



Love
after
Duty

Winning isn't everything.
It's the only thing.



A BALSAM RIDGE
NOVEL

AMBER KELLY

Love
after
Duty



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NOVEL

A M B E R K E L L Y

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To Brandee. Oh, the adventures we have shared and all the ones yet to come. I love you to the fifty-second floor and back.

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prologue

Isley

Fourteen Years Old

“Come on, Isley,” Joanna urges.

“I don’t know. Maybe we shouldn’t,” I say.

“Don’t be a scaredy-cat. It’s just a game,” Candy says before turning to Joanna. “She is such a buzzkill sometimes, Jo.”

I stomp past her and grab the handle of the door that leads down to Joanna’s basement.

It’s Jo’s fifteenth birthday, and she invited five of her friends, me included, to her home for a party and sleepover. We filled our bellies with pizza and cake and settled in the living room in our pajamas to watch *Can’t Buy Me Love*. Everything was going well until her older brother, Evan, came in the front door, followed by Jason Snyder and Langford Tuttle.

They are juniors and members of the varsity football team.

The three of them devoured what was left of our pizza before making their way downstairs. Jo's parents had purchased a pool table and some full-sized arcade games, and Evan and his friends like to barricade themselves down there, not allowing us to join them.

Which is fine with me. I'm awkward around boys. My brothers are always bringing their friends home to play basketball or to ride around on the quads and do whatever boys do when they're together. I make myself scarce because I hate the constant teasing they throw my way.

Jason and Evan came back upstairs to grab sodas and asked if we wanted to join them for a game of spin the bottle. I definitely did not want to. I've never kissed anyone and the last thing I want is to have my first kiss in front of an audience. Candy and her best friend are the opposite. They're game for anything. As soon the boys were out of sight, they and Joanna gained up on me.

When I make it to the bottom of the steps, Evan, Jason, and Langford are seated on the couches to the right. A large square coffee table in the middle holds a single glass Pepsi bottle.

The other girls file down behind me, all of them whispering and giggling as we join the boys.

"I'll go first," Candy says as she reaches for the bottle and gives it a fast whirl.

The neck of the bottle lands dead center at Evan's chest.

She grins and crooks her finger to him. He leans over the board, Candy cups the back of his neck, and the two lock lips for at least thirty seconds.

"Gross," Jo mumbles beside me.

"You're next, Jason," Evan says.

Scowling at his friend, Jason barely taps the bottle, causing it to purposely land on Joanna.

As she stands, he sneers at Evan because he's going to kiss his little sister.

“Now, you go, Isley,” Joanna says as she sits back down beside me.

Not wanting to be the only one not participating, I close my eyes and give the bottle a spin. I blink my eyes open just as it slows to a snail’s pace and comes to a stop, pointed directly at Langford Tuttle.

The Langford Tuttle.

Every girl in the ninth grade has a crush on him or one of his brothers.

He is tall with dark hair, whiskey-colored eyes, and the famous Tuttle dimples, and he has the coolest car in school. A black 1966 Mustang convertible.

With my heart beating rapidly against my chest, I start to stand when Langford jumps to his feet.

He looks at Jason. “This is fucking stupid.”

“Come on, man. It’s just for fun,” Jason says.

“Not gonna happen. I’m out,” Langford says.

He walks toward the stairs, and Evan follows him. I slowly sit back down, the heat of embarrassment stinging my cheeks. Every eye is on me.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I say abruptly as I stand again and dash toward the exit.

“For fuck’s sake, Evan, the girl has a mouthful of braces. I’m not making out with her.”

The words assault me like physical blows. He was whispering to Evan, but I have no doubt everyone heard his insult.

At that moment, mortification morphs into something else, something powerful. Red-hot hate.

Before I have a chance to run past them, the door flings open, and Jo’s dad appears.

“What are you guys doing down there?” he asks Evan.

“Nothing.”

“No, sir. Move it back up here. Now!” he demands.

“Fine, Dad.”

“We have to go back upstairs, guys,” Evan shouts.

Tonight will be the last time anyone decides I’m not worthy of their kiss, and Langford Tuttle is going to be sorry.



Chapter one

Isley

Present Day

I look at the people milling around. Fourth of July in Balsam Ridge has always been one of my favorite holidays. People come from all over Tennessee to enjoy a long weekend in the valley and to take part in our Independence Day celebration, which kicks off with an afternoon festival and picnic here at the fairgrounds, followed in the evening by a patriotic parade and fireworks show.

I can still see my brothers and me in our bathing suits, running through the splash pad, while Daddy helps man one of the Ducks Unlimited tables and Mom hands out ice cream bars with the ladies from her club.

This is my first time pitching in at the town's rotary club table in over a decade. My mother is the president of the club this year, and they are passing out miniature flags and red, white, and blue glow sticks for everyone to wave during tonight's parade.

My father thought volunteering would be the perfect time for me to get out and shake a few hands and get better acquainted with the town's voters.

So, along with the other goodies, I'm handing out homemade cookies with buttons and flyers, featuring a photo of me along with the words *Vote for Paysour*.

Right after high school, I left Balsam Ridge to attend college in Louisiana. Since obtaining my degree in social work, I worked as the director of homeless services and strategy for the City of New Orleans Mayor's Office. Reporting to the mayor's chief of staff, I was responsible for forming a team that developed strategies and created programs and services, collaborating with local private and nonprofit partners, that helped improve the ability of city departments and external agencies to make the enormous homelessness problem in target populations in the city brief, rare, and nonrecurring. In addition to being tasked to come up with ideas for improving government performance and assisting with initiatives to address the issue of affordable housing in New Orleans.

It was a position that I loved and thrived in. So much so that the mayor herself urged me to run for a city council position. I was ahead in the polls and a shoo-in to win the nomination when I received the call from my father, informing me that my mother, Evelyn Paysour, had been diagnosed with stage 2B breast cancer and would be undergoing surgery in three weeks.

The world stopped at that moment. My mother. The woman who led our family with quiet strength and the utmost dignity was sick? I didn't think I could recall her ever having so much as a head cold when we were growing up.

After grappling with the options, I withdrew from the councilman race. Both my brothers had moved away from Balsam Ridge as well, and they were now married with young children. It was a no-brainer for me, the only girl and the only single sibling, to be the one to help my parents as Mom underwent treatment.

I resigned from my job, packed up my life, and returned to Balsam Ridge the day before Mom's surgery. After the double mastectomy and axillary surgery to remove the lymph nodes under her left arm, she did eight cycles of chemo, and I held her hand through it all.

That was over two years ago. It was a rough and bumpy road, full of sickness and fear, but thank God, she is now in remission and cancer-free.

I had intended to return to New Orleans once she was on her feet, but as I became more and more acclimated to life back in Tennessee, I began to recognize the need for improvements in policy and government performance right here in Balsam Ridge. When the town's longtime mayor announced earlier this year that he was choosing retirement and would not be running for reelection, my father encouraged me to add my name to the ballot.

After careful consideration and with no other interested parties in sight, I decided to do just that.

Mayor Gentry is a good man who has served this community well, but it's time to shake things up in the valley and breathe new life into the office.

And that's exactly what I intend to do.



"Jeez, it's so hot out here," my best friend, Brandee, whines as she fans herself with one of the flyers.

She went to work in the office of my father's wood mill company, Paysour Lumber, after we graduated high school while getting her business degree from the local community college. She stayed until he retired and sold the company, and is the only person other than my parents, I kept in contact with through the years and has become my self-appointed unofficial campaign manager.

I slide my eyes to her.

"It's your and Daddy's fault we're out here. So, suck it up."

She sighs as she fishes an ice cube from her Styrofoam cup and runs it over the back of her neck.

I point to the cup. “You know that’s bad for the environment, right?”

She rolls her eyes. “I know, but Styrofoam is the only thing that keeps a drink cold enough so ice doesn’t melt and water it down, and it doesn’t sweat.”

“Still the bad choice,” I chime.

“Whatever. We can’t all be as environmentally conscientious as you.” She raises two fingers. “I solemnly swear to reuse this offending cup over and over until it disintegrates into a white powder, so help me God.”

I don’t really care if she uses Styrofoam. There are bigger fish to fry. It’s just fun to give her a hard time.

“How much longer does this event last?” she asks.

I look down at my watch. “One hour.”

“I swear it’s been one hour to go for the last four hours.”

I laugh at her as I plant a smile on my face and hand a cookie, button, and flyer to Hal Fogle, owner of a motorcycle repair business, Fogle’s Speed Shop.

Hal is an older gentleman, and his shop has been a part of the valley’s landscape for decades. He and his wife have two sons and two daughters. All of whom are still living, working, and voting in Balsam Ridge.

“Hi, Mr. Fogle. I hope you’re enjoying your afternoon.”

“I am. What’s this now?” he asks as he looks over the flyer.

“I’m running for mayor in the upcoming election, and I’d love it if I could count on your support,” I explain.

“And she’d also love it if you consented to her campaign team placing a yard sign in front of your business,” Brandee chirps.

At that moment, Mayor Gentry exits the restroom across the lawn and begins walking in our direction.

He has been in office since I was little. He and his wife were like surrogate grandparents to us all. She passed away a little over six years ago, and according to my mother, he is now dating Leona Tilson.

“Mayor, I hear Isley here is planning to fill your vacant office next year,” Mr. Fogle tells him.

“Hi, Hal. Yes, Isley is one of the candidates vying for the job.”

“One of?” I ask.

As far as I’m aware, I’m the only candidate up for the position.

“I guess you haven’t heard. Langford Tuttle filed a nominating petition with the County Election Commissions office last week,” Mayor Gentry informs me.

Langford Tuttle?

I glance at Brandee, whose eyes have gone wide, and she shrugs.

“No, sir, I didn’t hear,” I say through gritted teeth.

Langford Tuttle is the oldest son of Hilton and Sara-Beth Tuttle. We went to school together. He was in my brother, Everette’s graduating class, which was a year after my oldest brother, Heath and two years ahead of me and Brandee.

Back then, our father and Langford’s father were bitter enemies who locked horns over everything. He and his brothers were constantly fighting with my brothers, and Langford in particular was the bane of my existence, but I haven’t given him much thought in years.

“I, for one, look forward to seeing what each of you brings to the table,” Mayor Gentry admits.

I look up into his kind eyes. With his cotton-white hair and weathered skin and jolly outlook, he reminds me of Santa Claus.

Who doesn't like Santa?

"I look forward to convincing you both that I'm the woman for the job," I tell him and Hal.

"I'm sure you're more than capable. Your father brags about you all the time," Mayor Gentry says.

They move along to the next table, where ladies from the church auxiliary are selling sparklers to fund new uniforms for the youth softball team.

I turn to Brandee.

"I can't believe Langford Tuttle is throwing his hat in the ring. The man has zero experience," she mutters.

"Oh, I can. He wants the ear of the city council to propel forward his agenda. Daddy said the Tuttle's have been pushing to have the land off Hickory Camp Road rezoned," I tell her.

