’s family will be here early tomorrow, and they will get the other spare room.”

“Yes, sleepover! I haven’t had a sleepover since freshman year of high school,” she said counting the years on her fingers. “And even then, it was usually because I had drunk too much and couldn’t drive home. I may be an idiot sometimes, Del, but I never drink and drive.”

“Well, I actually planned things so that you will get the whole room to yourself.” I awkwardly played with my hair, directing my focus to Beaux’s property. Jules smirked at me like she was finally catching the hint.

“Good morning.” Beaux came toward the car shirtless, covered in his usual amount of sweat from working and planted a kiss on my cheek. “You must be Jules.” I watched as she sticks her palm out for a handshake only for Beaux to pull her into a hug. That made her smile. He was already doing better than Lance.

“It is so nice to meet you, Beaux. I have heard so much about you.” Her mouth stayed open as I mouthed ‘No! You have not heard anything about him’ behind his back.

“Actually, I have not heard anything about you other than the fact that you work here.” She nervously smiled looking back and forth between him and me. Thankfully he must have thought our awkwardness was cute because he turned to me and said, “Oh so she does talk about me?”

“All good things.” Jules walked nervously toward her bags, but before she could attempt to remove them, Beaux

grabbed them like they weighed nothing less than ten pounds and carried them up the steps and to the bedroom.

It was not his first time in there since I had stolen his old room considering he had to carry my deadweight up the stairs and drop me off on the bed only a few weeks ago. However, I still felt cautious about the random things I had thrown on the floor.

“This house is *too* cute!” Jules emphasized the ‘too’ dramatically.

“I can go get the rest of the bags from the car.” Beaux excused himself, dragging his hand across my lower back to walk through. His touch was enough to make me melt.

As he walked out the door Jules grabbed my arm and sat me on the bed.

“He is *so hot*, Del. And he hugs?”

“Yeah, he really is great.” The happiness left my face momentarily but long enough for me to pick myself back up.

“Okay. What is wrong?”

“What? Nothing. Really!” I lied.

“You realize my job is going to be calling people out on their bullshit. That’s literally what I am studying.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you had a degree in bullshit.” I laughed.

“Shut up. Tell me.”

“I don’t know. He is great, but he has this insufferable mindset that rips me to pieces every time I allow myself to think about it.” I fidget with my pillow on my lap as I speak.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the man is incapable of allowing himself to love anyone, and he has said that to me so many times. But I keep wishing that I sparked something in him to make him want to stay around long enough. I don’t know. I thought things were great and planned to ask him where we stood until he basically told me he thinks marriage is one of the world’s greatest tricks.”

“Wow. So, what do you think you’ll do?” Her eyes were heavy on me as I laid back on the bed and covered mine.

“I don’t know, Jules! What can I do?”

“You can tell him you love him for starters.” Her comment made the birds stop chirping and the air drop ten degrees in temperature. “You do love him, don’t you?”

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“Is he worth losing everything you have gained after Lance?” I stared at the ceiling contently. She looked at me

with sympathy and hope as I sat up again. The door opened as Beaux dropped the bags on the floor quickly.

“Here is the rest of your stuff, I need to go help Jeff with some last-minute things.” He said quickly before walking back out the door.

“You don’t think he heard, do you?” My face was pale.

“No. Definitely not.” She reassured me.

“Okay, then let’s figure out what we are wearing to this party.”

We rummaged through our bags for a while until we had two black outfits laying out on top of a pile of clothes as if we were kids eager to find an outfit for a school field trip. Jenna came over not long after with her white outfit on, and we spent the next two and a half hours curling our hair, applying red lipstick, and dressing up. The room looked like the aftermath of a teenage girl’s sleepover.

You’re welcome, Jules.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Beaux

When I was ten, I overheard my mother and father talking about getting a divorce. When I was eleven the conversation still was being discussed all the way up until I was thirteen, only this time the papers they discussed so much had proven to be real when they sat on the kitchen table right across from me.

My mother would constantly tell me never to get married. She said it was a trap and people only used it as a safety net. It was not that my parents hated each other, I had seen them like each other in private, and I had even seen my mom's eyes search for him in a crowded room to be followed with a smile as soon as she found him. But marriage became too much for my mother when my father spent so much of his time elsewhere.

My father owned the boxing ring right in the center of town. He became one of the most appreciated guys as he trained sons and daughters for such a fair price.

Random strangers spent more time with my father than my mother was able to. And between the work on the ranch and my football games, they hardly ever got alone time.

It stayed like that for a while until they decided to get a divorce. Unfortunately, the cancer was faster than the lawyers, my mom realized how much she did not want to lose my father when he was given six months to live, and they called off the pointless divorce. Stage four cancer would take him in a way she had never imagined happening.

When I said I didn't want marriage, it's because I have only seen it end on bad terms. My mother and father, my grandmother and grandfather, and sometimes even Anne and Greg fought. If I wanted to fight, I'd go to my father's old gym, not get married.

Then I met Del and things changed. We had hardly even argued once the last month and if we did it was over small things like whether pineapple should be on pizza or not. The correct answer is no, it should not, but the point was things seemed so easy with her. I figured maybe I could want such a big commitment. I thought she saw that in me too until I overheard her and her friend's conversation. She told her I was incapable of love and that I hated the idea of marriage, and it made me realize, maybe she was right, and I couldn't change. Maybe deep down she did not want me to change because she knew she deserved better.

I know it's cheesy to say, but Adella Jean deserved much more than what I could give her. The last thing I wanted was to set her back. I could not give her the life she wanted. And she knew that. My mind raced. And I knew I had to end things. I had known it would have to end sooner or later, yet still; my heart is pained by the thought.

I feel a large lump in my throat as I swallow realizing what this will mean. I could no longer pull her in to my body in the middle of the night and argue over whether the shower was too hot. We could no longer take turns picking a movie just to rewind it a thousand times because she asked too many questions while the main character was talking. My clothes would stay in my closet because she would no longer need to borrow a hoodie when she was cold. All of it was about to be gone and she was about to be someone else's good fortune.

Never in my life had I been this torn up over a woman, but also never had I felt the need to be so selfless as to let the only person in this world who has impacted me positively, out of my reach. And after everything Lance put her through, she deserved a relationship that was book worthy.

My thoughts were never-ending as I pulled my white button down over my head, tucking it into a pair of clean denim jeans. I slipped my boots over my socks and headed out the front door to see everyone standing next to their cars. I decided it would be easier to feel angry with her for saying those things to her friend, than talking to me about it. It felt like it did when I overheard her in high school talking bad about me to Cassie.

Scanning the group, my eyes instantly found Del. Ugh, this was going to be damn near impossible. She wore a form-fitting, black mini dress and matching black cowboy boots with a turquoise design. Her black cowboy hat sat propped on her curly hair, and she had a silver bulky belt that hung perfectly over her boney hips. Drooling from a few feet away was Cole.

Lovely.

“Hey, man, I didn’t know Cole was coming, I swear.” Jeff crept up behind me.

“It’s not a big deal, really, this is your night.” If I ended things with her, which I already planned to do, I couldn’t tell her who she can and can’t be around, even if the person in question was a raging douche with hair gel. Stop, I mentally chastised myself.

“Hey.” Del’s smile sparkled, looking even brighter in contrast to her dark red lips, forcing me to walk away and

completely disregard her, to keep myself from changing my mind. Did I have to be so obvious about it? Probably not, but if I hadn't restrained myself, I would have pulled her to my home and messed up more than just her lipstick and hair—I would have messed up her chance at getting everything she wants. So yes, I had to be so blunt.

Her gaze followed me in confusion as I sat on the hood of the car hoping she would ignore me, but I should have known better because she trailed quickly behind me. Her face contorted with rage now as she stood face to face with me. Standing tall, she pushes her chest out as she narrows those silver-green eyes at me.

“Okay,” she continued unwilling to let it go. “Did something happen since I last saw you?” Her lip curled as she tugged on her hair, nervously wrapping it around her finger, still flashing a look of confusion.

One thing about lies is that telling one leads to several, which is why I answer, “No,” sternly causing her to draw back. I couldn't end whatever this was now and ruin Jenna and Jeff's night, this needed to be a conversation saved for later, not for the night of her sister and my friend's prewedding festivities.

“If it's because Cole is here, I genuinely had no idea he was coming.” Her voice sounded like she was pleading with me, and her mouth turned down as her eyes stared off at Jenna who was watching us suspiciously. Trying not to make a scene I looked past her and reached for her hand. Del acted fast as she yanked her wrist out of my grasp and tucked it under her arm waiting for my answer.

Annoyance filled me as I stared at her. I was pissed that Cole was there. I was livid. Why did he have to come? He

was like this infectious disease that followed me no matter how hard I tried to avoid him. Anger got the best of me as I spit out the single worst thing I could have said.

“Del, I don’t care if he is here. I don’t even care if you go out with him, you can do what you want, I don’t owe you. I am simply minding my own business. But this is a discussion we can have at a better time.”

The words sounded less ignorant in my head, but the reaction on her face followed by the tears forming in her eyes proved otherwise. Taking a step back she looked at me like I was a stranger, her eyes examining me frantically back and forth as she stuttered to find the words to ask what was happening. It burned me from the inside out to see her like this. What else could I do?

Deep down I wanted nothing other than her, I desired her more than anything in this entire world and her touch alone was enough to bring me to my knees, but love like this did not exist for more than a few months, maybe a couple years maximum. Her face was more upset than mad now as my chest tightened.

I couldn’t even give her an answer that didn’t sound like complete and utter bullshit. I’d sound like some cheesy guy in one of her books who lets the girl go for no good reason in some self-righteous act. I knew how it sounded, but that wasn’t me. I wanted her to succeed.

“But I- I thought-”

“Del, I told you I don’t do relationships.” I cut her off. “I didn’t want to do this here; can we please talk later in private?” I spoke so quietly that I wasn’t sure she could even

hear me. The words were so soft that I wondered if I was speaking this low for her benefit or mine.

The hurt that was frozen on her face caused an ache in my chest, but this was the only way I reassured myself. What if I decided down the road that I wanted to end this? That would kill her. Part of me wanted to take it all back, to pull her in and never let go. I opened my mouth unsure of what I'd say next, but she cut me off before I had the chance to find out.

“Don't bother. I know that I can be a lot, but someone somewhere will think my 'a lot' is just enough. Someone will love me and commit to me. And I really hope you let someone do the same for you. I fell in love with someone who didn't deserve it before, and I fell in love again with someone who I know does now. But you're right, you don't want to be with anyone, and I'll respect that.” Her hand swatted a falling tear carefully to not mess up her makeup. Quietly and calmly, she said, “I hope you realize that you have always been enough for everyone except yourself. You were enough for me.” The words cut through my chest and revealed all my insecurities. My ego dwindled into nothing with her final words.

I fell in love again. Her words played on repeat in my head.

My eyes watched as she walked away toward the group of girls and reassured Jenna that everything was okay, and she would explain later. Then, shortly after, she vanished into the bathroom with choked back tears.