"Rezoned for what?"

"I don't know, but I bet it has something to do with that ski resort of his."

"Speak of the devil," she whispers while motioning behind me with her chin.

I turn to find Langford and his brother Graham approaching the table.

"Hello, ladies," Graham greets.

"Hi," I say as I grab a couple of flags from the bin on the table and hold them out.

Graham takes the offered favors.

"Have a happy Fourth," I quip.

Langford looks down and starts to flip through the flyers. When I lay my hand on top of the stack, his eyes snap up to mine, and the bastard grins.

There was a time when that smile pointed in my direction would have caused my heart to skip a beat. But that time has long passed. Now, it makes me want to slap those stupid

dimples off his face. They're deceitful and don't belong there anyway.

All the Tuttle boys have dimples. Inherited from their grandfather. Those dimples made all the girls in town swoon when we were teenagers, and honestly, they were charming on all of them but Langford.

With his tall frame, massive chest, bulging biceps, and square jaw, covered with a close-shaved beard, the dimples just look out of place. Too boyish for his rugged appearance.

Brandee interrupts our stare down by shoving the tray of cookies in front of him. "Cookie?" she asks.

His eyes leave me and take her in.

"I'm Brandee Chatlee. You probably don't remember me."

"Of course, we do. It's good to see you, Brandee," Graham says, and I swear I see her swoon at his words.

The silly bitch. Everyone knows that Graham is engaged to one of our former classmates and Leona's daughter, Taeli Tilson.

I elbow her in the side, and she blinks, then narrows her eyes and focuses them on Langford.

"I'm Isley's campaign manager, and we plan to crush you. So, you'd better bring your A game, bucko," she quips.

"Did you just call me bucko?" Langford asks her.

She sighs. "Yep. I did. Sorry about that. I've been buried in old-school Southern lingo research. You know, so we can relate to the older voters. I might have unintentionally veered into old Western cowboy lingo territory. It was a rabbit hole," she explains. "Anyway, cookie?" She waves the tray at them.

"Yes, please, have one," I insist.

Langford looks at the tray skeptically.

"Oh, come on, Tuttle. A big, strong man like you isn't afraid of a cookie, are you? I made them myself. My own secret recipe," I urge.

He licks his lips and brings his eyes to me. “The secret isn’t arsenic, is it?”

Brandee howls with laughter, smothering it with a cough. She sets the tray down and starts to pound her chest before turning away.

“You don’t trust me?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Jerk,” I mumble.

“I’m not a jerk. I just think it’s best to be honest with people.”

“That’s a refreshing approach for a politician,” I say.

“I’m not one.”

“I’m sorry, did you not just announce that you are running against me in the mayoral race?”

“I did.”

I lean over the table and look him straight in the eye. “Nope. No arsenic. I don’t need to poison you. I’m going to beat you fair and square,” I say as sweetly as possible.

Langford picks up one of the cookies and takes a bite, chewing it slowly without looking away from me.



Chapter two

Langford

I came out to the fairgrounds today for three reasons. The first was because Tucker and I have watched the parade and fireworks every year since he was born, and my mother always makes a spread you don't want to miss for the Fourth of July picnic. The third was to see Isley's face when she found out I would be running against her in the mayoral race.

Politics has never been my thing. I prefer tending to my own business ventures and spending as much time as possible with my son, Tucker. Precious downtime has been dwindling as of late while I've been overseeing the construction of the Misty Mountain Ranch and Ski Resort. It takes a lot of time and manpower to clear the land and supervise builds for the slopes, lifts, lodge, equipment rental facilities, offices, luxury resort hotel, stables for the ranch, and customer parking—not to mention, the hours of planning, interviewing, and training the new staff. I've even made it my personal mission to lure some snow sports talent away from the slopes out in Colorado. I've got a trip planned to see my brother Garrett's concert in

Aspen this November, and I intend to spend a couple of extra days out there to recruit two instructors I have my eye on.

But here I am, running for mayor, all because of Isley Paysour.

The girl has had it in for me since we were in high school. She was the petty little rich girl who, for some reason, did everything in her power to make my life miserable. She was the head cheerleader, homecoming queen, and a royal pain in my ass, along with her brothers. To be fair, I didn't like them either, and our fathers hated each other, but Isley's ire was concentrated solely on me for some fucking reason.

There is no way in hell I'm letting her hold the highest leadership role in Balsam Ridge. She'd cockblock anything that I or my family supported just because she could.

I swallow the cookie and smile at her.

"Damn, that's good," I say.

"Take another. Take some for your family," she offers.

"Nah, I think Mom has dessert covered," I say.

"Langford!"

I hear my name and turn to look over my shoulder to see Mona, one of the owners of Gus's Diner, walking our way with her arms loaded down with casserole dishes.

Graham and I quickly step to meet her and take the pans from her.

"Thank you, fellas. Gus had a plumbing issue back at the diner, and he sent me to deliver everyone's preordered plates. I almost lost them back there," Mona says.

"You should have texted us, and we would have met you at your car," I tell her.

"There's more," she says.

"We'll get them for you. Will drop these off and fetch the others. Where do they go?" I ask.

"We have a table by the funnel cake truck."

I inhale deeply and grin. “Is that peach cobbler I smell?” I ask.

“It sure is.”

“My favorite. Nothing beats your peach cobbler, Mona,” I say before lowering my voice to a whisper. “Don’t tell my mother I said that.”

She beams at me and swats at my chest before catching sight of someone behind me and calling out to get their attention.

When she walks off to greet them, I turn back to Isley and Brandee. “Duty calls.”

Isley shakes her head. “Charming old ladies? That’s low,” she says.

I cut my eyes to her and smile. “And it’s a coincidence that you’re wearing that outfit today?” I ask.

She looks down at the silky blouse, which matches her honey-colored eyes, and the snug brown skirt, which hugs her ass, and frowns. “What’s wrong with what I have on?”

“Nothing if your goal is to make all the gentlemen in town salivate,” I say.

She’s a far cry from the rail-thin female who walked the halls of Balsam Ridge High like they were her own personal runway. She’s always been a knockout, but her body has softened, and she’s filled out in all the right places now. I’ve always preferred a woman with curves over walking skeletons, and Isley Paysour has definitely got curves. Her long blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail at the base of her neck, and she has an evil little beauty mark above the right corner of her mouth.

Her face falls for just a second before she steels herself, and her sassy smile snaps back in place.

“What did you say?” Brandee asks as she steps beside her.

Fuck, I’m such a jackass.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. You look very nice,” I state.

Shut the fuck up, Tuttle.

“Why are you doing this? Do you honestly want to be mayor, or did you file the paperwork because it pissed you off that I was running unopposed?”

“Unopposed. What kind of race is that? The job of the mayor is too important of a decision. People should have choices, don’t you agree?” I ask.

“Viable options,” she corrects.

“And I’m not a viable option, right?”

She shrugs.

“Come on, guys. There’s nothing wrong with a bit of friendly competition,” Graham interjects.

She slides her glare to him before cutting it back to me.

“It doesn’t feel very friendly,” she snaps as her cheeks flush.

“I do enjoy riling you up,” I admit.

She leans over the table. “You don’t have the power to rile me up,” she bites out.

It’ll be fun, proving her wrong.

I forgot about the sexy little line that forms between her brows when she gets angry.

“Game on, sweetheart. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have to get the rest of these out of the car for Mona. See you at the parade.”

I raise my chin for Graham to follow, and he snatches another cookie as he falls in behind me.

“Well, that was interesting,” he says.

It sure the hell was.



“Dad, can I have another hot dog?” Tucker calls out as he and Caleb, Taeli’s son, come skidding to a halt in front of me.

“How many have you had already?” I ask.

He wrinkles his nose, as if he has to think about it, and then he holds up four fingers.

He just turned thirteen, and I swear the boy can outeat me now. He’s always starving.

“Four? You’re going to make yourself sick before the picnic even begins.”

“He had six at Scouts the other night,” Caleb tattles.

“Six?”

Tucker nods. “Hiking is hard. Works up a man’s appetite.”

“A man’s appetite, huh?”

He puffs out his chest. “Yep, and Caleb and I have been hiking all over the place, helping the vendors carry merchandise from their trucks to the tables.”

I reach into the pocket of my jeans, pull out a twenty-dollar bill, and hand it to him.

“In that case, you’d better get one for you both. We can’t have our manpower getting faint from hunger and passing out on us.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Tucker says as he and Caleb take off for the hot dog stand.

“He’s getting so big,” my mother, Sara-Beth Tuttle, says as she, too, watches the boys trot off.

“I know. Time sure flies. Seems like we were bringing him home from the hospital yesterday,” I mutter.

“Wait for the day he has his own son out here.”

“I can’t imagine that,” I say.

“Blink, and he’ll be forty, trust me,” she says as she reaches up and pats my cheek. “I saw you talking to Isley earlier.” She changes the subject.

“Yeah, we stopped by to say hello,” I say, gesturing to Graham.

“I hope you were polite.”

“He was something all right,” Graham utters.

Her head turns to him. “What did he do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I say.

She holds her hand up to stop me as she looks at Graham for an answer.

“He commented on how she’s dressed. He called it inappropriate.”

Her eyes snap to me. “Langford Tuttle, you didn’t,” she scolds.

“I said no such thing,” I defend, sending a scorching glare at my brother.

He grins at me in return.

Fucking rat.

“He strongly suggested it.” He doubles down.

Mom scans the crowd until her sight lands on Isley. She left the rotary club table and made her way over to Anna and her baby girl.

Anna is the widow of Mike Kunder, a firefighter who worked for my brother, Corbin, Balsam Ridge’s fire chief. He was killed last fall, fighting a wildfire that ravaged the back side of Misty Mountain. Anna was expecting their first child at the time, and six weeks after we laid him to rest, their baby girl arrived. They had thought they were having a boy, so the tiny girl was a surprise. Anna named her Michaela, after her father.

Anna hands the baby over, and Isley cradles her against her chest. Her face is alight with joy as she coos down at the baby.

“I think she looks wonderful. There’s nothing provocative about what she’s wearing. You go over there and apologize to

her this instant,” she commands.

“I did apologize to her.”

“Did he?” she asks Graham.

“Kinda.”

She frowns at me.

“I’m not apologizing again,” I tell her.

She points in Isley’s direction and demands in her brook-no-argument tone, “Oh, yes, you are. Now, scoot.”

Looks like I’m apologizing.

Graham laughs under his breath as I stomp off in the girls’ direction.

Asshole.



Chapter three

Isley

“How are you holding up?” I ask as I rock Michaela in my arms.

Anna shrugs. “I’m okay. I thought it would do us some good to get out and get some sunshine.”

I met Anna when I returned home from Louisiana. She and Brandee are neighbors, and the three of us have grown close since she lost her husband last year. We are Michaela’s godmothers, and we love this baby girl with all our hearts.

“You should stay for the picnic and parade. The fireworks might be too much for her, but I think I saw earplugs being given out at one of the tables,” I say.

“I don’t know. I should probably get her home for a bath and bed.”

“Are you sure?”

She looks around and shrugs.

“Hi, Langford,” she says, and I look over my shoulder to see the Neanderthal has returned.

“Hi, Anna, and hello, little lady. You just get more and more beautiful every time I see you,” he coos down at the baby.

Michaela’s eyes open at the sound of his voice, and she starts babbling at him in response.

“Is that right?”

More unintelligible baby talk.

“Go ahead. Get it all out. Tell Uncle Langford all about it,” he urges.

Michaela giggles, and then she sticks her tongue out and blows a bubble.

She likes him.

I have to admit, the sight of this mountain of a man speaking softly and sweetly to an eight-month-old baby is adorable.

Even the Devil was an angel at one time.

“Can we help you?” I ask him.

He clears his throat and stands to his full height. “I just wanted to apologize again for what I said about your dress earlier. It was below the belt, and my mother raised me better than that,” he says as his eyes glance over to where Sara-Beth is standing, watching us.

“She made you come over and say that, didn’t she?”

“Yep. But she’s right. A man shouldn’t talk to a woman that way. If I caught Tucker being a jackass, I’d make him apologize too.”

I smile at this thirty-nine-year-old brute, who still respects his mother enough to do as she tells him.

“Apology accepted.”

“Okay. You girls have a good evening. Especially you,” he says to Michaela.

“You too, Langford,” Anna says.

Two young boys run up to us at that moment.

“Hey, is that Mikey?” the taller one asks.

He leans over and kisses the top of her head.

“Back up, Tuck. Your hands are dirty,” Langford barks.

“Oh, right. Sorry, Anna.”

“That’s okay.”

“Come on, you two. Let’s go help your grandma set up.”

The boys fall in step with him, and they make their way back to the picnic tables.

“What was that about?” Anna asks.

“That was Langford Tuttle struggling with his conscience. Who knew he even had one?”

“Langford is a good man,” she says.

“That’s debatable,” I reply.

Her watery gaze follows them. “No. It’s not. They’re all good men.”

Michaela’s face turns red, and she begins to squirm in my arms as she grunts.

“Um, I think that’s my cue. The diaper bag is in my car,” Anna says as she reaches for her.

I give the baby up. “Okay, you guys get cleaned up, and I’ll have Daddy pull another chair up for you.”



After eating with the crowd, Brandee, Anna, and I make our way across the street to where Daddy set up a line of camp chairs on the sidewalk in front of town hall.

We settle in to wait for the parade to begin. Anna is between us, bouncing Michaela on her knee. The baby is clutching one of the flags in her tiny fist.

A group of women sitting across the street opposite us starts waving and calling to Anna. She waves back, and one of them stands and darts across the road to us.

“Hey, y’all.”

“Hi, Erin,” Anna says.

The girl bends and runs her hand over Michaela’s head. “Hey, baby boo.” Then, she asks Anna, “Who are your friends?”

“Oh, sorry. I thought you guys knew each other. This is my neighbor, Brandee, and this is Isley. Guys, this is Erin.”

“It’s nice to meet you two.”

“It’s a pleasure,” I return.

“So, what are you guys doing after the fireworks?” Erin asks.

“I’m heading in after the parade. This one is going to be ready for my boob and bed,” Anna answers.

“Oh, right. We were going to head to the brewery, but if you want, we could pick up a couple of bottles of wine and come to your place instead.”

“I don’t want you to have to change your plans,” Anna says.

“Girl, we don’t care where we perch our asses. As long as we are together, we can get tipsy anywhere. Besides, we all want baby cuddles.”

Anna smiles. “Okay. I can have one glass and then pump and dump.”

“Great! What about you two? White or red?” She looks from me to Brandee.

“White or red?” I ask.

“Yeah. Do you prefer white wine or red wine?”

“White,” Brandee answers.

Erin’s eyes come to me expectantly.

“Um, I like red myself,” I say.

“You got it. One white and one red. We’ll be there as soon as the fireworks are over.”

“See you then.”

“Don’t worry. We’re not crazy. Well, Maxi is a wee bit crazy, but you’ll get used to her. Crap, I’d better get back over there. I see headlights coming.”

She sprints back across the street to rejoin the others.

“Did we just make a new friend?” Brandee asks me.

“I think so.”

“Yes. I love new friends.”

“You’ll definitely love all of them. They’re the best,” Anna agrees.

I wonder who “all of them” includes.

Daddy quickly escorts Mom across from the fairgrounds, and they get seated just before the first Jeep appears. The Balsam Ridge Fourth of July parade is sponsored by the local Jeep club, and every other participant is a Jeep, decorated in patriotic displays of lights and ribbon.

Michaela is fascinated by the sight and claps and squeals along to the music that plays through the speakers.

Main Street is lined with citizens who cheer and applaud for each passing vehicle. Children stand with their hands in the air to catch the candy and trinkets the passengers toss out of their windows.

I forgot how much fun it is was to just sit outside with the rest of the town and celebrate.



Chapter four

Isley

I have no idea how I ended up here with all these women.

After the fireworks, Brandee and I said good night to my parents and hopped into her car. We stopped at her house and ran in to change into sweats and T-shirts before walking over to Anna's home.

Now, we are sitting here, in her living room, drinking wine with women we haven't seen since high school.

"How are the wedding plans coming?" Anna asks.

"Which wedding?" Erin asks."

"Either."

"We finally decided on a date and venue."

"Really? Where?" Anna asks.

"The ski lodge when it opens next year. We're going to have a winter wedding."

"That sounds nice," I say.

The girl's eyes come to me. "Thanks. I'm Ansley, by the way. I own the coffee shop at Market Square."

"I know who you are, and I know your place. My mother and I like to stop in," I tell her.

The Well-Bred Café and Bookstore is one of my favorite places in town. It's so intimate and cozy. After Mom had recovered, she and I would spend many afternoons there, huddled in front of the stone fireplace, with a book in each of our laps. She'd sip a ginger tea while I enjoyed a mug of the rich French press.

"The coffee is divine."

Ansley beams. "Thank you. We're adding an outdoor space this fall. My fiancé and I took a trip to France last spring, and I fell in love with the quaint Parisian cafés. I thought Balsam Ridge could use its own version, so Graham designed a patio for me. It'll have a few round wrought iron tables with black-and-white striped umbrellas with lights strung above. Fresh-cut flowers on each table. And two large stone fireplaces to keep everyone warm."

"That sounds fantastic. Have you talked to the other business owners in Market Square? I bet they'd be willing to expand to include outdoor space as well. You could collectively invest in the patio. Then, the dress shop could pull racks out for patio sales, the barber shop could have some benches for waiting clients, and the pet store could have a place for owners to sit with their pets, one with water dishes and treats for dogs," I say.

"Don't mind her. Her brain is always in town-improvement mode these days," Brandee says.

It's true. Since my decision to run for mayor, I see the valley through a different lens. Not only do I see the beauty, but I also see the possibilities. I have so many goals for this place.

"I love that idea," Ansley says.

"You can even have your sexy man play an acoustic set out there," Anna suggests.

“She’s engaged to Garrett Tuttle,” Erin tells me.

Garrett Tuttle is Balsam Ridge’s very own country superstar.

“Weren’t you two an item back in school?” I ask.

“We were. I guess you can say we took a detour on the way to our happy ever after.”

“A long ass detour,” Erin agrees.

“I see. Well, congratulations,” I say.

Erin points across the room. “That’s Taeli. She also took off after graduation. Moved to Chicago, married a doctor and had his kid then found out he was cheating and knocked up his assistant. She moved back to Tennessee after the shit hit the fan. Her mom, Leona, is dating Mayor Gentry, and she is now engaged to Graham Tuttle. What a rebound. The blonde beside her is Jena.”

“We remember all of you guys,” I note.

“We did all go to school together,” Brandee points out.

“Yeah, but we didn’t run in the same circles. I was a tomboy, Taeli was an athlete, Ansley was a nerd, Jena was a stoner, and you two were …” She pauses as she tries to come up with the right word. “Elitists.”

“I can’t argue with that. We were brats,” I agree.

“Who’s that?” Brandee asks, gesturing to a woman with long, dark hair.

“That’s Maxi. She moved to town from Maryland last year, and she’s Corbin Tuttle’s main squeeze.”

Corbin Tuttle?

“What happened to Susanna?” I ask.

Susanna was one of the girls I considered a friend in high school. She was on the cheer squad. We lost touch once I moved away.

“That twat? He finally shook her off. Thank God.” She leans in and whispers, “Maxi is so much better. She’s kind of

bitchy until she gets to know you, so don't let it put you off. She'll warm up to you."

She will?

"Enough about all of us. How's the campaign going, Isley?" Erin asks.

"It's going fine. Our first fundraiser event is next weekend, and I rented a small office space next to the fly-fishing shop in town to serve as my campaign headquarters."

"That's near us. Taeli, Jena, and I work for Tuttle and Sons Realty. Our office is beside the campground. You should come by for lunch sometime."

"I don't know," I say.

The truth is, there's zero chance I'll be visiting any of the properties owned by the Tuttle family, but it's better not to voice that out loud.

All their curious eyes come to me.

"What is the deal with your family and the Tuttles anyway? Why all the hate?" Taeli asks.

"Ever heard of the Hatfields and McCoys?" I ask.

"Sure."

"Do you have any idea why they hated each other?"

She wrinkles her nose. "No. Not really."

"Exactly. Everyone knows they were mortal enemies, but no one remembers why," I say.

"Didn't they all die?" Erin asks.

"Yep," I reply.

"Fabulous. So, no one knows when or why the Paysour-Tuttle feud started?" Maxi asks.

"It began about thirty years ago. To hear my father tell it, it all started when Hilton Tuttle was burning some brush on his property, and it got out of control and spread to our land. It burned through our fields, and Daddy lost an entire year of crops. Hilton claimed it was an accident, but no amount of

apologizing could fix it. They warred for ... well, I think they still do today. It trickled over to my brothers and the Tuttle boys. They fought like cats and dogs in high school. Over football positions, after-school jobs, and girls. Everything was a competition. The Paysours versus the Tutts. That's all I know about it," I explain.

"And where were you in all of it?" Taeli asks.

"I was the bratty little sister who supported the Paysour brothers. The head cheerleader who did everything she could to warn the other girls off those horrible bumpkin Tuttle boys. I was the mean girl," I admit.

"That's so cool," Erin says.

I give her a quizzical look.

"I love a good origin story," is her cryptic explanation.

Maxi brings over a wine bottle and sits beside me.

"She's a lot. I know. Don't fight it," Maxi whispers.

I pull my attention from the others and look at her. "Fight what?"

"Erin's pushy friendship. Resistance is futile. The more you fight it, the harder she pursues you. Best to just let her love you," she advises.

"Okay."

She tops my wineglass off. "This helps," she says.

"Isn't this fun? We should all sleep over," Erin suggests.

"I agreed to wine and a chick flick, but Corbin is swinging by to pick me and Ansley up after the game," Maxi informs her.