The only ounce of comfort in my body was that she had her chance at happiness now. Even if it was not with me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Del

A familiar feeling lurked its way into my body.

My heart stung. My stomach sank. And, I had an unbearably tight feeling in my throat from holding back tears. I was once again alone only this time instead of sitting by myself on the floor of an expensive penthouse staring at broken shards of glass, or in a high school parking lot on my prom night, I was in a night club an hour away from my parent's house with the perpetrator inches away from me on a tightly packed dance floor as people danced on one another directly in front of him.

"Hey!" Jules screamed over the loud music. "I got you another drink!" Passing me the martini, I watch as she swirls her hips around. I accepted the drink only to please her, but heavy drinking was the last thing I needed right now.

"Thanks, Jules." My mouth grazed the glass as the small sip of mixed drink touched my tongue. "Please have fun tonight," Jules continued, reaching out for my hand. Pulling me onto the dance floor she smirked. "Beaux's looking," she whispered in my ear. "Show him what he's missing."

Together we dance with our arms over our heads, swaying to the music.

"Look at you!" Jules takes my hand and spins me around as I abandon my glass on the bar, following her movement as we dance. I needed to have a good time even if Beaux stood within a yardstick distance of me. He was not taking anything else from me tonight. I would not let my guard

down any more than I already had. Lance made me a fool, and I was on the way to fixing myself. I won't let Beaux ruin all my progress.

A hand stroked my waist as I turned around catching a smirk from Cole. Beaux doesn't want me, and he made that clear. Cole was not a bad guy; I just didn't like him in that way. Leading him on would be wrong but I could still be nice to him?

“Want to dance?” He yelled.

“I'm already dancing!” I shouted, competing with the volume of the club as “Good Girls Bad Guys” by Falling in Reverse played. Cole must've taken my bluntness as an invitation because before I knew it his hands grabbed my waist and pulled me into him so that my body was pressed against his.

I was caught off guard, but everyone seemed to be dancing like this, even Jules who had made her way over to Jenna. The small amount of alcohol I consumed was enough for me to move my hips to the beat against him, my dress riding up more and more as I slid up him. I felt those dark brown eyes from across the crowd burning through me as Cole placed his hand on my thigh and slowly traveled it up.

Beaux straightened up. If looks could kill, Cole would be in a stretcher outside on his way to the morgue. Or buried six feet under already with the shovel stashed away.

Cole's fingertips continued to slide up my leg, making me feel uncomfortable. It felt wrong. He wasn't the guy I wanted to be with right now. I pushed his hand down to an appropriate spot slowly leaning away from him.

“No one cares, I just heard moans coming from the corner. We’re fine,” he states, pulling me back in to my dismay. His hand forced his way back up under my dress as I grew hot with embarrassment. “Cole, no. I don’t want tonight to be like that.” As I looked at him this time, I didn’t see Cole who ran the pool table with me and flashed a charming smile as he said goodnight. I see the Cole I failed to understand in high school. The one who supposedly told the locker room we hooked up to piss Beaux off.

“Like what? You’re all over the place, Adella. Beaux doesn’t want you, he humiliated you earlier. I do want you, let’s get a cab and go back to my place.”

“I think I should go find Jenna.” I tried to walk away but somehow the floor was even more crowded now.

“She is fine, Del. Come on.” Without much thought he yanked me into his body again. “Dance with me.”

“Stop touching me!” I shouted as a huge fist came from around the corner of my eyes into Cole’s face. My body falls into shock as I watch an intimidating Beaux push Cole away from me.

“She told you to get off of her,” Beaux yelled warning him even though he already sent him to the ground. His body towered over Cole’s as he breathed heavily, in and out. I could see him attempting to calm himself down as he counted to ten mentally, but it wasn’t working.

“She wanted me! Did you not see her dancing up against me?”

The anger flooded past the calm he was working on, and Beaux began to raise his voice again. He spit as he went at Cole again. Cole backed through the crowd, scrambling to get out of his sight and reach. The music was so loud only a few people glanced our way.

“Beaux! Stop! It’s okay! Stop.” My hand grabbed his arm trying to show him it was not worth it, but he continued to get in Cole’s face. He continued to act aggressive, and all I could think about were the memories. Lance slapping me in the street. The sound of a lamp smashing against a wall or the narrowed dark stare he would give me before hurting me. I knew Beaux would never physically harm me, but it would always be in the back of my head, and now as I watched his anger worsening, my instincts told me to go.

“If you lay a hand on her, no, if you even look at her again, I swear to God you will never be able to walk again. Go home, Cole.”

Confusion filled up any extra space in my head as I walked past the fighting men over to my sister and her party giving a reassuring nod. Then quickly, I darted up the flight of stairs toward the restrooms. The bathroom drowned out the music leaving only the sound of the stall door echoing as I slammed it shut feeling frustration flow through my veins.

How did I constantly put myself into these positions? How did I expect to write a book about love when the universe has thrown me so many signs that it is not for me? I pulled my phone out and opened the notepad app.

My fingers slammed into the keyboard as I typed out a paragraph.

As I grew to know Henry, I realized that in his own version of this story, he was both the antagonist and protagonist. He spent so much time shouting insults in the mirror and blocking out all forms of happiness that it ended up becoming all he knew. He would become his own downfall in the end, and all I could do was stand by and watch.

No matter how much I loved him.

Maybe love is simply not enough.

I didn't see Beaux when I exited the bathroom. I didn't see him after that either when I joined the party again. A burst of emotion rushed through me so fast, I wasn't sure if it was relief or heartbreak that I was feeling.

"Are you okay?" Jenna said grabbing my face. "What an asshole! He is not welcome at the wedding, Del. How dare he touch you like that?"

I wasn't sure how to answer at first but unconsciously, the question left my mouth, proving what my heart still wanted. "Where's Beaux?"

"Beaux left." Jules joined in but only long enough for her mouth to drop into a frown to sympathize for me before she drunkenly forgot what we were talking about and retreated to the bar for another drink. I stared down hopelessly at my shoes as a tear escaped from my eyes and splattered on the floor. Another flashback came back of the rain splashing on the concrete as Lance tore me down at what I thought was my last straw.

I was wrong.

This.

This was my last straw. And Lance somehow still
won.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DEL

Jeff's family had finally arrived making Jenna more of a bridezilla than she had been the last week.

Which I thought was impossible.

She panicked as she straightened every chair in the house calling out orders to mark things off her invisible checklist. She was worse than my mother during the holidays when my grandparents came to the house. My mother would scream up the stairs, *"Girls! Your rooms better be spotless, we have guests coming over!"*

"Are they going to be in our rooms?" Jenna asked making it obvious that she was being a smart ass. "What?" she said as I nudged her with my elbow, scolding her for talking back to mom.

"Mom's stressed, let's just do what she asks,"

Jenna groaned. "They act like the guests are going to go sprinting up to our room to make sure our beds are made."

"You never know, they might!" My mother called up as she eavesdropped at the bottom of the steps.

Jenna was behaving exactly like our mother and her younger self would have been giving her so much sass at the number of orders being thrown out.

Jeff's family, the Moores, all sat down at the table while my father carried their belongings up the steps into our freshly cleaned spare room. Jules was still occupying mine, but it seemed like now we would be having a sleepover the rest of her visit since my recent break up or whatever you would call the result of ending a month-long endeavor with Beaux. It was hard, but today was the day. All my focus was going to Jenna, and that's how I wanted it to be. Starting with pleasing the in-laws.

The Moores were clean and smelled exactly like maple syrup. Mrs. Moore wore a white sundress that made her overly cautious as she sat down at the table worried dirt would diminish its eggshell color, and on her left shoulder she held a purse that looked like a gift Lance would have given me. I was careful not to make any judgments because Beaux had judged me for the exact reason, and besides, Jenna went camping with their family, and presumptuous people do not camp, at least Lance never did. Mr. Moore picked up a blueberry muffin with his clean hands and manicured fingernails.

“You have a beautiful home, Mrs. Andrews.” He smiled.

“Oh, Dean, you can call me Anne, we are family now!” My mother pulled Dean and Beverly in for a long hug before releasing them. I could tell Beverly was slightly uncomfortable with this, whereas Dean seemed appreciative of the welcoming gesture. Leaning back and wiping the remnants of my mom's hug off her chest, Beverly arched an eyebrow. “Unique color for a kitchen.” Her tone was dismissive and rude.

“Oh, the yellow was here when we moved in. The previous owner's wife had passed away from old age, and she painted this kitchen. Her husband said yellow was her favorite

color and that when they put it up on the market, their Realtor suggested he repaint it. I would not dare paint over something so beautiful with such a beautiful story.” My mother was the most thoughtful, sweetest person to ever live. I should have made my only goal in life to be as wonderful as her.

Wiping his eyes slowly, Dean gave a soft understanding smile. “The yellow is splendid. I love it.”

Slowly, I carried a tray of various breakfast foods over to the table as Jenna filled glasses with homemade orange juice. Her hair was bright and full of volume from the rollers that sat on her head all morning before their arrival and her face glowed from the highlight she applied on her face.

“Everything smells amazing.” Jeff inhaled the steam that came off the hot food. “And looks amazing,” he continued, only this time he was looking at Jenna as she blushed from his sneaky compliment. I found myself holding back a smile as I looked back and forth between them. She was so happy and so was he, in only a few hours they were getting married. Jenna insisted that they share breakfast with their families before their wedding since they would be leaving for their honeymoon directly after the afterparty.

“Honey, wipe your face,” Beverly held a napkin out to Jeff as he looked at her embarrassed.

“Mom, I am okay,” he insisted. “I can manage my cleanliness.” He laughs trying to play like his overbearing mom was kidding.

“No, you will use your sleeve and that’s tough stains to get out.”

“Oh, I can do all the laundry.” Mom grinned. “No worries, you can just drop it in the hamper in the spare room. The kids used to get the toughest stains in their clothes from the farm, so I am a professional stain remover.” She laughed confidently.

“Yes, you are, dear.” My father joked.

“That’s wonderful, Anne, but I would really quite prefer he uses a napkin.” Beverly snapped. “In my house we raise men, not—” turning around she looks out the window at the barn and scrunches her nose, “—animals.”

Redness flushed Jeff’s face as he accepted the napkin fearful of his mother’s tone getting more aggressive. My mom dismissed the comment and continued, “While the bride and groom get ready, we would love to show you the animals. Just so you can see what we raised.” I fight back a laugh at my mother’s ammunition just in time for Beverly to cough up an egg into her neatly folded napkin.

Just as Dean was about to eagerly accept her invitation, his ass of a wife pushed it to the side. “We need to get ready as well, I am actually going to head up now.” She excused herself as Dean shook his head and thanked them for breakfast before following behind.

“What a bitch,” I whispered, forgetting that Jeff was still seated at the table. Luckily for me, he laughed. “Imagine living with her.” He joked, taking his plate over to the sink. The room cleared out as we went to complete the last of the checklist.

Getting dressed.

...

Jenna looked incredible as always but even more so in this very moment. Her white strapless lace dress trailed behind her as she stared in the mirror, exhilarated, patting the poof down to contain it. The long, blonde, thick braid stuffed with white baby's breath flowers sat on her slim, glowing shoulders, and her makeup was put on in a generous amount to enhance her already gorgeous features.

“Wow.” My eyes teared up as I soaked up her beauty.

Stepping off the pedestal, she hugged me tight.

“I am so grateful to have you, Del.” Her eyes were wide and genuine. “And you should love me so much for picking out that sage green dress for you.” She looked down at me and whistled.

It was true. The dress was perfect too. Everything was perfect and yet somehow, I still felt incomplete and imperfect. Beaux and I had not spoken nor even seen each other since the combined bachelor-bachelorette party, even though I had attempted to talk to him.

D: Beaux. Can we talk.

Nothing. No response. Just a delivered message. I feel my phone ping in my pocket as I walked away from the bridal party feeling slightly agitated. I glanced down hoping it was Beaux, but instead I saw Jared's name. Before I got the chance to open it, a delicate hand stopped on my shoulder.

“Nana.” I pulled her in for a hug. Every time I saw her, my excitement would take over my body. She was the best woman I ever met. I respected her more than anyone else, and her opinion was the opinion that mattered to me most. I had seen her the other day at Jenna’s, but she didn’t stay long because of her sleep schedule that was earlier and earlier as she aged, not that you could tell. The woman was eighty-three and was still beautiful and vibrant. Her skin was naturally tanned, and her silver hair was always in shiny curls still at her age. She had a slim body with strong hips and dressed like she lived in New York with me. I wrote my book about her. I knew I wanted to write my first book about her since I was a little girl.

“Adella Jean?” she would say as she knocked on my door pretending to not notice me fake sleeping.

“Adella Jean. Snores are not that loud, especially not for a sweet little six-year-old girl.” She smiled. I sat up straight and fluffed up my hot pink comforter.

“Nana? Do you think princesses are real?” I asked her with curiosity flooding through my eyes. It was easy to be happy when you’re a child because you have not yet seen the real world for all it could be, and I was the happiest child.

“What makes you ask that?” Her smile was even more white and sparkly than it is now.

“I think I might want to be one, Nana.”

“Well, pumpkin, princesses are real. I can promise you that sweet cheeks, but it’s a lot of hard work being a princess, not every day is full of sparkly dresses and golden horse-drawn carriages.”

I stared at her puzzled before continuing, "I want to be a princess so I can meet a prince and live in a huge castle." My arms stretched over my head to emphasize how big.

"You can be whatever you want to be, baby, but you don't have to be a princess to find love. Maybe one day you will be a doctor or the president! Pop-Pop is my prince, and I am nothing more than a housewife." She looked genuine.

"Does Pop-Pop love you?"

"Hmm," she thought for a quick second then laughed, "I sure hope so, because Pop-Pop snores louder than you just did, and he can't help it! He better love me for putting up with that at least."

"How did you meet Pop-Pop?"

"Your grandfather was the most handsome man I had ever met. He was tall and built a long time ago." She winked. "All the girls in town would drive past his house hoping he would notice them, but instead he noticed me. His next-door neighbor who wore cardigans that covered every inch of my body." She laughed some more, and I could tell the story made her happy. "I was carrying eggs inside one day after going to the grocery store, and he followed me to my porch after weeks of bothering me to get to my brother, Uncle Jonas, and asked me out on a date. Of course, my brother came out and refused the invitation for me so that night I heard a stone on my window."

"Was it Pop-Pop?" I yelled out eagerly.

“It was pop-pop.” She nodded and smiled.

“He’s silly. What did you do, Nana?”

“I climbed out of my window and down the side of the house, and we rode our bikes and talked all night. We realized in that moment that for us, there were no other souls that matched better.”

“What are souls?” I struggled to repeat the new word, pronouncing it as ‘swells.’ She grabbed my tiny, fragile hand while the other fixed my pigtail.

“Souls are an emotional energy inside of us. When you feel happy or sad that’s your soul. Your personality and character and everything that makes you, you. Honey, some day you will see someone with a beautiful face, and they may have a damaged soul. They may not be the nicest.”

“Have you ever seen a damaged soul?”

“It’s not so much something you see, it’s more something you feel.”

“Well, why don’t they go to the doctors? Doctors fix broken things, right?” My face was innocent and optimistic as I stared back at my grandmother, my head propped up on my tiny, balled up fists now as I eagerly kicked my legs in the air.

“You are right, baby, they do. Some people don’t want help though, but you have a beautiful soul. It is the prettiest one I have ever seen.”

“I thought you couldn’t see them?” I squinted my eyes in accusation ignoring her sweet comment. She pulled me onto her lap as I let out a high-pitched giggle.

“I can’t, but the light that is causing you to glow right now is enough for me to know. No matter what, pumpkin, just remember that you are remarkable, and no one can take that from you. Some day you will find a prince, and he will appreciate you without taking away from you. Now get some rest, sweetie. Your mother is going to be very mad at me if you are late for school tomorrow.” She tucked me in and gave me a kiss on my forehead. After that, her story of Pop-op was my new favorite bedtime story. I heard it so many times then when I turned twenty, I decided to write it. The letters she would receive were to be hidden from her brother who was deeply disappointed by his sister dating his enemy so they would sneak out at night, fall in love, and each time he would give her a letter to read during the day, so it was like they were still together.

I snapped back into the present time as I released her from my hug.

“Nana, doesn’t Jenna look beautiful?” I looked back over to the bride.

“Jenna looks like a princess.” She raised her eyebrows. “And so do you.”

“Thank you, Nana.” My eyes began to tear up as I looked at her, and I wasn’t sure if it was because I knew she was a safe place for me or if it was because I was so happy that she remembered that moment I treasured.

“Baby doll, I don’t know what is going on with you, but I have to say, you are a strong and beautiful woman. You

are a knockout, sweetheart, so why are you letting that man ruin your life?" I knew she was talking about Lance. She knew better than I ever would.

"I don't know, Nana. I feel weak." There was no point in lying to her, so I plopped down on the couch in the living room and stared at the ceiling. The only way to look is up, I mentally reminded myself.

"You?" She laughed humorously. "Weak?" She sat down and set my legs on her lap as she rubbed them. "Sweetheart, you have not one weak bone in your little body. Do you remember the time you broke your arm on the swing set at the old farm?" I nodded my head. "You did not even let out a single tear! You hopped right back on that old tire and showed Jenna that no matter how much she pushed you around, you would not give up that easily. Even after she tried to swindle her way out of trouble." I chuckled feeling oddly proud of myself. "The hardest pain is the mental kind. And if anyone can overcome those obstacles, it's you. And anyway, that boy seems to have taken a liking to you."

"What boy?"

"Mr. Jones."

"Beaux?" I let out an exasperated laugh at the formal sound of his name in which she addressed him as. "Ha! That was a good one, Nana."

"You cannot get anything past me, Adella Jean. Where do you think you got your wits from?" She winked. "Anyway, I saw how the boy looked at you as you danced, and I saw how you looked at him. Rumors get around fast here, nothing like the crowded streets in New York. I heard about the bar."

“Let me just clear that up now. There were no noises coming through the truck, and we had not done anything physical!” I pointed out assuming she had heard the same as everyone else.

“Adella Jean!” She called out in shock. “Wash your mouth out with soap! The good lord is up there listening.” She shook her head.

“Sorry, I just assumed you heard what everyone else did. Nothing happened, Nana, I promise.” At least not that night...

“Nonsense, I meant I heard from him the other night. After the bachelor party. He came home early, had an Uber drop him off. Still not sure how he managed to get an Uber all the way here, but I couldn’t help but notice the layers of bruises on his knuckles. The kid is damaged, but not in the same way I told you before. He is a good man, I can tell. I made him sit with me as I altered Jenna’s wedding dress.”

“Did he say anything about me?”

“That is none of my business to tell. But I will say, I like him very much, maybe you should talk to him?” She patted my legs indicating for me to lift, and I watched as she walked away leaving the remaining questions for me to ponder alone.

I look down at my phone, and open Jared’s message.

Chapter Twenty-Five

BEAUX

Have you ever been somewhere where you feel like you are the most hated person in the room? For example, Jenna and Jeff are both standing at the altar while Del and I stand as their honorary guests. However, all of Del's family is eyeing me up like I'm some evil villain who planned for this. My gaze catches Jules' in the crowd. Her face hardens with disappointment but part of me knows it's not the fact that I left Del at the club, it's the fact that I never showed up after to talk things over.

When I left their bachelor party, I was not thinking straight. I wanted to keep slamming my fist in Cole's face, but I had to tell myself after the scene I caused in front of Del, Cole would not attempt to touch her without her consent again.

Or at all if it was up to me.

I grabbed a bottle of whiskey I'd bought off the seat of the Uber before drunkenly stumbling out of the door letting my feet smack roughly against the ground. A sigh escaped my mouth as I pictured Del walking out of the restroom just to be told I carelessly left her there. My head burned at the thought.

"Mr. Jones." A quiet voice announced on the porch. I spun around on my heels struggling to keep my balance as I squinted my eyes to see in the distance.

"Mr. Jones, do you care to join me?"

Rose.

“Hi, ma’am, I’m sorry about the noise, I hope I didn’t wake you,” I slurred.

“Boy, come sit down next to me.” She patted the swinging bench as I walked toward her. Her fingers moved carefully as she sewed the needle in and out of the white dress that I presumed to be Jenna’s. “Whiskey.” It was not a question or gesture to pass it to her, it was more of an observation.

“Yes ma’am,” I answered.

“My husband only drinks whiskey when he is upset with me, says it’s the best cure for frustration.”

I sat quietly next to her and stared at the hard glass bottle before placing it by my feet. I wouldn’t say it was a cure personally.

“Lift your feet.” Rose directed.

“Huh?”

“Lift your feet or else the chair won’t swing.” I pulled my feet slightly off the ground as the chair moved slowly back and forth and she continued to sew. “I am assuming my granddaughter is the reason for the strong smell of a distillery that is seeping through your pores right now?”

Attitudes run in this family but missed Anne somehow. I stick to my statement that Anne was a saint; however, I should have known what to expect considering I

read an entire book on Rose and that lady did not make it easy for her husband, Lorenzo.

“Your granddaughter didn’t do this to me.” I sunk down to her level since the small curve in her back made her even shorter than she already is. “I did this to me.”

“Mr. Jones, my granddaughter is the type of girl who men read books about. The type that they see in an airport and wish they had said something to. She is smart, diligent, caring, beautiful, and above all so loving.” Her eyes left her thread and needle and stared over at me. “So, may I ask, why are you here and not with her?”

“She deserves much more than I can give her. She is all those things and so much more, she is creative and intelligent and kind. She can eat so much food and doesn’t care at all about counting calories. She’s annoying in the sense that we can never watch a movie together without her asking questions and now I can’t watch a movie without her because I miss the look of surprise on her face, like when we finished Shutter Island. It’s only been a few hours away from her and I feel awful, but love is not real, attachment is. Love is a fictitious thing that men and women created to believe that another person can fulfill them when they cannot do it themselves.” Disappointment hardened her face as she turned away shielding me from her judgment. Quietly she went back to altering the dress ignoring my previous rant.