"Yeah, Graham and Caleb are at Langford's, watching the Atlanta Braves game too. They are going to stop and get me on their way home," Taeli adds.

"What about you two?" Erin asks Brandee and me directly.

"I live next door, and we are having a sleepover. You're welcome to join us. I have a spare bedroom with a king-size

bed. Isley can bunk with me,” Brandee offers.

What in the hell?

“Good call. That way, the baby won’t wake us up early in the morning,” Erin says.

“I have to open the café in the morning, so I need to go home this time as well,” Ansley tells her.

“I guess that leaves you and me, Jena.”

“I’ll call home and let the hubs and kiddo know I’ll be out all night,” Jena says, grabbing her phone and walking into the kitchen.

Erin looks over at me. “You like poker?”



“Why’d you leave Balsam Ridge?” Maxi asks.

We’ve been playing cards for the last hour. It’s been fun. Every time you win a hand, you get to ask a question.

“I don’t know. I was just trying to create a new life for myself,” I explain.

She nods her head as if she understands.

“What was wrong with your old life?” Anna asks.

“Nothing in particular. I was just restless, I guess.”

“Restless? You were eighteen. We were all restless at eighteen,” Jena says.

She’s got me there.

“The truth is, I didn’t like myself very much when I was younger. I didn’t have a lot of friends, and the ones I did have were superficial, all except for Brandee. I wanted to go somewhere no one knew me and re-create myself and become someone new,” I admit.

Erin throws her arm over my shoulders. “I think the person you were and the person you are now are pretty spectacular.”

I turn to her. “You do?”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, we may not have been friends back in the day, but you were an impressive human being. Straight A student, class president, head cheerleader and homecoming queen. Not too shabby, although the new you is a little nicer,” she says.

“That’s fair,” I agree with her.

Maxi passes us each a shot glass, filled with clear liquid. She raises hers in the air. “To being less of a snotty bitch,” she says.

We all repeat her toast and bring them in to clink glasses before tossing back the shots.

“That is one smooth whiskey,” I tell Maxi.

“It’s the best.”

I look around the table and realize that I haven’t enjoyed myself or laughed this much in ages. In the span of three hours, I’ve gotten to know these women. They’re so warm and open.

I envy their relationship.

Erin stands. “More wine?” she asks.

“No more for me. I’m already going to be useless tomorrow,” Ansley says.

“I think I’d better switch to water,” I agree.

“Lightweights,” Erin says as she opens another bottle of red.

“I’ll have another,” Brandee says, sliding her glass forward.

“That’s my girl.”

Maxi shakes her head. “You’re such a bad influence.”

“I know. It’s my best quality,” Erin sings.

Erin fills Brandee’s glass and takes her seat beside me.

“You know, I like you. If we weren’t marrying the Tuttlés, I might even vote for you,” she says.

“You’re not marrying a Tuttle. You’re already married,” Jena reminds her.

“I know, but one, two, three people in our tribe are marrying Tuttle, so that means we are all Team Tuttle,” she says as she points to Taeli, Ansley, and Maxi.

“I’m not marrying anyone,” Maxi says.

“Oh, please, it’s just a matter of time before Corbin puts a ring on your finger, and we all know it.”

“Even if he does, I’m allowed to vote for whoever the hell I want, and so are you,” Maxi states.

“Sure we are,” Erin says as she winks at me.

These girls are a riot.



Chapter five

Langford

“Can we order a pizza?” Tucker asks.

“Pizza? You scarfed down five hot dogs and a full plate of Grandma’s fried chicken today,” I say.

“That was forever ago,” he whines.

“It was a couple of hours ago.”

“I’m a growing boy, Dad. I need fuel to keep this fine-tuned machine running.”

“Where did you hear that?”

Weston grins.

I’m beginning to think his moving in was a bad idea. He lost his house to the wildfire last year and has been bunking in my downstairs guest room ever since.

“Every boy needs a cool uncle to teach him how to be a man.”

“All you’re teaching him is how to be a little shit.”

I'm hoping his snark will help him run the family business one day and not a prison gang.

"I'm with the little dude. I could go for a pepperoni and sausage pie," Morris chimes.

Tucker's old hound dog waddles in from the hallway and lets out a low bark before flopping down on the hardwood floor.

"You too, huh?"

My brothers and the boys came over to watch the baseball game together while all the women gathered at Anna's house.

Morris is the youngest of the Tuttle clan and the only one who still lives at home with our parents.

"Fine. Call it in." I relent.

Tucker and Caleb run off to the kitchen to use the landline.

"Just one," I call after them.

"One? I can eat one by myself," Morris gripes.

"Fine. They can order two, but you're paying for one of them," I tell him.

He grins and follows after the boys.

His ass ain't going to pay for anything.

I grab the remote and take a seat on the couch.

"I heard Isley joined the girls tonight," Graham tells us.

"Great, just what I need, the women fraternizing with the enemy," I grumble.

"I wouldn't mind fraternizing with her," Weston interjects.

I cut my eyes to him.

"What? She's sexy. Who knew all that hotness was hiding inside that teenage nightmare?"

"She has grown up well," Corbin agrees.

"You'd better not let Maxi hear you talking like that, or she'll rip your balls off," Weston says.

Corbin's hands instinctively cover his crotch. "No, she wouldn't. She'd agree with me."

"She would, wouldn't she? Damn, I need a woman like that," Weston muses.

"Just stay away from Isley. The last thing I need is some romantic complication between her and one of my brothers," I command.

"I make no promises."

Jackass.

The pizza arrives, and we all settle in to enjoy the Braves game. They played the Chicago White Sox earlier today, and I recorded it so we could watch it after the day's festivities.

"Bathroom break," Weston says as he hits pause.

I stand and stretch. "Anyone want another beer?" I ask.

"Nah, I'd better not. I've got to pick Taeli up after the game," Graham answers.

My eyes slide to Corbin.

"Yeah, I'm done too. I've got to get Maxi and Ansley."

"I'll have another," Morris calls.

"Fine, but you're staying here. You can bunk with Weston."

I grab two cold bottles from the fridge and return to the couch.

"What's your campaign strategy, Langford?" Corbin asks.

"Beat Isley," I say.

"And how do you plan to do that?" he asks.

I shrug.

Graham laughs.

"What?"

"Isley is a smart, driven, and capable candidate. You're going to have to do more than wing it in order to beat her."

“I’m open to suggestions.”

“You’re gonna need flyers, road signs, promotional ideas to hand out. And show your face at all the social events. Shake hands, kiss babies, and all that stuff,” Corbin says.

“Yeah, and you’ll need to make speeches that actually say something, not just stand at a podium and grunt at the audience.”

“Fuckers,” I grumble.

Graham points at me. “See, that’s what I’m talking about. You can’t call your supporters fuckers. Do you know what you need? A campaign manager.”

They’re correct. If I’m going to do this right, I’m going to need some help.

“Got any suggestions?” I ask.

“Mom and Leona,” Weston proposes as he rejoins us.

“Right.”

“I’m serious. They know everyone in town. Leona has the outgoing mayor’s ear, and they both have plenty of time on their hands to schmooze the masses on your behalf.”

“Good point,” Graham says.

“Plus, imagine how happy they’d be to help you beat a Paysour,” Weston adds.

It’s not the worst idea he’s ever had.



Tucker asks if Caleb can stay, so once Graham and Corbin take off, I leave the boys playing the Xbox down in the rec room with the goober twins to call Mom.

“Langford,” she greets.

“Hey, Mom. Sorry to call so late,” I say.

“It’s fine. Your father just made it home a little while ago. He was helping Ralph and Buddy with the parade and firework cleanup. What can I do for you?”

Ralph is Mayor Gentry's first name, and Buddy Klein is the head of the town's parks and recreation department.

"I think I'm going to need some help with my campaign. The guys pointed out tonight that schmoozing and public speaking aren't exactly my forte, and I have to agree with them."

"True."

"Do you think you and Leona could lead my team?"

There is a pause on the line.

"Mom?"

"We'd love to," she replies.

"Don't you need to check with Leona first?" I ask.

"No. I'm sure she'll be thrilled to help. We've already talked to Ed Simmons who owns the slingshot rental place on the edge of town about renting that old billboard on his property. We're gonna need to get you in at Priscilla's photography studio for new headshots. Do you have any color preferences for your campaign logo?"

Color preferences?

"Um ..."

"Never mind. We'll match the wording to the color of your suit once we decide which one you're going to wear in the new photos. Can you make time this week?" she asks.

"I guess."

"Perfect. I'll call to make the appointment and let you know when to be there. We can use the conference room at the realty office as your home base, and I'll have the girls make campaign calls to all the registered voters during their slow times at the office. I'm sure Leona can get her hands on a list. We need to set up an account for donations. Can you meet me at the bank tomorrow morning? You can swing by and pick me up here. Tucker can spend the day with your father while we get our ducks in a row."

She has obviously been thinking about this.

“Mom,” I interrupt her.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.” I can hear her smile over the line.

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“Good night.”

That was easier than I’d thought. Isley had better get ready because I’m about to unleash my secret weapon, and the dynamic duo shouldn’t be underestimated.



Chapter SIX

Langford

I wake up and shower before following my nose to the kitchen.

Weston is at the stove, and Tucker, Caleb, and Graham are all seated at the island.

“Hey, big brother. You hungry?” Weston says over his shoulder.

“Yep.”

I pour myself a cup of coffee and plop down on the empty stool next to Graham.

“You’re here awful early.”

“I was promised breakfast,” Graham says.

Weston slides a plate in front of me.

“What the fuck is this?” I ask.

“It’s an egg white omelet,” Weston answers.

“Where’re the real eggs?”

“Those are real eggs, asshole. Try it.”

I pick up a fork and cut into the thing. It’s filled with mushrooms and spinach.

“Where’s the cheese and bacon?”

He huffs and turns from the stove to glare at me.

“There wasn’t any, so I compromised. This is the best you’re getting.”

I stand and walk over to the cabinet to retrieve a bowl and then grab the box of fruity cereal from in front of Tucker.

Weston tosses a hand towel on the counter and watches as I open the fridge and return to the island with the carton of milk.

He shakes his head. “I slave over this stove for you, and the thanks I get is you shoving that sugary, chemical-laden crap down your throat.”

I take the spoon and scoop a huge heap of cereal into my mouth.

He tosses his hands in the air.

“Far be it from me to try and help you. That dad bod of yours is getting out of control, dude.”

I pick a kernel of cereal from the bowl and throw it at him. Pinging him on the back of the head.

“Hey,” he yells.

“I don’t have a dad bod.”

“Keep telling yourself that. Just remember that being described as voluptuous isn’t exactly a compliment for a man.”

Graham spits coffee across the table, and the boys snicker.

“Maybe I’d be able to get down in the basement and use my weight room if I didn’t have a jackass living down there. Besides, you need to stop worrying about my body and concentrate on that receding hairline of yours,” I grumble.