“Why are all of the Andrews women so silent every time I say that?” I continued.

“You said it yourself, Beaux, we are intelligent women. We know when a man is confident in what he believes and when he is not.”

“And?”

“Beaux, do you love Adella Jean?”

I shook my head in disbelief wondering if she even listened to a single thing I had just said. “What?” My words were clearer now because that question sobered me up.

“You heard me, Mr. Jones. Do you love my granddaughter?” Her head stayed down and focused on her task, as the question ran through my head. “I met Lance once.” She tilted her head knowing her words shocked me. Adella told me no one in her family had ever met her fiancé.

“His name was Carter Delioro, and he was the same exact man that Lance was based on Del’s description. Wouldn’t know for sure though since he never cared to meet us. Carter was tall, handsome, and everything my father and brother had wanted for me.” I recalled the name from Adella’s book. “Carter drove an expensive car and was a part of our local country club; to the public eye he was a much better man than Enzo Mancini. Enzo was a paperboy who would deliver paper to all the families in town, and after his long days working, I would watch him return home which was next door to me and continue to work. The girls went crazy for the local “bad boy,” but I saw through him. Truth was, I do not care for guys who put on a tough act. Then he came to my door. Enzo is still to this day an angel with a tough exterior. My brother wanted more than anything for me to be with Carter, but Carter was not a man. He was a coward. You remind me of my husband. You’re a good man. You just need a reason to let your guard down, and I believe you found that.”

“I read Letters to Rose,” I admitted. Standing up, she folded the dress over her arm and began to walk past me toward the door, “The answer is yes,” I said certainly. She

turned and smiled with a small nod then went through the door. Before closing it, she whispered, "Turn the porch light out before you leave. "

With that, Rose shut the door leaving me sitting next to a bottle of whiskey staring at a sky full of stars. I tossed my head into my hands and placed my feet back on the porch ground.

I refocused on the crowd in front of me. Jenna and Jeff were now sharing a passionate kiss as everyone smiled and teared up, even Beverly Moore. My gaze wandered to Del, she looked absolutely stunning as always, making it even harder for me to keep myself in control during such an important moment. Her eye contact stayed hard on Jenna as if she was forcing herself to not look in my direction. Pulling off each other, everyone stood as they made their way back down the aisle together reaching the middle before Jeff swopped Jenna in his arms in her own princess-fairytale ending.

The crowd moved out in a fast manner as the newlyweds made their exit.

"Del," I called out skimming my fingers against her arm. Ignoring me she headed toward Jules who was now giving me that death glare that seemed to be stuck on everyone's face when they made eye contact with me.

I kept my distance hoping Del would be free for just a moment of her time, but instead she was socializing with everyone who was within a fifty-foot radius of her. An hour passed since the bride and groom departed in Jeff's new truck that he and Jenna picked out together. I looked through the crowd, but Del was nowhere to be seen. I spotted Jules almost instantly as she held the bouquet tightly that she had caught from Jenna, showing everyone in the crowd.

“Jules, can we talk?” I pleaded.

“What do you want, Beaux?”

“I need to see her. I have so much to tell her, please.”

“Beaux, I would help you if I could but it’s too late.”

My heart broke at the thought of that. “I know I messed up, but I need to fix this.”

“No, it’s too late. Del just left for New York. I tried to convince her to stay, but she said she can’t hide from her past forever. Jenna told her to do whatever made her happy, so we called her a ride maybe twenty minutes ago?” She looked at the time on her phone. “Thirty minutes,” she corrected.

“Shit.” I ran toward my truck frantically searching for my truck keys in my pockets. “Why the fuck do suits have so many pockets?” I yelled to myself before ripping the keys and slamming them into the ignition. The lights lit up the now dark outdoor scenery. Party guests stood in front of me as I laid the horn down indicating for them to step to the side. Middle fingers were thrown up for nearly everyone except two people. Rose and Lorenzo held hands tightly as they chuckled and walked toward the house.

I slammed on the gas as I sped out of the driveway and down the road. Trucks sounded their horns and people on the streets screamed, “Watch out, asshole!” as I drove like a crazy person to the airport. Blowing through stop signs, I flew down the street careful to look for any other cars in my path.

Luckily a wedding in a small town means almost everyone is invited. Just as I hit the parking lot, red and blue flashing lights lit behind me. I guess not everyone. I groan.

Shit.

Stepping out of the car, the officer made her way over to me. “Hello, sir, do you know how fast you were speeding?” The woman questioned as she shined a flashlight in my face.

“Yes! I am about to miss my flight; I need to go.” I begged.

“License and registration please.” She smiled with pink lipstick plastered on her front teeth.

“Ma’am, please.”

“Sir, have you been drinking tonight?”

“I had two beers; I am fine. I need to go.”

She gestured toward the glove box as I threw papers on the ground to find my registration. I shoved it in her hands along with my license as she walked around my truck into her patrol car.

Fifteen minutes later, Office Potter appeared back at my window. “My printer is broken, but you’ll get a fine in the mail,” She handed my documents back. “Anyway, are you coming back to town?” She grinned. My face dropped. This

lady not only just ruined my chances of getting to Del in time, but now she's flirting.

"Is that all you need?" I groaned.

"Yes. Have a nice night."

Running into the airport, I read the sign.

New York. Departed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DEL

The air was thick, and the clouds were molding into dark shades of gray. A small sliver of sun seamlessly snuck through an opening in the sky and shined desperately through the smog deflecting off the car window.

New York felt different.

The first time I had impulsively fled here, I was hopeful and optimistic. I felt amazed by how large and full of life the city was. I set out for a better future, and although my relationship completely crumbled with Lance, my career had improved as I hoped. This time though, as I stepped out of my taxi onto the pavement that led to my apartment building, I paid attention to the horizon that hinted to the city's end.

An entire world was out there.

The city seemed, for the first time, *small*.

Yesterday I had stayed up the entire night writing due to the newfound motivation that seemed to be shot into my veins. On the plane I finished my book. I gave her a happy ending, one where Georgia is comfortable in her solidarity and where Henry has finally allowed himself to become secure with this person he is and can be. Although I did add an extra detail.

They love each other even if they are not together.

They're friends. And maybe someday there could be more. There's always room for sequels?

...

I had my car dropped to me at the airport. I needed to feel the independence of driving myself back for the first time since I had left. It was important to me that I did things the way I wanted to this time. My life before was filled with everyone doing everything for me. Others scheduled my appointments or cleaned my apartment and did my laundry, but now I could drive my car places other than to my therapist.

Opening the door, I stare at the clean, crisp leather interior. The new car scent that made Jenna's old car smell like garbage, lingered in the air. I never would have thought I'd prefer that vehicle over this one, but I had.

Adjusting the seat, I place both hands on the steering wheel and turn on the radio. The Killers play on the stereo as I scramble to find my sunglasses. The center console stares at me as I maneuver it open.

A smile creeps on my face as I stare at the contents in the compartment. A pair of blue scissors sits in front of me. A symbol of all the progress I had made since I left. My eyes ventured to the rear-view mirror. There's something different about them. They look hopeful.

I had done it.

I had successfully won in every single hypothetical situation Loretta suggested. I had freed myself from the weight of the anchor. Pulling my phone out from my purse, I located Loretta's number. Taking a picture with the scissors, I

captioned it, “I can finally breath now that I’m no longer sinking,” and sent it to her. I considered calling Beaux to tell him I’m okay, but I knew he would follow me, and this was something I needed to do alone. Placing the scissors in my coat pocket, I headed to the penthouse.

...

I walked past the apartment building staff smiling nervously as I scurried into the elevator. I had received a call from Jared earlier, and he informed me that Lance was out on a business trip this week, so I had enough time to clear all my stuff out and stay with my editor, Scarlett. It gave her time to discuss the book and me time to find a new place to live, *if I chose to stay in the city*. After my grandmother’s speech, I couldn’t give up on the idea of Beaux. But this came first. I cannot start something new until I say goodbye to the old.

The door creaked as I opened it. The apartment was exactly how I left it only there were empty bottles of vodka on the center island. I dropped my bags on the floor as I held the bottle to see if there were lipstick marks on it as usual, but it was clear. Was he smart enough to wipe them away this time?

The assumption was wrong but also right because on the floor next to the spice cabinets laid a pair of white silk underwear. For the first time, seeing another girl’s lingerie on my ex’s floor did not make me want to sulk.

Or smash vases.

Stretching my back, I made my way to the bathroom. Memories flooded from the last time I looked in this mirror. It felt like ages. Last time, I was broken and humiliated. I was bruised and in denial. I was a damaged soul in a damaged body. I had all the money in the world it seemed

like. I could travel anywhere at a moment's notice with Lance's card. I could buy any clothes I wanted, and eat lobster and caviar every night for dinner, but there was no amount of money that could buy happiness. My eyes stared at the new woman in the mirror. Healthier and glowing. This was my new start.

Then it happened. Like everything, my hope quickly vanished. A floorboard creaked in the hallway as the bedroom door swung open. Heavy footsteps stumbled in the hall as a body slammed against the wall. A picture frame can be heard smashing into the floor from impact as my heart drops into the depths of my stomach. I hear the person head toward the kitchen as I stayed, nailed to the floor unable to move—or breath.

I was *not* alone.

My face grew pale as I considered the possibilities of what was about to happen. Carefully, I shut the bathroom door slow enough to avoid the creak it sometimes tended to make while simultaneously dimming the light with shaky hands. No one had heard me come in, I hoped. I prayed that maybe Jared had come to help me pack and that Lance did not just lie about his whereabouts this week or cancel like he tended to do, but even I was wired to know the exact sound his body made as it moved through what was once our home. Taking a deep breath, I climbed inside the tub sinking to my back allowing the navy-blue shower curtain to cover me. I held my breath and stayed quiet as the door opened on the other side of the thin piece of fabric. The bathroom light turned on showing the tall figures shadow.

“What the hell do you want, Jared?” Lance's voice yelled as he began to piss in the toilet next to me. I stayed frozen and still as he continued. “The meeting was canceled. What are you so concerned about? Do your job and don't

worry about mine.” There was a pause and a faint voice on the other end of the phone. “Jared. I am not coming in today. I have so much work to do from *home*. Now I suggest you do something productive for once or you will be without a job.”

He hung the phone up and set it on the back of the toilet. A whiff of liquor left his breath and lingered into the tub causing my throat to clog up and my up-choke reflex to be fought back.

He drank vodka today.

He’s angry and *drunk*.

I contemplated my options before noticing the phone’s position. Lance zipped up his pants and headed toward the kitchen leaving them behind. Quietly, I reached over to the toilet to grab it. Shivers went down my spine as I heard my name. Loudly. I retracted my arm back like a yoyo realizing the mistake I made. My bags are openly laid out in the kitchen.

“Adella?” Lance screamed again, “Where the fuck are you? I have left so many fucking emails and messages.”

Tears flooded my eyes as I reached toward the phone again, hoping to not be seen but fail a second time as a noise sounded from the kitchen.