“There is nothing wrong with my hairline, bro. You wish you had a beautiful mane like me, and don’t use me staying here as an excuse for your laziness,” he says as he picks my plate up.

“Leave it. I’ll eat his,” Graham says.

“At least someone appreciates my cooking around here.”

Weston sets the plate down beside Graham’s other one.

“I just figure this healthy crap isn’t gonna stick to my ribs long, so I’d better double up.”

“Dad, can I go to the shop with Uncle Graham and Caleb today?” Tucker asks.

“Your granddad is expecting you. I’m supposed to drop you off at his house when I pick Mom up this morning.”

“Can I go to Granddad’s too? Please,” Caleb asks Graham.

“Call and ask him if it’s okay,” Graham instructs, as if Pop would say no.

“I’ll take him with me. Sorry you drove all the way out here for nothing,” I say.

“Not for nothing. He got a gourmet breakfast,” Weston says.

I roll my eyes as I get up to fetch my boots.

“You don’t think my hairline has changed, do you?” I hear Weston ask Graham as I turn the corner.



The boys pile into my truck, and I drive us out to my parents’ house.

It’s a beautiful morning in the valley. The mountaintops are shrouded by a subtle blue haze that glistens as the sun rises on the horizon.

Pop and the boys are going fishing. I’m a little jealous. It’s the perfect day to sit on the banks of the Coyote River with a rod and reel, but duty calls.

I miss the carefree days of youth sometimes.

Mom is waiting on the porch when we pull into the drive. She hugs the boys as they head inside to Pop and then joins me.

“Isn’t this exciting?” she says.

I look over at her. Her window is rolled down, and her silver hair is blowing in the breeze. A serene smile graces her face.

I have a million other things I need to be tending to right now. Logging trucks are heading to the resort to remove more trees to clear space for the horse pastures, and I need to pay Jeffries Lumber Mill in Knoxville a visit. They’ve been sourcing the trees from the property and cutting the lumber we need for the building material. It’s a pain in the ass, having to haul it that far, but the only wood mill in town is Paysour, and that ain’t happening. But sitting here, spending time with my mother and seeing how happy it makes her, there’s nowhere else I want to be today. All that other shit will be there to deal with tomorrow.

Leona is sitting in her car in the parking lot when we make it to the bank.

I spend the next hour signing contracts and having the bank representative walk us through using a cash app to accept donations for the campaign fund. It takes Mom and Leona a while to catch on, but once they get it, they are excited to have flyers printed with my new QR code.

A trip to the office supply store and crafts store later, and I have a truck bed full of supplies and a growling stomach.

I treat the two of them to lunch at Gus’s Diner.

“Taeli said the girls had a good time together last night,” Leona tells Mom.

“Yes, Maxi told me the same thing when she called this morning,” Mom says.

“It seems that Isley and her friend fit right in with the lot of them.”

“Yes, Maxi liked them both very much,” Mom agrees.

“Did they happen to mention if Anna needs anything?” I ask, changing the subject.

When Mike passed away, Anna considered moving back to Kansas with the baby to be closer to their families, but once Michaela was born, she decided to stay here in Balsam Ridge. She said she felt Mike’s presence here, and she wanted to honor their desire to raise their child here in Tennessee.

The entire community has since made it their mission to look after the two of them for Mike, our fallen hero.

“Taeli says, other than them being a bit tired, the two of them are doing fine,” Leona assures me.

“Maybe we should drop in and take her lunch a couple of times a week. While we’re there, we can play with the baby for a bit so she can get a nap in or run some errands.”

“Yes. And when she’s ready, we can have sleepover parties with the baby so she can go out with the girls.”

The waitress comes over and takes our order, and I sit and have the meatloaf special with my best girls.

As we are leaving the diner, we pass Isley and her parents. She has her mother by the elbow, guiding her up the walkway, while her father follows behind.

“Good afternoon, Evelyn,” Mom says.

Isley’s mother looks surprised by the greeting.

“Same to you,” she replies.

“Asa,” Mom greets.

Mr. Paysour brings his eyes to us, and he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t look at us with any menace. It’s more like confusion, or maybe it’s curiosity.

Isley turns to him. “Daddy, Mrs. Tuttle said hello to you.”

That seems to snap him out of it, and he nods his head.

“Hello to you, Sara-Beth.”

Isley takes her free hand and clasps his. Then, her eyes cut back to us and up to me before she walks them past us and into Gus's.

“Well, that was uncomfortable,” Leona mumbles.

Mom turns and watches as the door closes behind them. “It’s silly, is what it is.”



Chapter seven

Isley

Four weeks have passed in a blur. Between fundraisers and meet and greets, Brandee has kept me busy.

The valley has been bustling with all the late summer arrivals trying to get in one last family vacation before the children head back to school.

It's the beginning of August, and the evenings are already beginning to grow cooler. The slight chill in the air is evidence that fall is just around the corner.

Soon, the trees will begin to show off their transformation in an impressive array of colors, the apple trees will start to drop their fruit, and my favorite time of the year will begin.

Nothing beats autumn in the Smoky Mountains.

When I arrive at my office, Brandee is seated at her desk with her phone propped on her shoulder, and she is typing away at her laptop.

“Yes, Mr. Wallace, that’s very generous. Thank you for your support.”

There is a pause.

“She looks forward to seeing you at the debate as well. Good-bye.”

She clicks off the call and looks up from the screen.

“That’s another sizable donation. This time from the Balsam Ridge Bow Hunting Club,” she informs me.

I’ve found strong allies with the various hunting clubs in the valley. The majority of their memberships are decidedly against cutting into any of the forests for development.

“That’s wonderful. When do the television spots begin airing?” I ask.

“Tonight, after the evening news.”

“And did you have a chance to go over my speech for the ladies’ quilting bee meeting this weekend?”

My mother is a member of the Balsam Ridge Quilters Guild. The club is fifty-two members strong with ages ranging from the early twenties up into the nineties. Daddy thought it would be a good idea for me to spend time with the ladies since they would have their husbands’ ears, and swaying them into my favor could also mean garnering the votes of their spouses.

“Yes, it’s good. I only made a couple of slight changes. It’s on your desk.”

“Thank you,” I say as I make my way past her and to the desk that sits opposite hers.

“The girls want us to join them for drinks at Well-Bred tonight. Ansley has a guitarist from Knoxville coming in, and they are doing a wine special for ladies’ night out.”

Since the Fourth of July, the girls have been coming around and inviting us to lunch and other outings. Between helping Mom at the house and the social demands of the mayoral race, I haven’t had much time to spare for socializing.

“I’ll have to pass. I’m taking food home to Mom and Daddy, and then I’ll probably crash early,” I say.

She sticks her bottom lip out.

“Put that lip away. Just because I don’t go doesn’t mean you can’t.”

“I know, but I want you to come. You need to get out and have a little fun. Your entire life can’t be your parents and work,” she whines.

“Maybe next time.”

“That’s what you said when they invited us to the concert at the fairgrounds last week. They’re going to start thinking you don’t like them.”

“I like them fine,” I state.

“Then, come tonight. You don’t have to stay long.”

I bring my eyes to her pleading ones.

“I’ll try,” I say.

She smiles and turns back to her laptop.



I call in an order of dinner plates to Gus’s Diner before packing it in for the day.

When I make it home, I find my mother at the kitchen table, elbow deep in paperwork.

“What’s all this?” I ask.

“They’re the results from the doctor’s office in Nashville,” she says.

I set the bags on the counter.

“What do they say?” I ask.

She sighs. “I can’t make heads or tails of it all.”

I walk over and look over her shoulder at the diagram she is studying.

The results are what I feared.

“It’s not good, is it?” she asks.

I place a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“It’s not horrible, but we were hoping for better.”

She reaches up and covers my hand with hers.

“Don’t worry, Mom. We’ll get through this together. I promise that everything is going to be okay.” The lie slides off my tongue so easily.

Nothing about this is going to be okay. It’s only going to get worse. Much worse.

“Have you told him?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“No. He’s having such a good night. The Braves are winning. I don’t want to ruin that. We’ll show him tomorrow.”

My heart aches for her. The last couple of years have been hard. We were anticipating calm waters for a while, but here we are, our boat being tossed around in a raging storm once again.

“Okay. Whatever you think is best. I brought dinner,” I say.

I step back as she scoots her chair out.

“I’ll take your father his plate,” she says.

I help her unpack the bags and transfer their dinners to plates from the cupboard. I watch as she steels herself, grabs both their dinners, plants a smile on her face, and walks to the living room, where Daddy sits in his recliner in front of the big screen television.

He grabs the bar on the side, brings the seat back up, and takes the plate from Mom. I come in behind her with the collapsible TV trays and stand one up in front of him.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he says as he sets his plate down.

Mom curls up on the couch with her own meal, and I leave them to eat by myself in the kitchen.

The back doorbell chimes, and I call in to let them know that I'll answer it.

No sooner do I get the door open than Erin, Jena, Brandee, and Maxi file in.

"Grab your purse," Erin says.

"Why?" I ask.

"You're going out tonight with your NBFFs," she states.

"My what?"

"Your new best friends forever. Spoiler alert: it's us," she says as she swirls her finger in the air.

I stand there, speechless.

"You might want to grab a coat. It's chilly out," Brandee informs.

"I think I'm going to stay in tonight," I tell them.

"Nope. You're coming," Erin insists.

She looks around the corner and into the living room.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Paysour. We're kidnapping Isley," she bellows.

Daddy looks over his shoulder and smiles, and Mom waves.

"Okay, we'll see you later, sweetie," Mom calls to me.

"Hurry, or we'll lose our seats," Erin says, rushing me.

I huff.

"Why do you guys want to be friends with me? I was such a bitch to you all in high school," I remind them.

Erin nods. "You were."

"So, why would you want to be my friend?" I ask.

"I didn't even know you," Maxi says.

Jena turns to her. “I feel like you two would have liked each other.”

“Nah, I liked bitches, but not snotty bitches,” Maxi states.

Jena considers that for a moment. Then, she turns to me. “That’s true. There are definitely different degrees of bitchiness. You were type A, and she was probably type B.”

Brandee wrinkles her nose. “What’s the difference?”

“Type A is the *I’m perfect, so everyone should bow down to me, and if you don’t, I’ll make your life miserable, you peasant* kinda bitch. And type B is the *I don’t give a fuck about anything, and I’ll cut you if you look at me wrong* kinda bitch.”

“Oh,” Brandee says, as if that makes perfect sense.

Erin waves them off. “Like we’d hold high school against you. We all grew up.”

“Yeah, I was easy in high school, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna sleep with anyone’s man now,” Jena says.

“You weren’t easy,” Erin tells her.

“Please, I slept with your boyfriend and his brother,” Jena quips.

Erin gasps.

“Not at the same time. I was easy, not a slut. There’s a difference.”

“But—” I start, but Maxi interrupts.

“I told you, don’t fight it. They’ll pull you in anyway. It’s less painful if you just slide in there without resistance.”