Fleetwood Mac rang from my phone as it was tucked tightly in the side pocket of my duffle bag.

After a beat, I heard screaming again. Only this time he was angrier.

“Why the hell is Jared calling you?” A fist smashed into the counter before throwing my phone into the wall, breaking it violently into small pieces. Fear controlled my body as I reached across the sides of the shower and snatched his phone pulling it tightly up to me. A moment of hesitation showered over me as I questioned myself. Are the cops necessary right now? He broke my phone. I don’t know if he will hurt me again. My mind fought to think of any reason as to how I could be overreacting in this moment, and I hated myself for that. Dammit. Why do I do this? Why am I defending him again? With trembling hands, I unlocked his phone and dialed 911.

Immediately the line picks up.

“911, what’s your emergency?” echoed through the bathroom loudly as I struggled to turn the phone volume down. My body rattled against the tub until the volume was on one.

“Hello?” the responder asked again.

“My name is Adella Jean Andrews, and I need help. Please send help.”

“What’s the problem?”

Footsteps came to the door as I whispered slowly, “My ex-fiancé is drunk. He is going to hurt me.”

“Miss, I can’t hear you.”

Panicking from Lance's heavy feet against the door and the sound of deep breathing, I paused before saying even quieter under my breath, "Trace this phone," and I hung up. My head hurt as I tried to remember phone numbers I could call for help. The front desk was on my phone but not on Lance's. The only number I knew was Jenna, and the last thing she needed was her honeymoon destroyed because of my bad judgment. I quickly redialed Jared. He answered on the third ring.

"Boss, I am sorry, I am working now. I did not mean to overstep," Jared insisted.

"Jared, it's me. Call the police," I whispered so quietly I hoped he would be able to hear. I figured he would sense the difference in tone in my voice compared to Lance and immediately know to contact the authorities, sending them to this location if they were unable to track my number.

A sigh of relief escaped Jared and then a moment of realization hit because I heard the fear in his voice when he asked, "Del? Are you okay? I had no idea he was calling off his meeting. I swear."

"I don't know. Please, Jared."

In a quick motion, a gust of wind pushed the curtain inward as the door swung open aggressively. Lance grabbed me by the wrist dragging me out of the tub as I screamed for help. Darkness flooded his eyes as he filled with rage. With his other hand, he grabbed his phone.

"Jared? What the fuck did I tell you?" He screamed so loud his voice cracked and spit flew out against his glass. He turned his attention back to me with his other arm still

clinging tightly around my forearm causing me to lose circulation.

“Please, Lance,” I pleaded.

“You left me, you selfish bitch! Why the hell are you calling my assistant? Did he tell you about Amelia?”

“No.” I sobbed as tears rushed down my face and onto the tiled floor. Lance held his phone up and showed me the call I sent out to Jared, he looked at me quickly as my eyes widened.

The call to 911 was directly underneath it on the call log screen.

He must’ve noticed the terrified look on my face because he turned his darkening eyes back to the phone before dropping it into the empty tub. He stood numb, and expressionless.

The calmness on his face was terrifying. Sunken eyes twitched at me as fear continued to absorb me. Tilting his head, he stared down at me. His mouth hung open as his eyes filled with tears, not from regret but from anger.

“Why is 911 in my call log, Del?” He slurred the words at me through narrowed eyebrows. Confusion locked on his face.

I said nothing.

“Adella!” He screamed, spit flying from his mouth as he punched a closed fist into the brick wall. Blood ran from his knuckles. Taking his bloody fist, he slammed it into his head as if trying to wake himself up from a bad dream. It was not long before he ripped me up by the collar of my coat and asked again, “Why the fuck is 911 on my call log?”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” My head felt light and heavy. I was ready to accept whatever he planned to do, whatever punishment he gave me whether it be kicking me in the ribs like he had done last Christmas after I reluctantly pointed out his phone lighting up every five minutes from a random number or just him punching me in the face.

“You are not sorry. Do you realize what you have done? My career. My status. My father’s name. My name! All down the drain because of your stupidity.” His fingers aggressively tapped his chin as he thought of a way out of this mess. My legs rubbed against the floor as he pulled me by my hair into the living room where shards of glass from my phone and the empty vodka bottle covered the ground.

“You have me in a tough position here, Del. You screwed me. No. You screwed yourself. Yeah.” He opened the cabinet and pulled out another full bottle of Tito’s. Popping the lid off he downed about four shots and shook his head at the taste of the vodka.

“Shit!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. I prayed someone would hear and would knock asking for help, but I knew better. No one bothered the Powell family. The floor was cold as I lie still leaning back against my elbows still stuck in the position from when he pushed me down. Scared to move, I stayed calm and watched as he exited the room turning sharp and fast around the corner. His hand held something in it.

“No,” I mouthed under soft helpless cries. My eyes filled with water, ready to explode at any moment as I realized what he held. A pistol. Loose bullets clasped against each other in his hand.

“Lance, why do you have a gun?” My soft cries were now terrified weeps as I shed more and more tears from my eyes. Wrapping my arms tightly around my body in a desperate need for comfort, my hand touches something sharp in my coat.

The scissors.

I maneuvered my hand slowly to the handle as I held them tight to my chest.

“I cannot lose my life, Adella. I am important! I am going to make a difference in this world being alive. Your work will make a difference more after you’re gone. You write books for Christ’s sake. If I kill you, I will make you even more successful. People love dead artists’ shit.”

Keeping the blade close to me, I attempt to distract him long enough for him to drop the gun. Scissors would do nothing against bullets. “You will spend the rest of your life in jail, Lance. You won’t make a difference if I am dead and you’re locked up,” I yelled through bared teeth.

“You’re right. But if they find out that my fiancé disappeared after finding out about my new relationship with Amelia, they will believe me. Yes, they will believe me,” he convinced himself. “She went crazy, I’ll tell them. She showed back up and broke into my gun safe. I tried to beg her to drop it, but instead she fired at me. Luckily, it only hit my shoulder and gave me enough time to defend myself.” He shook his head and held the barrel of the gun up to this shoulder, finger

against the trigger. “I was just an innocent man blinded by love. That’s exactly what I will tell them.”

“Wait!” I felt the word vomit slip out again. “I told Jared.”

“Jared? What does that matter? I will say I fired him. That he was sleeping with you, and I didn’t know until after I saw the messages you sent from your phone, which you smashed to hide right after you tried to kill me!”

“Lance, I came back for *you*. I love *you*.” I lied scooching toward him. “I realized I can’t live without you. I know you won’t believe me, but it’s true, Lance.”

“You don’t love me. You left! So, what? I slept with a few girls—I was going to marry you! You think all relationships are picket fences and lovey dovey notes? No. I am sorry, Del, truly, but I am saving you from a life of disappointment.” The gun raised again only this time it was on me.

A million thoughts entered my mind, but only one stayed. My happy place. Visions danced through the darkness that began to fill my head of the future I had so desperately desired. The vision was not the same this time as I had imagined it. It was me and Beaux, and we lived back home among the farmland and the crops. We take the kids down to the pond and teach them to ride ponies. Beaux offers ice cream to the kids after drying them off with pale blue towels after a long day of swimming. The kids giggle as Daddy kisses Mommy and our daughter yells, “Ew! Gross!” My mother calls in the distance from the house as the kids abandon us to go see their grandmother and grandfather. We eat hot dogs grilled over a bonfire, and we love each other. Jenna is sitting

on Jeff's lap, and I am on Beaux's. Life is good. Then I remember reality.

Jenna. She is going to live without a sister, her honeymoon will be ruined by the news. We won't ever share a birthday cake again. She will be forgetting my voice as time goes on without me. This will kill her.

Then I think of my parents who will lose their farm in a legal battle against their daughter's killer. They won't give up. The only thing more important than the farm to them is their daughters.

And Jules will feel as if she had not done enough, knowing more than anyone else had known. She had known about the person Lance was.

Loretta will blame herself for canceling sessions.

And Beaux will live knowing he could not protect me. He will live thinking I died upset with him. Thinking he chased me away to my death. I cannot die.

I slowly lifted myself to my feet as the gun followed me. "Do not move another step," Lance ordered. Reaching farther under my coat I slowly pull the scissors.

"Lance. Please, I love you." I lied.

His face is expressionless. "Please. Let's talk this through. I love you." I walk toward him again as he keeps the gun pointed.

I could not stand here and wait to be killed. I remembered his phone in the tub. If I could get close enough to stab him then I could round the corner and lock the door long enough to call the cops and have them leave a message for my parents. At the least.

“Lance, you aren’t this person.” I pleaded dropping the scissors back in my pocket. Putting both hands pointed in the air I walk toward him. “You were never this person. You’re under stress, I get it. I was asking for a lot when you had so much on your plate. You don’t want to kill someone. You may not feel the guilt from cheating—but the guilt from taking a life? That will live with you forever. I have parents who love me. A sister who can’t live without me and a best friend.” He stood silently inching toward the counter. Taking another swig of the vodka with his free hand, he frowns. He didn’t want to kill me. I could see it in his face. But this was his only solution, and I knew he’d do anything to salvage his reputation.

“Adella, when I saw you in that coffee shop, you were a project. You wore bell-bottom jeans that were a size too big and a white V-neck with coffee stained down it from when you laughed at my joke. You were naïve and hopeful, two things I was never able to be in my life. I was never able to make a mistake, or my father would disown me. I was never able to cry, or I was a little bitch. And having dreams? Oh God. That would have been the worst. My father’s only son, not following in his footsteps? I loved you at first, Adella, but then I grew to resent you. You were free in the city that has been nothing more than a prison to me my whole life. You were able to smile so carelessly and encourage me to be anything I wanted. You gave me hope. How could you do that knowing I had hidden my entire life from the idea of what I wanted? You opened this entire door of thoughts of things I desired, and it made me depressed. Knowing I would never be able to have them. Then came Shelby. She saw me as I was. A rich, snobby man who wanted one thing only—power and sex.

She saw the real me, not this fictitious man in a book. Not the man I wanted to be. I was never the project, you were.”

“Lance, you can be that man still. You don’t have to do everything other people tell you.” I watched the tear slip from his eye. “You can be whatever you choose to be.” My voice is genuine this time.

“No!” he screams. “No!” He’s crying now. Through clenched teeth, he continues to shout, “No!” shaking his head back and forth, drool coming out of his mouth.

My ears burned from the volume as I stared at my escape plan again. The gun still pointed at me, maybe even closer this time, but now his eyes were squinted, fighting back the emotion he hadn’t allowed himself to ever actually feel. He was vulnerable.

Without thought, I did it. I ran toward him sinking the scissors into his shoulder. Dropping the gun, he groaned in pain. “Fuck!” he shouted holding his hand over his shoulder. He moved fast, kicking the gun to the opposite side of the room before I could retrieve it.

I sprinted around the corner, my socks sliding against the floor until I flung myself inside the bathroom hearing the gunfire behind me. I locked the door as he banged aggressively on the other side, the entire room shaking. The phone was in the same spot as I hid in the shower. Dialing 911 I cut them off before they could give an introduction.

“Are these calls recorded?” My voice rattled through the phone as cold chills took over me.

“Yes, ma’am. This is 911. What is your emergency?”

My voice cracked as I searched for the right words. “My name is Adella Andrews. My fiancé was Lance Michael Powell Jr., and he is going to kill me. Probably in the next five minutes. He has a gun. I spent the last month in Tennessee visiting my family. My sister’s name is Jenna, and she needs to know there is nothing she could have done. I want her to know that I am so proud of who she has become. And my parents are going to try to prove that I was murdered for no reason, and they need to know not to fight it.”

“Ma’am,” the lady says on the other line.

“Please let me finish, they need to know not to fight it, please don’t fight it. They do not have the funds, and they need to live their lives after mine ends. They are everything I wanted to be. My first soulmates and my last soulmates. I will take that with me. Their love is what makes me feel safe in hard situations, and right now, they need to know I love them. Tell my grandparents they are my world, and without them, I’d have no ambition.”

The door pounds heavier. “Adella! You dumb bitch. Open the door!” Lance shouts.

“—Jules, if you listen to this, I love you. And Beaux. I sprayed you with the hose in high school because I was jealous. I liked you, but so did every other girl. And now that I know you, the real you, I love you so much. That’s all I needed to say. They all need to know.”

A gun shot fired through the door again followed by loud pounding as the responder’s voice faded out. Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I stare ahead at the hole in the

door. I looked down at my leg confused from the red that spilled through my jeans, seeping into the tub.

I was *shot*.

“Ma’am, was that a gunshot?”

“They need to know that I tried to live, not for myself.” I tried to blink the stars away that clouded my vision. “I tried to live for them. They need to know that I was happy. And that I felt no pain. Tell them I felt no pain. That because of them I was able to look in the mirror again and for the first time in six years, I recognized myself. I died as their Adella Jean not the Adella Andrews Lance created.”

My eyes slowly began to fade out. The color escaped the room as I blinked stars away. I could now die peacefully knowing the people I loved could go on with their lives having closure. I prayed that I would be able to see them from wherever I ended up. That I could place a hand on Beaux’s shoulder as he received the call. Or that I could hug Jenna at my funeral.

“Ma’am! Where are you located,” the voice called on the phone as it laid in a puddle of red.

The door opened. Another bullet flew from the chamber into my shoulder, an accidental overkill by the scared expression on his face. Looking past Lance, I saw a glimpse of what the last sky I would ever see would be through the sliding glass doors across the hall. A fire cast along the sky overtaking the darkness that had begun to settle. The saturated colors were beautiful as they lit up the world around me. Losing myself in the orange and gray palette, I thought, I am about to hit the last page of the story of my life. And the

ending was far from what I had drafted, but the thing was, all stories had an ending.

Some were good.

Some were bad.

Mine? Mine was a twisting combination of the two.

As my vision continued to blur, there was one last thought that raced through my mind. Him. Beaux's life would continue, and although I was only a chapter in his story, he was the plot of mine. He was the ending I would write myself. And to him, I'd be a memory. I would be the girl who danced to the Lumineers under trees full of fairy lights. The girl whose book sat on his shelves as his children ran by it completely unaware of their father's first real love. I would be the light in the darkness, and the sun as it rose each day. I would be everywhere and yet I would be nowhere. My sight diminished into nothing as I dropped back. A smile on my face because I knew one thing for certain.

I was the one who taught him how to love himself again, even if I wouldn't be there to see him do it.

Maybe in another life.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

BEAUX

It took no time to convince Jules to give me Adella's address in New York. She had explained that Lance was out of town on business so Del would be there now packing her things. My phone rang as I attempted to reach her for the tenth time. Leaving her message after message.

"Come on, Del, answer your phone." I impatiently rocked back and forth until the phone went straight to voicemail. Never in my life had I felt so entirely out of control.

"Del, we need to talk. I have so many things I need you to hear before you decide to stay in New York with your publisher. I need you. Please. Call me back." God, why isn't she answering? Had she already decided to stay? Was I too late?

The faded-yellow taxi dropped me off at the foot of her luxurious building. No wonder she wore those shoes the first day I met her, this place was expensive to say the least. There were clean-shaven men outside opening and closing the golden-framed doors and everyone within a 200-foot proximity wore a tailored suit that fit their bodies perfectly. Well, everyone except me.

My cowboy boots and muddy denim jeans were enough to differentiate me from high class. The man at the front desk looked me up and down in disgust as I approached, placing my elbows on the counter. You would have thought I was a criminal on the most-wanted list based on his furrowed eyebrow and curled lip. If it weren't for the scrunch of his nose and the tilt of his head as he opened his mouth to speak, I

would have assumed he was a kind man. But no, he looked like he was holding back a mouthful of vomit.

“Can I help you?” he groaned.

Tensing my jawline, I mocked his sadistic tone, “Don’t worry, I only have the chicken flu.” I kidded, however he looked anything but amused. “I am looking for Adella Jean.”

Taking a step back, he applied an obnoxiously large amount of hand sanitizer indicating that sarcasm isn’t a language spoken here.

“Sir, there are over 2,000 people residing with us over the course of the last two months. Could you be more specific?” I shook my head frustrated and slammed my hand down. What a condescending ass hat. I had to speak in a way he would understand.

“I need Lance Powell’s fiancé, Adella Jean Andrews. Give me her room number.”

He held up a finger as the phone hooked to the wall rang behind his desk. “Hold that thought,” he said covering the speaker at the bottom. “Front desk, this is Perry speaking.”

He shook his head and nodded as if they could see him through the phone. “In our apartments?... Oh no sir, I understand... We do not allow firearms in our complex... Pardon? ... Oh my, oh dear, yes chief, we will send security up now, how long until they arrive?” He slammed the phone down and stared at my confused expression. His face was horrified as he motioned for security to come over with his hand.

Great, they were going to kick me out.

“A call from the Powell residence just reached the police. They are in room 604,” he whispered trying to keep the guest from hearing.

The conversation was loud enough for me to hear and budge in front of the men up the stairs. Without thought I moved as quickly as I could. The police? What could have happened? I hit the sixth floor when a gunshot echoed against the walls. The hairs on my arms stood straight as my heart hammered intensely sending me into a cold sweat. People who were home on the floor ran from their apartments in a mess of chaos, down the steps making it hard for me to get by. Pushing through to the best of my ability, I reached the door.

The numbers 604 stared at me as I took a deep breath, preparing myself for what I might see. Chills burned through my core tearing me from the inside out.

Twisting the handle, the knob stopped. Locked.

My heavy boot slammed into it. *Nothing.* I repeatedly put all my force into the door until it broke, swinging up. I saw nothing except slivers of gold and yellow hues creeping through the cracks of a partially opened patio door.

It was silent as I entered. Making my way past the broken shards of glass, I slowly creaked the door open the rest of the way. Stepping out onto the patio, I saw a man holding a gun standing on the ledge. He was tall and blonde. His shoulder showed an obvious injury as I stayed where I was. A trail of blood in his path.

“I did not want to kill her,” the man said, blood covering his hands as he stared at the city view from the ledge. “I didn’t want to. She left no option. No matter how hard she tried to make me the good guy, I couldn’t. Some people are just born bad but I, I was forced into it.”

“Who did you kill?” The words came out slow, and my head began to feel lightheaded. “Lance! Who did you kill?” I screamed moving toward him.

No response.

“Who did you kill?” I repeated it for a third time.

He said his final words. “This was meant to be her happy ending, and I stole it from her. It was never meant to be mine” His eyes filled with sorrow. “I’m sorry,” he apologized before flinging himself backward off the building.

My feet stayed planted as I stood frozen staring out. Beeping and screams could be heard from down below. Traffic was stopped as everyone rushed to get out of their vehicles to see the billionaire who had just willingly leapt from his sixth-story balcony. Frantically, I ran inside swinging up random doors. “Del!” I screamed.

The bathroom door cracked as I pushed it the rest of the way open. “Oh, God, please, no.”

I sunk to my knees as she lie in a pool of her own blood, her hand gripped around the bullet wound that was spotted on her thigh.

“Del?” I whispered, sobbing. “Please, Del. You can’t die. Please. You deserve everything in this world.” I ripped the curtain and wrapped the fabric tightly around her thigh. Pressing my ear against her chest. That’s when I noticed the second wound. Listening closely, I could hear a faint beat. Hope.

I pressed my mouth onto her performing CPR.

“Del.” Please God, please. I remove her from the tub onto the floor, and I continued to breathe puffs into her as her body lied still holding on between life and death.

Security flooded in the room with cops. “Put your hands up!” They screamed, pointing their firearms at me.

“She’s going to die!” I explained as an EMT ran over to her and checked her pulse. I felt as if my soul had left my body. The only thing in the world I needed to live was lying in front of me. I was too late. She was dying, and there was nothing I could do but scream internally. My hands grabbed my sweaty hair as I sat against the wall watching the medics fight for her as I sat there, worthless. Out of control.

“Someone hand me the defibrillators!” the woman demanded as they were rushed to her. Pressing them into her chest, the woman shocked Del.

Nothing.

Another jolt.

Nothing.

And again. And again.

Her body jerked robotically with the electric shock each time they attempted to start her heart. How could such a powerful heart stop so easily? The room was silent as the EMT watched hopefully for even a single puff of air to leave her pink lips. For a moment, I saw as she almost contemplated giving up. A frown took over her face as she concluded there was nothing else left to do. They watched for even the smallest sign of life to reassure us that she hadn't left our world just yet. Finally, they pressed the defibrillators down into her chest for one final shock.

And still, there was nothing.

Adella Jean Andrews was perceived to be dead.

Looking up, the paramedic shook her head in sorrow. I wanted to yell. I wanted to scream and to sob even harder if it were physically possible. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die because nothing would ever be okay again. How could anyone expect me to live a life without her? I sat as the crying slowed into nothing. I felt numb, like I was floating. Looking over, I watched as the medics began to get the stretcher ready. Reaching for her hand, I held tightly.

“Maybe in another life,” I whispered tearing myself away. Walking over to the window I rubbed my forehead desperately, controlling my breathing. I focused on the sounds around me, inhaling slowly. For a split moment, I thought I had imagined it. Then it happened again.

A cough could be heard from behind the wall I put up between us to shield myself from the pain of losing her. Del released a gasp of air as I yanked my shirt to my eyes to wipe the stream of tears that flew out forcefully. Relief stretched

across my face as I fell over to her. “Del, oh God, thank God.” Tears flooded my sockets heavier this time. She fought desperately to keep her eyes open.

“I am here,” I repeated. “I am here, I am never leaving you ever again.” I grabbed her hand inside of mine.

“She needs to go to the emergency room now!” The responders directed at me as they took her away from me.

Today I almost lost everything, making it even more obvious to me just how much I *needed* her.

Just how much I loved her.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Del

It has been two weeks since Lance took his life.

An ache reached my heart at the news when I woke up in the hospital. Luckily, I had Beaux by my side when I realized what had happened. Lance had his own issues. He had serious mental problems, and it pained me that he never got help. It pained me that I, of all people, saw the person Lance could become before power, money, and, more importantly, the world got him. He was running from his own demons; one wrong move and his life was over. I did not respect it, but I understood it unfortunately because it made me want to forgive him.