“That’s right. Listen to her. Ansley and Taeli are holding our spot. Chop-chop,” Erin demands.

Giving in, I send a scathing glance at Brandee, and then I grab a light jacket from the hook by the door and follow them out.



Chapter eight

Langford

“Hey, bro, over here!”

I survey the dining room of Barbecue and Brews, looking for Weston until I locate the table where my brothers are seated.

Walking past the hostess stand, I grab a menu from the podium and make my way to join them.

“I ordered the loaded tots appetizer,” Morris says as I take the chair beside him.

I raise my hand to flag down the waitress.

“What can I get you, Langford?” she asks as she passes with a tray full of food.

“Whatever IPA you have on tap,” I order.

She nods and disappears.

“How are things going up on the mountain?” Graham asks.

“Steady. I’m hoping to get the roof on the stables before this year’s snowfall,” I tell him.

He nods. “I can have my crews up there as soon as you tell me the clearing is finished.”

“I wish you’d get the place open already. I need a better-paying job,” Morris says.

His college graduation is next spring. He’s spent the last year slinging burgers at a joint close to the campus.

“You need to get certified if you want to work for me,” I tell him.

“I know. I’m already enrolled in the eight-week Level I and Level II Instructor Prep Course at Snow Trade Trainers in Cooper Peaks, Colorado, that starts January 16.”

Weston whistles. “Who’s paying for that?”

“Mom and Pop, but I’m covering the airfare. I also found three other guys who are taking the classes, and we’re going to share an apartment.”

“Spoiled rotten,” Weston mutters.

Morris grins. “It’s good to be the baby.”

“The twenty-eight-year-old baby,” Corbin points out.

“You’re all just jealous. When I’m forty-nine, I’ll still be Mom’s baby boy.”

“And a pain in our old asses,” Weston adds.

“Forever,” Morris agrees.

We order our food and another round of beers when Graham’s phone dings. He fishes it from his jeans and looks at the screen.

“The girls want us to join them at Ansley’s café,” he says.

“What’s going on over there?” I ask.

“Ladies’ night. It’s something new Ansley’s trying. She has live music and discount wine with cheese and meat boards.”

“Why the fuck would we want to go to some froufrou ladies’ night?” I ask.

He shrugs. “She said it’s winding down. They have a shit-ton of open wine left.”

“I don’t drink wine,” I say.

“Are there any women still there?” Weston asks.

Graham taps on the screen. “She says there are about fifteen left.”

Weston’s eyes scan the bar area of the place. “Looks like the pool’s run dry here. I say we go fishing in another pond.”

The last thing I want to do is go trampling all over town so Weston can find female company for the night, but the boys had several pitchers of beer before I arrived, and driving them is the responsible big-brother thing to do.

We pay our tab, and the five of us pile up in my truck.



The parking lot of Market Square is packed. The mini-golf course across the road is hopping, and there is a line stretching down the sidewalk, leading to the ice cream stand.

I find a vacant spot three shops down from the café and back in.

When we walk inside, the guitarist is onstage, packing up his equipment. A few ladies are seated at the tables scattered across the room, and Taeli, Ansley, Maxi, Erin, Jena, Anna, Brandee, and Isley fucking Paysour are seated on the couches in front of the stone fireplace.

When did they all become so chummy?

Morris, Graham, and Corbin start gathering empty chairs from the tables and dragging them over so we can join the girls. Weston stops at one of the other small groups of females.

I pull a chair between Erin and Anna.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Erin says as I sit my ass down.

Taeli stands from her perch on the couch and settles in Graham's lap.

"You guys wanna glass of wine? We have to finish all these open bottles," Ansley offers.

"I'll take a glass," Morris accepts.

"Me too," Weston calls from across the room.

"Langford?" she asks as she pours wine for the others into paper coffee cups.

I shake my head and point to Weston and Morris. "None for me. I have to get those two assholes home."

"Where's the baby tonight?" I ask Anna.

"Your mother and Leona are babysitting. They're at my house now. I've texted them about a hundred times since I left. It's weird, being out without her."

"I remember those days," I muse.

She looks down at her phone. "Maybe I should call it a night."

"If you want to, but I promise, Michaela is in good hands with those two. They've raised eight babies between them."

She sighs. "I know you're right."

"If you want to go now, I'd be happy to give you a ride."

She shakes her head. "I'll stay a bit longer."

"Good."

I look up to see Isley watching us.

"Hey," I greet.

"Hi."

"Look at you two being civil," Jena bellows.

"What do you expect us to do, duel right here and shoot up Ansley's café?" Isley asks.

I laugh.

"You're such a snarky bitch. I like it!" Erin cries.

Isley looks at her like she's crazy and then smiles.

"Where's Garrett this week?" Morris asks.

"San Antonio," Ansley replies, "but he'll be back in town in two weeks to shoot the television thingy for Langford."

"Television thingy?" Isley asks, her eyes coming to me.

"Yeah, Sara-Beth talked him into stopping in town to record a promo for the campaign before the last four East Coast shows of his summer tour. He can't stay but a couple of days, but at least I'll get to see him, and he'll get to see the progress on the house."

I sold my famous brother acreage on the back side of my property to build a private estate for himself and Ansley. She has been overseeing the build while he finishes his latest album and is on an international concert tour. Hopefully, the house will be ready for them to move in before the wedding.

"Two weeks. Just in time for the debate. Smart," Isley quips.

"I'm just making use of all the arrows in my quiver."

"I'd do the same," she muses.

Weston joins us and plops down into the space Taeli vacated.

"What'd I miss?" he asks.

"Ansley just told us Garrett's gonna be home for a visit in a couple of weeks to check on the house," Morris says, filling him in.

"Awesome. I want to have him take some photos out at the hemp farm, using the new salve I'm about to launch."

"So, you're both exploiting your brother?" Isley accuses.

"Hell yeah. A fire took out my house. I need all the help I can get."

A whimper comes from beside me.

Weston's eyes come to Anna, and they instantly fill with regret.

“I’m sorry, Anna. I wasn’t thinking,” he says.

“Thinking is not exactly his strong suit,” I mutter, then change the subject. “Speaking of, when is your house going to be ready?” I ask Weston.

“Next spring. If the weather cooperates this winter.”

“Great.”

“Don’t act like you don’t enjoy having me around,” he says.

“I don’t.”

“Well, Tucker does. Someone has to teach that nephew of mine how to be a man.”

We stay until all the other patrons leave, and the girls help Ansley tidy up.

Ted, Erin’s husband, shows up to escort her and Jena home safely.

Graham and Corbin wrangle their women.

“We’ll swing by and get the boys from Pop. Tuck can stay with us tonight,” Graham offers.

“Thanks, brother.”

I look at the remainder and start mentally arranging them in my truck. It’s a king cab, and it’ll be a tight fit, but I can haul them all home.

“Weston, call Barbecue and Brews and tell them your truck is staying parked for the night. I’ll swing you by to pick it up in the morning when I get Tuck.”

He gives me a salute and pulls his phone from his pocket.

“The rest of you are coming with us. I’ll get you home.”

“I live beside Anna. Isley can stay with me. That way, you only have to make one stop,” Brandee says.

I turn to Isley. “Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, I’ll text Mom and tell her.”

I fetch the truck and pull up to the door. Morris, Brandee, and Isley hop into the backseat, and Anna squeezes in between me and Weston in the front.

The girls are tipsy, giggly, and singing to the radio the entire ride. At least, they attempt to. It's more like singing the chorus of the songs and either mumbling or singing the wrong words to the verses.

Weston pulls his phone out and records their performance.

"Give me that," Brandee demands, and then she leans up and snatches the phone from his hand.

"Hey, woman, easy."

She clicks a few buttons and gives it back to him.

"What'd you do?"

"I texted it to myself and then deleted it."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Because I don't trust you. You'd broadcast it to all your townie friends and embarrass Isley," Brandee accuses.

Weston frowns. "I wouldn't do that."

"Why should I believe you?" she asks.

I chuckle.

"What?" she snaps.

"I just find it funny that you think West is up to some kind of political espionage."

"Yeah, what he said," Weston gripes.

"I trust none of you. All's fair in love and war," Brandee says.

Weston looks at me, and his forehead wrinkles. "I'm confused. I thought you guys were just running for mayor in our little town, not starting World War III."

Brandee leans up and points at West. "Oh, it's war, buddy. And you guys are going down."

Isley giggles, and our eyes lock in the rearview mirror.

“You’re feisty. I like you,” Weston tells Brandee.

We pull up to Anna’s house. Mom and Leona are on the front porch swing.

Everyone stumbles out.

“How did she do?” Anna asks as Weston helps her down.

“Wonderful. She woke up about an hour ago for a bottle, and she went right back to sleep. You still have a little over ten ounces of milk,” Mom informs.

“Oh good. I’ll be able to pump and dump now.”

“Pump and dump?” Weston says.

“Yeah, I had too much wine. I don’t want her drinking the polluted milk. And my boobs are about two hours past needing a squeeze.”

Weston’s eyes go wide and then fall to her chest. Then, he trips and ends up landing on his ass.

“You can’t even say the word *boobs* in front of grown-ass men,” Brandee says as she tries to help him to his feet.

Anna turns to wave. “Thanks for the ride, Langford.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Weston gets back in the truck, and we idle and wait until the girls are all inside their homes and Mom and Leona have pulled out onto the road toward home.

Then, we make our way back to my place.



Chapter nine

Isley

Brandee and I wake up early and head to my parents' house so I can change before we head to the office for a few hours.

"Ugh, I have such a headache," Brandee says as we step inside the back door.

"I do too. Hopefully, a greasy breakfast and caffeine will help." I toss my jacket on the hook and kick off my shoes.

The kitchen is dark. The parentals must still be asleep.

I glance over at the microwave to see the time, and it's not illuminated.

Walking deeper into the room, I flip the switch to turn the light above the sink on.

Nothing.

I click it up and down a couple more times.

"What's up?" Brandee asks.

"The electricity is out," I say.

“Strange. The streetlight out front is on.”

I fish a flashlight out of the junk drawer in the china hutch.

“Wait here,” I tell her as I turn it on and make my way to my parents’ bedroom.

I tap on the door as I push it open slightly.

“Mom, Daddy?” I whisper, rousing Mom.

She sits up abruptly. “Isley?”

She reaches to pull the chain on her bedside lamp. Confused, she yanks it harder.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. I just wanted to let you know that the power is out,” I inform her.

Daddy stirs.

“Asa,” she calls softly.

His eyes blink open. “What is it?” he asks, groggy.

“We don’t have any power.”

“Must be the weather,” he says before rolling over and closing his eyes.

I glance at the large picture window that looks over the backyard.

It’s a misty early mountain morning, but there isn’t a cloud in the sky.

“I’m sure it’ll be back on soon,” Mom says.

“Do you have the number for Valley Electric? I’ll call and report the outage,” I offer.

“Check the Rolodex in your father’s office,” she suggests.

“Okay, go back to sleep.”