I always admired myself for seeing the best in people. Even if they did not deserve it. I liked to believe that there was something in Lance that was good. My goal in the beginning was to be myself again. I had spent the last six years hating everyone. Blaming others for my own problems. Now that I was myself again, I realized what that meant. It meant I would never again live a life assuming the worst in people is greater than the good. I couldn't allow my mindset to become that pessimistic again. I would continue to see the best, even in Lance. Despite what everyone recommended, I went to the funeral. Not for him, but for myself. I needed closure. I needed to forgive the good side of Lance that just wanted to be enough for his father.

The service was beautiful, I sat by Jared and his family. I scanned the room to see if I could find familiar faces. Amelia sat a few rows behind me, but other than her, none of Lance's women came. Fear settled in my bones when I heard Camille, Lance's mother, standing by the podium in an expensive black ankle-length dress. The crowd was in

mourning. He may have gone out in a way that destroyed his reputation, but nevertheless, death was always sad.

“Hi,” she said through muffled sounds that echoed from the speaker. “Today, we mourn the loss of a man. To some of you, he was a friend.” She glanced to a group of lawyers; men who sat firmly, obviously distressed from the loss of their friend. “A boss,” her direction switched over to Jared who uncomfortably slid down in his seat, “a partner, and most importantly, to me at least, a *son*.”

Discomfort filled her face now causing makeup to run as she wiped tears away with crinkled tissues that had been stuffed in her black-gloved palm. One of Lance’s cousins walked quickly up the steps and comforted Camille as she struggled to stand up straight.

“You can do this,” the tall blonde whispered into her ear.

She nodded her head in response, picking herself back up from the broken depths of a mother suffering the loss of her only child.

“My son was a lot of things,” Camille continued, “and of all the things he was, a monster was not one of them.” Pain struck through me like a knife being twisted in my healed wound. I felt like my stomach was raw as she finished that sentence. Pushing back the memories, I choose to think of the good times. I needed to remain kind in cruel situations. She was a coping mother, burying her only child.

“My son was rewired to think a different way since gaining the responsibility of a firm. He was told that even the slightest failure would ruin our success. He had a lifetime’s worth of duties that weighed him down and never allowed him

to have a life outside of the office. He made poor decisions, and I understand how they have affected some of you.” She was speaking to me now, her eyes laid warmly on mine, and it felt like we were the only two people in the room as she spoke again. “But he was my son.” She shook her head and tucked her quivering upper lip under her lower one as she tried to fight back the second round of tears. In a shaky movement the tissue reached her eye again. “If he were here, I think he would have wanted me to say sorry. But since he’s not here, I want to say sorry. Not from him but from me for not allowing him to be human. For teaching him that mistakes weren’t acceptable and for putting weight on a boy’s shoulders at such a young age. I’m sorry.” The room was chilled and silent as she fell to her knees and sobbed. The cousin helped her up and excused her from the room.

Following her was Lance Powell, Sr. He seemed more together as he readjusted the microphone. Unlike Camille, Lance Sr. looked unscathed. His silver hair was perfectly combed over, and his tall, suited body stood strong and firm as he took the podium over. His words were relaxed but practiced, not nearly as passionate as Camille’s speech.

“Being a lawyer has taught me many things,” he pauses and dwells on this for a second. “It has taught me that in almost every case, there are two sides. The most important thing that I can take away from the business that I have learned is that neither side is the truth. In two weeks, I had to learn a side of my son that I had never seen. In over thirty years, I have seen a side of him that two weeks has completely debunked. Changing the public opinion forever.” Looking up at the beautiful cherub-painted ceiling in the church, he continues. “Lance, if you can hear me, I want you to know that I will remember the man you were before. When I watched you ride your first bike, and the day you graduated from high school. I will remember you as the man who wanted to make a difference in the world. And I will remember you as a son I would have never traded for anything. I am sorry, for being so

hard on you, and I would take it back if I could.” With that, he exited the stage.

Moments after speeches ended, a gentle hand tapped on my shoulder to gain my attention. “I can’t help but think the forgiveness you are giving him is what he needed to rest peacefully. I am sorry for what happened to you, but I cannot apologize for missing my son and wishing he were here.” The black fishnet hung over Camille’s pale, tired face. She looked as if she aged five years since I saw her picture in the paper Monday. The bags were sunken in under her eyes, and the shadow from under her cheek bones was the darkest thing on her face.

“I forgive him as much as I can allow myself to,” I whispered in her ear. “There was nothing you could do. I hope he’s at peace.” I smiled softly as she accepted my words and watched as she slowly walked toward the cousin who had helped her earlier. My attention was almost instantly redirected toward Jared who I sat by but had not actually conversed with.

“I am shocked you came.” His face was covered in guilt. “I am so sorry.” He frowned, keeping his eyes locked anywhere but at me.

I gifted him reassurance by placing a friendly hand on his shoulder. “I blame no one. I am okay, I *promise*.”

He looked relieved for a moment until he lit up suddenly as he asked, “Did you get the flowers I sent?”

I nodded my head and smiled again.

“Okay good, well, I hope to see you around.”

Cutting him off before he could escape the awkward conversation, I continued, “I’m actually moving back home, so I am not sure if you will—”

“Wow.” His head perked up enthusiastically. “That’s great. How is Beaux?” The confusion on my face must have been apparent because he explained before I got a chance to ask. “I met him at the hospital when I dropped the flowers off. He is a great man and loves you a lot. He slept on the waiting room chairs until you came to.” My mind pondered on the word *love*. I had said it once in the heat of an argument but other than that we had not said it. Saying it in a hospital was not ideal so I didn’t blame him for not admitting his feelings. At least I hope that’s what he felt.

“He’s amazing. He wanted to come today, but this was something I needed to do alone.” He shook his head and pulled me in for a hug. “You deserve to be happy,” he said before walking toward his wife and baby who stood patiently by the door.

I had recovered days after being in the hospital but going to the funeral was the last thing I needed before walking away from New York forever.

...

Picking up the last brown cardboard box that was placed on the marble counter of my apartment, I turned to a puppy dog-eyed Jules who sat pressed against the door. Her face was a twisting combination of sorrow and satisfaction as she fidgeted with a loose strand that hung from her ripped denim shorts. Her thick dark curls were tight as they sat on her brown sun-kissed shoulders. A small part of her knew that I had to leave my past life, but honestly, if I could change everything

that happened, I wouldn't because it would mean I would have never shared that cab with her the first day I arrived, and we would have never become best friends.

“Please don't be sad.”

“I am going to miss you so much,” she said wrapping herself around me. “But I am so proud of you. And when I finish school, I will visit as much as humanly possible. I will visit so much that you're going to hate me.”

“Even if you lived with us, it still would not be enough. But look, you and Doctor Jason Momoa are hitting it off, and we can call every night. I love you.”

“I love you more, Del.”

“Okay, okay. One last look to make sure you didn't forget anything.” We split up between rooms until Jules called my name and came out with a familiar pair of black Louboutin heels hanging on her fingers by the straps. My smile curls up at the red-heeled shoes I had brought back with me from Tennessee.

“You forgot these.”

Taking them out of her hand, I dramatically shook my head no and dropped them in the trash can. “I did not forget these. I won't need them where I'm going.” I beamed.

“Are you crazy?” Jules retrieved them from the trashcan quickly. “That was real poetic and all Shakespeare, but have you forgotten that we are the same size shoe? I will be paying medical bills off until I'm so old that I can't even

walk in heels? Therefore, I will keep them. If anything, I will be buried in them or something.”

Laughing at her bluntness I say, “All yours, Jules,” followed by an effortless smile, which was always my genuine reaction after talking to her.

We shared one last moment in the apartment before closing the door behind us and slowly making our way to the elevator.

Ding.

The doors opened at the same time Jules’ mouth did. “Do you think these will be appropriate in lectures?” She asked before the elevator doors began to shut. “Because imagine how cute these would look with a lab coat!” I watched as the view of the apartment got smaller and smaller through the crack of the doors then disappeared completely.

In the lobby, I stepped onto the carpet, seeing the most perfect cowboy I had ever seen in my entire life. He stood with his hands tucked in his pocket and his dark eyes staring at me.

“Well, hello, sir. Do you think you could help me with this box?” I made it look ten pounds heavier by the way I carried it as I walked toward him.

“Hm, thought you could handle it?” He teased, remembering our argument from fifteen minutes ago when he tried to carry the last of the load before I shut him down almost instantly. “*I’m an independent woman,*” I countered, “*I can carry my own boxes.*”

Pushing it toward him, I groaned, “Okay, well I changed my mind,” before dropping it in his arms.

His eyebrows raised, crinkling his forehead as he said, “Pushy. I like it.” Placing the box by his feet on the cement he waved over a taxi. “So, what’s next on the to-do list?” His hands reached below my waist and made their destination on my lower back. Jules’ fake coughed from behind us. “I’m still here,” she confirmed.

Beaux’s sight caught the heels that Jules protected like her life was on the line. “Nice shoes.” He smirked sarcastically.

“Thanks, they’re new.” She snapped back. We shared one last hug and said our temporary goodbyes before she caught a taxi, leaving us in the dust.

“Where were we?” Beaux asked as he adjusted his cowboy hat.

“In New York?” I said sarcastically.

“Thanks, Sherlock Holmes.”

Throwing my hands up in defense, I joked. “Hey, you asked.”

“You knew what I meant.” Pulling me in he asks, “Where do we go from *here*?” Holding back the urge to say Tennessee in another sarcastic tone, I smile. “Well Beaux Henry Jones, I’m going home with the man I *love* most in this world.” His smile grew even larger when he said, “Shit, I

didn't know Matthew McConaughey was here?" With the roll of my eyes, he bites his lip and continues, "I'm kidding. I love you so much, Adella Jean," as he moved me toward him and planted a fairytale kiss on my lips. My leg popped in the air in what was my big romance movie moment. Cars honked as they passed us, only making it more magical.

"Get a room!" a man called out from a window above us as my middle finger raised in the air, pulling Beaux and our last box in the car.

"Let's get out of here." Turning to the taxi driver and back at me, he shoots me a sly-looking smile. "Hey, bud," he says tapping on the driver's shoulder. Leaning in he whispers something into the man's ear, quiet enough for me to not hear. Resting his head back, he watches as the driver gets on his phone and selects a song.

"Can you turn this up?" I asked as Celine Dion's voice got louder with the turn of the drivers' fingers on the volume knob. She was completely unaware that I had stolen a man who was undoubtedly devoted to her and only her.

But now, he was unequivocally *mine*.

Epilogue

Del, One Year Later

Seven years.

Seven years since I met Lance.

Seven years since I gave all of myself to him.

One year since Beaux saved my life in every aspect that a human being can be saved. He gave me hope and although it was touchy at times, he proved that I could be the exception.

He was the reason that I was able to reel my metaphorical fish in and finally leave the dock in the past.