I close their door and walk back down the hallway to Brandee.

“I’m going to go downstairs to Daddy’s office to get a number from his Rolodex. I’ll be right back,” I call.

“A Rolodex? Who uses those anymore?” she asks.

“People over the age of sixty—that’s who.”

I walk to the other side of the house and open the door that leads down to my father’s office. I haven’t been down here in years. Before he retired from Paysour Lumber, he spent most daylight hours at the business and then several hours in the evening after dinner in his home office.

Now, he tools around down here a few afternoons a week, and the rest of the time, he is upstairs with my mother.

I descend the steps carefully and let the light of the flashlight guide me to the office door. I open it and gasp, shocked by what I find inside.

A horrendous odor assaults my nose.

The office is a mess. There are boxes upon boxes stacked in piles in front of his large mahogany desk. Papers are scattered across the surface and spilling onto the floor. The small trash can, tucked by the credenza behind the desk, is overflowing with garbage. Several plates with half-eaten sandwiches and dirty coffee cups are sitting on the table perched in front of the brown leather sofa to the left.

Oh, Daddy.

A sick feeling rises in my stomach as I pull the collar of my blouse over my nose and walk inside.

I find the Rolodex, set the flashlight down so I can see what I’m doing, and begin to shuffle the cards, looking for the one for the electric company.

That’s when I see the stack of unopened envelopes. I pick them up and thumb through them. Each one has a bright red stamp that reads *Final Notice*. They’re from several companies, including Valley Electric.

Shit.

I grab the stack and tuck them under my arm. I abandon the Rolodex and make my way to the door. I’ll have to deal with the rotting food and trash later.

When I emerge, Brandee is standing in the archway that leads back to the kitchen.

“What did they say?” she asks.

“It’ll be back on shortly.”

“Good. We can grab food and coffee in town.”

“Sure. Just give me a few minutes. I’ll change, and then I’m going to run out and crank the generator so they have lights and hot water when they get up. I’ll meet you at the car.”

I run up to my room and grab a satchel from the closet and stuff the envelopes in it. Then, I change into a pair of leggings and a long tunic.

Once the generator is humming, I set up the coffeemaker for them so they’ll have hot coffee when they rise, and I join Brandee in the car.

“Is everything okay? You look upset,” she asks.

No, everything is not okay.

“Fine, but I still have that headache.”

“To Gus’s for greasy diner food it is.”



“I’m going to walk down to the bank. I’ll be back shortly,” I tell Brandee when we pull up to the office.

“Sure thing. Bring us back some pastries,” she calls after me.

I retrieve the hair tie from my crossbody satchel and pull my hair over my right shoulder and braid it, securing the end with the tie.

The sun is warm on my face as I enjoy a leisurely stroll down Main Street. I greet the shop owners who are sweeping the walkways and washing down windows in preparation of opening for the day. The smell of freshly baked bread lingers on the breeze.

Children’s laughter fills the air as I pass by a creekside park, and I stop to give the cutest gray schnauzer, being walked by its dad, a scratch behind the ear.

Shelley Plink, a teller at the bank, greets me as I walk inside, “Hi, Isley. What can we help you with today?”

“Good morning, Shelley.” I walk up to the counter and hand her my checkbook.

When Mom was diagnosed, as a precaution, both of my parents signed a medical power of attorney over to me and had my name added to all their accounts. That way, I could speak freely with Mom’s doctors and insurance providers when necessary.

“I’d like to check the balance and recent activity on this account, please,” I say.

She opens the book and types the account information into the computer at her side.

She takes a Post-it Note and writes down the amount and slides it to me.

Over five hundred thousand dollars.

That’s a relief.

“And when was the last transaction?”

“It was almost three months ago. A check to the Heirloom Market was processed on May 16.”

Three months ago. They haven’t used their account in three months.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Shelley asks.

“No, that will be all. Thank you.”

She hands the checkbook back to me, and I place it in my bag.

My mind is in a whirl as I make my way out the door to the front steps of the bank.

How have they been paying for things? I’ve been picking up groceries since I’m living with them rent-free. I know Mom used a credit card to pay for supplies at the quilting bee. Has she paid her credit card bill?

It doesn’t make any sense.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't even notice that I've made it into the parking lot until I crash headfirst into something rock hard.

"Whoa there."

I shake my head and look up to see Langford Tuttle's concerned face.

His strong arms are around my waist, holding me steady, and I'm enveloped by the scent of his cologne.

No, it's not cologne. Soap maybe?

I lean forward and take a long, deep inhale.

Irish Spring and burned wood?

Whatever it is, he smells good. Cozy, like a warm blanket I want to wrap myself up in.

What the hell am I saying?

Snap out of it, Isley.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Are you okay?"

He chuckles as he releases his hold on me. "Other than being assaulted by you when I got out of the truck, I'm good."

"I'm sorry," I say and step to the side to go around him.

He reaches for my wrist and stops me. "Seriously, are you all right? You're white as a ghost."

"I have a hangover."

I have no idea why I blurted that out.

He looks from me to the front of the bank and back again.

"You sure that's all it is?"

Pulling myself together, I narrow my eyes at him. "Of course I'm sure. Can't a girl take a walk to clear her head after a night of drinking with her girlfriends without getting the third degree?"

He raises his hands in the air, and the hem of his T-shirt slips up to expose a toned stomach. A hint of ink crawling down his left side peeks out from underneath.

“You can indeed. Have a good one,” he says before lowering his arms and walking past me and up the steps.

I scold myself for being so defensive, but the last person I want to share my concerns with is Langford Tuttle.

I walk over to Well-Bred to grab a to-go box of pastries and then make my way back to the office so I can deal with the stack of past-due notices in my satchel.



Chapter ten

Isley

I spend the afternoon opening each piece of mail. Calculating the late fees and noting the days left before service is terminated or the accounts are turned over to collections.

By my estimate, my father hasn't paid any of the utilities, Mom's last round of medical charges from the oncologist, or either of their credit card bills since May.

He has the money, and he has been getting the statements, but obviously, something isn't right.

I should have been paying closer attention.

The state of his office and the news Mom received yesterday are proof that the two of them need me to take over some of the responsibilities at home.

“Are you listening?”

Brandee's question draws me from my thoughts.

“What?”

“I didn’t think so. What are you doing?” she asks.

“Just taking care of a few things.”

“You need to get your head in the game. The debate is less than a month away. Langford already has that huge-ass billboard, and now, Garrett is doing a television spot in support of him. I haven’t seen any poll results lately, but you were barely ahead the last I checked. You’re going to have to crush him in this debate.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I think I’m still tired and suffering from a headache. I’m having trouble focusing.”

She sighs. “You really are a lightweight. I’m going to go grab us a sandwich and stop in the pharmacy to get you something for your head. If that doesn’t work, then we’ll call it an early day so you can go home and sleep it off.”

She leaves to get us lunch, and I take the opportunity to call the number on each letter, explain the situation, and pay the amount due.

I’m able to convince four of the creditors to forgive the late fees, and Valley Electric agrees to have someone out before five today to restore power.

By the time Brandee returns, I have a solid game plan written down, and the burden in my chest has eased.

We work the rest of the afternoon and rehearse possible debate questions and my answers.

“Did you file my Residency Affidavit with the city clerk’s office?” I ask.

“Yes, there’s an electronic copy in Google Drive. Along with the Statement of Candidate, Loyalty Oath, and Oath of Candidate. The only thing we have left to file with the clerk’s office is the Temporary Sign Permit,” she informs.

“What date can we start posting the signs?” I ask.

“Ninety days before Election Day, so we should be able to start next week. I have hired a couple of teenagers with their own trucks to help with that. They have to all be cleared fourteen days after the election.”

“And the printer?”

“I’ve already approved the proofs, and they should deliver them to us by Friday.”

“Awesome. Good job,” I praise.

“Thanks.” She beams.

I have no idea how I’d manage this campaign without her.



Brandee drops me off at home, and I take a moment to prepare myself for the conversation I need to have with my mother.

We haven’t always been the best at communicating with one another.

For all the pain and worry, her illness turned out to be a blessing. At least in the way that it altered our relationship.

When I was growing up, we weren’t close. I always felt like she considered me more of a project than a daughter.

Evelyn Paysour is a rare breed. She was raised in Asheville, North Carolina. My grandparents were wealthy socialites who lived in an exclusive neighborhood near the Biltmore Estate. Mom insists her mother was a distant cousin to the legendary Cornelia Vanderbilt, for whom the grand home was built. A claim that has never been confirmed.

She and my father met while attending college in Brevard, North Carolina. He was studying business while Mom was pursuing a fine arts degree.

Once they married, he moved them back to his hometown, Balsam Ridge, where my grandfather had started Paysour Lumber.

Try as she might, Mom never fit in with the rustic hamlet on the outskirts of the Tennessee mountains. It was a far cry from the highbrow lifestyle she was used to back in North Carolina.

Making friends wasn’t easy. Most of the young wives and mothers in town had grown up together. Mom, with her fancy

attire and haughty attitude, didn't exactly invite inclusion. So, she made her little family, and we were her entire world.

She homeschooled us until my brothers were old enough to complain and my father forced her to allow us to attend public school.

From the time I was old enough to walk, she had me in everything from dance to piano lessons. I was a ballroom prodigy and knew more about classical music and literature than any other child in the valley.

She lived vicariously through me. Which was miserable for my teenage self. I wanted to go to drive-in movies and bonfires with my friends, and she wanted me in cheer competitions and beauty pageants.

It was a constant battle of wills in our home.

Going away to college was my chance to break free. To shed the expectations and escape the grooming of my mother and find out who Isley was meant to be. And I liked myself for the first time ever. That was why I didn't return after graduation. It didn't have anything to do with Balsam Ridge. I love it here. It's home.

When Daddy talked me into coming home to help him with Mom's care, I was hesitant, but thank God I did. During those months, Mom and I got to know each other. Being sick and facing your own mortality has a way of pulling back the curtain and exposing your vulnerabilities. I saw her differently for the first time. I empathized with the young woman she had been when she moved away from all she knew for the sake of love and what that had cost her. I wasn't only her daughter; I was also her only friend. Having me be the one to feed and bathe her in her weakest moments was humbling for us both.

New love and trust grew between us, and for that, I am grateful.

Especially with what we are facing on the horizon.

I find her in the kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel. She turns to greet me, and her face falls when she catches sight of my expression.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

I shake my head. “We need to talk.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Daddy?” I ask.

“He’s outside with the linemen. They showed up about twenty minutes ago to fix whatever is wrong with the power lines.”

I take a seat at the island. “That’s what I need to talk to you about, Mom. I think we have a problem, and the two of us need to figure out a solution.”

She removes the apron around her waist and sits on the stool across from me.

I lay it all out for her.

“I called all the creditors. I set up auto-pay with the ones that accept it, and I asked that the others be sent to me via email. I’ll make sure nothing like this happens again.”

She takes the news in stride, though I can see the unshed tears moistening her lashes.