Fortunately, my new book *Defining Love* was released as a *New York Times* best seller, again. Critics discussed how raw and genuine it was to discuss toxic relationships. I celebrated with Beaux, his mother, Jeff, and my family in Tennessee, not just for becoming a better author but for turning another year older.

Today is the first birthday that Jenna and I have celebrated together in the last seven years. Her baby bump pokes slightly through her salmon-colored dress as my mother graciously slices the half chocolate, half peanut butter cake into even pieces. Beaux's mom comes around the corner with a platter of cookies and sets them on the table as Jenna fills her

plate with the desserts. “What?” she asks as I stare. “I’m eating for two.”

Changing the subject, Beaux grins. “I got you a present.”

“Is it another dog?” Jeff joked. “Because I have already dog sat for you both twice, and you know I love Charlie, but he’s a pain in my ass. Last week he ate my brand-new sneakers.”

“Hey!” I yelled. “Charlie is an angel.” I hovered over to pet the little golden retriever who lied at my feet. “And besides, he did you a favor. Red and yellow doesn’t belong anywhere except for McDonald’s, and it especially does not belong on sneakers.” I laughed. Sonny curled next to Charlie as we all joked.

Beaux slouched in his seat laughing. “Everyone, calm down, it’s not another dog.”

“Awh man,” Jenna and I said simultaneously. We shared a moment smiling at the disappointment due to the lack of puppies until an unfamiliar silver convertible pulled into the gravel driveway.

“Who is that?” Jeff questioned under narrowed eyebrows.

The car comes to a stop as the expensive, shiny door opens. A pair of Louboutin heels stepped out of the driver’s side slowly to reveal a glowing Jules.

“Oh my God!” I yelled running toward her, pulling her into a hug. “I thought you would be in Ghana still? How was the trip? Did you save a bunch of lives?”

Jules giggled. “I got here two days ago. Beaux and I decided to keep it as a surprise though for your birthday celebration.”

“I love you both so much.” I glanced over to my perfectly beautiful boyfriend and blew him a kiss as he fakes catching it in the air and places it on his sunburnt cheek. “Wait, you’ve been here for *two* days?”

“Oh shit, yeah. I had something to do.”

“Like buy a new car?” My eyebrow raised.

“Do you like it?” She looked back at the convertible as it sparkled under the sun. “Just got it waxed, let’s take a ride!” She turned and winked at Beaux.

My smile grew lopsided as I sung my question, “What’s going on?”

Jules averted her attention over to the family. “Are you guys coming? We can pile up.” Filling the small interior like a clown car we headed down the street. My white sundress tossed in the wind as I sat on Beaux’s lap.

We passed the never-ending green mountains as the sky was a blue cerulean canvas. The warmth through the clouds touched my nose making me feel more alive than ever as Beaux wrapped his arms around me tightly, securing me

like a seat belt. We pulled around the bend over open fields that were just a minute away from my family's old farm.

“Okay, now close your eyes.” Beaux covered the top portion of my face with his hands making the last thing I saw smiling faces spread throughout the car. Opening the door, he guided me to my feet and walked me slowly down what felt like more gravel.

“Where are we going?”

“That ruins the surprise, Del, doesn't it?” Jules mocked.

After another minute of walking and instructions on what to step over and where to turn, I was finally instructed to open my eyes. My face beamed with happiness as I looked ahead.

My childhood home was restored.

What used to be chipped paint on the tall beams was repainted with beautiful shades of pearl and beige. The shutters were replaced with a robin-egg blue color and planted in the mulch beds were pink tulips. The house was completely re-sided, and greenery hung from the windowpanes. Placed neatly on the porch were two black rocking chairs next to a brand-new mocha wooden door. Pushing through the front door, the interior was even more beautiful in an open layout filled with bookshelves. The home was classic and beautiful. On the kitchen table sat, to my surprise, the same exact green vase I had smashed in my fit of rage a year ago. Jules shrugged her shoulders in excitement. “Can you believe that your one-of-a-kind rare flea market vase was on Amazon?”

“I love you Jules,” I said through a grin that expanded over nearly my entire face. I was so blessed to have her.

Our hands interlocked as Beaux and I led the group out the back sliding doors, revealing the back yard. My heart dropped as butterflies took over every inch of my stomach. The flowers that were planted were beautiful, but they were not what caught my immediate attention. Surrounding our new home was a brand-new white picket fence.

Tears of joy rolled down my cheeks and left a glow of light as Beaux got down on one knee, revealing a sparkling, rectangular diamond on a slim gold band.

My *grandmother's* ring.

“Del,” he started, my mouth covered seamlessly with both hands overlapping. “I never pictured myself becoming anything more than what I was before I met you. I never realized that I was missing something from my life. And when you came along the second time around, the idea of loving someone became easier to comprehend. Truthfully, I had shielded myself from the idea since I lost my father. The pain behind that was unimaginable and then when I almost lost you, my world came crumbling down in ways that burned holes through me. But then I thought about it and realized how lucky I am to have something worth fighting for. You once said that not everyone falls in love, and not everyone wants to, but falling in love with you? That was the best damn decision I have ever made. You have made me the best version of myself.” He sniffed back tears as he looked desperately into my eyes like he craved me. “I don’t know how I lived a third of my life without you, but I don’t want to spend the next two thirds of it making the same mistake. I wanted you yesterday, I want you today and I will want you even more tomorrow.

Adella Jean Andrews, I love you so much that it consumes me. Will you marry me?"

Eagerly shaking my head, I pushed past the beautiful diamond and collapsed onto him. "Yes, yes, yes," I answered kissing every inch of his face, knocking him down in the soft grass. Charlie joined our hugging session in what would be one of the most memorable moments of my life.

"Oh," Beaux says flatly as he places the ring on my finger. "I forgot to tell you. You were right."

"About?" I ask through narrowed eyes.

My heart pounded out of my chest while animated hearts circled around my head when he smiled, a white, shiny, tooth-bearing smile.

"I am, without a doubt, a picket fence type of guy."

A LITTLE NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



I have always enjoyed writing and art in every form since I was old enough to hold a pencil. It helped having such encouraging parents who not only saved my work for me—even the stick figure drawings from kindergarten—but also were avid readers. If it were not for my father’s love of writing and my mother’s love of reading, I do not think I would have had the mindset needed to create a novel.

Having been raised in a small town for most of my life, I loved writing a novel that was set in a place I am familiar with. In small towns you know everyone and on the rare occasion that I visit the nearest city to me—Philadelphia—I feel like I am in a completely new world.

It was easy to decide that I wanted to write a romance novel. I have watched countless relationships in my everyday life—some that have lasted an entire lifetime, and some that have lasted weeks. What I found to be most intriguing about relationships was the concept of time. We assume that a relationship that lasts years is better than one that lasts months. However, I have seen a person happier in a month-long relationship than their long-term relationship.

This novel was written to encourage anyone who might need to walk away from something that is holding them back. Whether that be a relationship, a job, or even a place. One step forward can be the most important step you take in your life. It can also be the hardest step.

We often find ourselves using time as an excuse to not leave the things that are bad for us. We say we can't leave our job because we have spent four years there and we just aren't ready for the change. Or we can't end our relationship because how could we ever restart? And the thing is, it's okay to feel this way. We can't judge another's situation. You wouldn't judge an addict for having a hard time getting off drugs, right? So why do we judge humans for being addicted to relationships. As much as one may realize they need to move on, that addiction won't let them. Mental health is just as serious as physical.

I wanted to explain why I added the funeral scene. To some this could be confusing. I will admit, I was angry with myself for empathizing with a man who had made so many mistakes. But there was a point I wanted to make. In a

way, I wanted Adella to reflect my morals. Growing up, I have always been one to forgive. I have a mindset where I always consider why someone acts the way they do because odds are, a bully is a bully for reasons that have nothing to do with the victim. Whether it be family issues or just some deep resentment toward something in their personal life. I choose to understand that everyone copes differently. That being said, I am NOT an advocate for domestic abuse no matter what the circumstances are—obviously, but I am an advocate for getting people help when you think they may need it. That is why I shared with the readers about Lance from the parent's perspective. I wanted to make it clear that at one point he was a good person, but unfortunately, outside factors stripped that away causing him to not get help. There is a stigma that makes men feel as if they're weak if they ask for help, and I am here to say that stigma is wrong. It's unfair and the reason we lose lives, whether it be from suicide or domestic violence. Life is too short. Get help if you need help.

It is also so important to remember that the toxic relationships that we romanticize in novels and entertainment are NOT comparable to the toxicity that one may experience in real life. Domestic abuse can be seen on many levels, and unfortunately, it's the cause of many people's stories to be cut short. Fortunately, I have never experienced this firsthand; however, I briefly learned it.

I studied psychology for a short time in college before deciding to drop out due to financial and mental health reasons. In a way, I wrote Adella to be like me. It is never mentioned throughout the book if she attended a college or not because I felt that it was irrelevant to the story. I wanted the character of Adella to be seen as she is, regardless of what everyone would want her to be. I wanted readers to relate to this book in a sense that you should give yourself time to achieve what you're meant to achieve. Achievements come in all shapes and sizes, one may win a medal of honor, and

another may be a single mother of a child. You are valid no matter what you do with your life, and you are enough.

The truth is we live for other people throughout our lives. A perfect person would dress for themselves, eat whatever they want without the fear of being judged, and simply live their lives however *they* wish.

I, like many others, am *not* perfect.

We are taught to live up to social expectations. To speak or act a certain way. To dress in upper class brands. As comedian, Will Rogers once said, "*To buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't like.*" I want someone to read this novel and know that a perfect person does not exist. Adella Jean Andrews is an example. Beaux Jones is an example. Lance Powell is an example. We are all characters in someone else's life and in our own lives. The psychology behind it can be beautiful and it can be ugly.

To wrap up who I am as an author and as a person, I am the result of many failures and successes. The result of my siblings and my parents. My friends and my mentors, and the result of hundreds of books I have consumed throughout the course of my life. I am my mother's kindness and my father's resilience. I am who I am because of the people who positively contributed to my life. I am simply writing my own story and editing it as I go.

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I had always known I wanted to write a book someday. My father writes screenplays and has always had an artistic eye and vision, and my mother has the creativity every author would dream of having even an ounce of. Prior to this novel, I started a thriller, a fantasy, and a horror, but I felt the romance book could make a difference for people.

Growing up in a large family, I always imagined the amazing things my siblings could accomplish. My oldest sister, Talia, could be an author; Miki could be a CEO; AJ could be an award-winning actress; and my youngest brother, Pat, could be an explorer. I had all these hopes for my siblings to become successful that I had never thought about what I wanted to be.

I had without a doubt realized that being an author was a dream of mine, whether I shared it with only myself and my family, or with the world. Therefore, I need to thank my friends and my family for not only taking the time to read pieces of my literature and giving me advice, but also for encouraging me, judgment-free, in all that I do.

I would also like to thank Sam Palencia for creating my first ever book cover. She took time to really understand my book before planning the illustrations that inevitably brought the vision to life. Her social media is hello@inkandlaurel.com.

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