Then, I usher her down the hallway to the stairs that lead to Daddy’s office.

When I open the door and she steps inside, her eyes shift from corner to corner, taking in the handwritten notes taped to the walls. Lists. One has our birthdays. Another has the name of his grandchildren. And another has phone numbers. Dozens and dozens of frantically written notes. Some are easy to read, but they progress to illegible scribbles.

“I think he’s been making himself a roadmap, trying to preserve his memories.”

Mom’s legs grow shaky, and she has to support herself on the frame of the doorway. “Oh my God,” she gasps.

“It’s going to be okay, Mom. I’m right here,” I say as I lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

She nods as the silent tears finally break free and fall down her cheeks.

Life is so unfair sometimes. A year ago, we were celebrating her recovery, and she and Daddy were elated to know that they were going to be able to live out the plans they had made for his retirement. They were going to travel. She had always dreamed of going to Paris, and Daddy intended to take her. They bought an RV and were going to drive cross-country to see my brothers' families.

So many plans that will never be.

She fought so hard to live and now has to face this.

"I'm not ready," she says.

Neither am I.



Chapter eleven

Langford

I stand in front of the mirror, surrounded by my mother, Leona, Erin, and Weston.

“I think you look wonderful,” Mom says.

They dressed me in a black suit with a red, white, and blue tie.

“The tie is a bit much,” I grumble.

“I like it. It makes you look patriotic,” she disagrees.

“It’s cheesy.”

“Fine, if you don’t like it, you can pick one of the others,” she mumbles.

I make quick work of the knot and toss the ugly slip of fabric to the side and undo the button at my collar. “There. That’s better.”

“You’re not gonna wear a tie at all?” Mom asks.

“Nope.”

She sighs but doesn't argue.

Garrett is on his way to meet us and shoot the campaign ad.

"Everyone is going to be looking at Garrett. I don't know why it matters what I wear. The whole town knows what I normally look like. A suit doesn't make me any more or less qualified to do the job."

"He is distractingly handsome. We should tone that shit down," Weston interjects.

"Why? I say we play to his strengths. Send him out there in a pair of gray sweatpants. He'll have the female vote for sure," Erin adds.

"Yes!" Weston exclaims.

"Why gray sweatpants?" Mom asks.

Leona leans over and whispers, "I'll explain it to you later."

"Explain it to her now. I want to see her face," Weston prompts.

"Oh, hush you, devil," Leona says.

Weston grins.

"Why are you here?" I ask him.

"To help, big brother. I'm even willing to trade sexual favors if you need me to."

"Weston," Mom scolds.

Erin wrinkles her nose.

"I thought you said you wanted to help, not run off voters."

"Children. You two need to scoot," Mom commands.

"You got us in trouble," Erin mumbles as Mom pushes them out the door.

"What is taking Garrett so long? I'm ready to get this over with," I ask.

Mom looks at her watch. “I have no idea. He was going to swing by and pick Ansley up on his way from the airport, but that shouldn’t have taken but a minute. The café is on the way.”

That explains it. I’m sure that minute turned into a least thirty, maybe more. I can’t blame the guy though. He hasn’t seen his woman in months.

I walk over to the couch and take a seat.

“You two might as well settle in. It’s gonna be a while yet,” I tell them.



“Let’s go out and blow off some steam,” Garrett says after we finish shooting.

“Don’t you want to spend some time with Ansley?” I ask.

“I’ve talked her into taking the week off and coming to New Jersey with me. So, we’ll have time. I’d like to get in some quality time with my brothers while I’m home.”

Mom and Leona offer to take Tucker and Caleb to the movies, and Garrett texts Graham, Corbin, and Morris to make plans for us all to meet at the brewery.

“You gonna wear the suit?” Weston asks.

“Fuck no.”

“You should. You might get lucky.”

“I don’t need a jacket and tie to attract a woman,” I tell him.

“Girls love that shit,” he says.

“Not the girl for me.”

“I’ll change, and we can head out.”

I go to the restroom of the small studio, change into my clothes, and join the guys.

The three of us take my truck. The others are already there when we arrive.

Maxi is behind the bar, and she comes over to say hello and lay a scandalous kiss on Corbin before taking our drink orders. She sends another waitress over to handle the food.

“How is the tour going?” Corbin asks Garrett.

“It’s exhausting. I wake up not knowing where I am and wishing I were home.”

“Oh, poor superstar. Boohoo,” Weston teases.

Garrett punches him in the chest. “I miss Ansley, jackass.”

“I’ll switch lives with you in a heartbeat. You come to run the hemp farm and set up house in Langford’s basement, and I’ll go onstage and let millions of females throw themselves at me every night.”

“You’re joking, but I’d do it in a minute if your ugly, tone-deaf mug wouldn’t cause me to go broke.”

“Who are you calling ugly? I’m the best-looking Tuttle at this table.”

“That would be me, old man,” Morris chimes in.

“Old? Son, I’m just hitting my prime. Langford is the relic.”

“I’m about to turn forty.”

He clasps my shoulder.

“Which is closer to fifty than twenty, and fifty is almost sixty, and if you blink, that might as well be seventy, and then you’re being put out to pasture.”

I shrug his hand loose and glare at him.

We devour the food like a pack of animals, and Maxi comes over with another round of drinks.

“Brace yourselves, boys. The ladies are descending.”

She nods toward the door, where Isley and Brandee have entered and stopped at the hostess.

Isley gives me a tight smile as she sashays past our table, following the hostess. She’s wearing another one of those

curve-hugging skirts, and I can't look away from the sway of her ass.

"Little Isley Paysour is all grown up," Garrett muses.

"Yes, she is," I murmur.

He cuts his eyes to me and grins. "I have a feeling you're in trouble, brother."

"Nah, he's got this. She doesn't stand a chance," Morris quips.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," Garrett replies without looking away from me.

Whatever.

They are seated at a table closer to the bar. As soon as they are settled, Weston stands.

"I'm going to say hello."

I grab his wrist, and he turns back to me.

"What?"

"Can you not? We're trying to have a nice night. Just us brothers."

"I think that girl Brandee was sending me vibes at the café that night," he says.

"She wasn't."

"You don't know that. She could be my soul mate."

He pulls himself loose and goes off to embarrass himself.

"That girl will chew him up and spit him out," I say.

"And he'll enjoy every second of it," Morris adds.

Weston slides a vacant chair up to their table, and we watch as he regales them with some bullshit that makes them laugh for the next hour.

"He's not that fucking funny," I grumble.

"He's a traitor—that's what he is," Morris complains.

Graham's and Garrett's phones keep buzzing with messages. One after the other.

"Go ahead and tell them to come on," I finally say.

They both look up from their screens to me.

"Rude asses," Morris adds.

Graham gives us an apologetic look and puts his phone on the table, facedown.

"I'm serious. Tell them it's okay to come join us."

Garrett slides his eyes to Morris.

"Fine. Brothers' night out is over, and family night begins," Morris announces and then stands, "I'm going to go see if I can steal one of those girls from Weston."

He saunters over and squeezes his way in between Isley and Brandee at the two-seater table.

An uncomfortable feeling bubbles in my chest as West's attention focuses on Isley when Brandee begins to chat up our baby brother.

"Wasn't he the one calling Weston a traitor fifteen minutes ago?" Garrett asks.

"Yep."

"The girls will be here in ten. They were planning to ambush us anyway once Maxi got off her shift," Graham informs us.

I feign annoyance, but the truth is, I don't mind the gals breaking up the party nearly as much as I mind Weston's hand being so close to Isley's knee.

I stand.

"Where are you going? You said it was okay to invite them," he defends.

"Yeah, I don't care if they come. I'm just going to order another drink. I'll be right back."

"What can I get you, Langford?" Maxi asks as I reach the bar.

“Something woman-proof. Do you have that?” I ask.

“Nope. But I have a hundred ninety-two proof Polish vodka. It’s the next best thing.”

“I’ll take a shot, and keep ’em coming,” I request.

“No can do, cowboy. If I allow one of Cor’s brothers to die from alcohol poisoning on my watch, he’ll give me so much shit. You’ll have to settle for one shot and a draft,” she says as she places a shot glass in front of me.

I toss it back and slam the glass down on the dark wood.

She turns the bottle up and fills it again.

I raise an eyebrow at her.

“You’re a mountain of a man. I think you can handle one more,” she says and then leans over the bar. “I’d give you another, but if you have much more, you’re not gonna be able to keep that mask of indifference in place. We don’t want to start a bar fight with our brother over a girl we don’t want to like, now do we? How would that look?”

“Stop pulling that bartender psychology crap on me, Maxi.”

A corner of her mouth lifts.

Fucking Maxi.



Chapter twelve

Isley

“Is he always so intimidating?” Brandee asks.

Weston follows her gaze over his shoulder to Langford, who is standing at the bar, hammering shots.

“Nah, but he’s a grumpier bear than usual tonight. Mom made him wear his church suit earlier, and it went downhill from there.”

“I bet he can wear the hell out of a suit,” Brandee utters.

The image of Langford in a suit pops up in my mind, uninvited, just as he turns and our eyes lock.

Damn.

“He looks like one of those wrestlers on television. The fabric stretched and holding on for dear life around those tree trunks he calls arms,” Morris quips.

“I like a big man,” Brandee murmurs.

The door swings open, and Taeli, Ansley, Erin, and Jena walk in, followed by Erin's husband, Ted.

"Party's here," Jena bellows.

Ansley goes directly to Garrett and sits in his lap. Graham finds an empty chair for Taeli and pulls her in close to his side.

Erin kisses Ted, and he settles into the spot Langford vacated at the table.

A momentary twinge of envy shivers through me, but I quickly shake it off.

When I was younger, I always had a boyfriend, but I'm not that girl anymore. I don't need a man to validate me, but sometimes, it'd be nice to come home and curl up in a pair of strong arms and be assured that everything is going to be okay.

To be part of a team.

Erin spots us, and she and Jena head our way.

"Maxi, can we get a round of pineapple margaritas?" Erin calls.

Maxi looks up from her conversation with Langford. "Nope. I'm not making margaritas. If you want one, go to the Mexican restaurant."

"Why are you like this?"

Maxi shrugs.

"What will you make then?" Erin asks.

"Beer, cider, wine, or shots."

"In that case, I'll have a pineapple cider."

"Coming up. What do you want?" she asks Jena.

"The same."

"Hi, guys. Sorry we're late to the party. I got sucked into that pimple popper show again," Erin greets.

Maxi walks over, carrying their order.

"The hell did you say?" Weston asks.

“I’m a popaholic,” Erin claims.

“What is a popaholic?” I ask.

“You know, someone who likes to pop other people’s pimples or watch doctors cut open cysts.”

“Ew, gross,” I mutter.

“It’s a high,” Erin defends.

“I don’t know what you smoked in high school, but it definitely wasn’t the same thing the rest of us did,” Maxi mumbles.

“It’s true. Acne extractions release dopamine, the feel-good hormone, just like sex, shopping, or smelling cookies baking in the oven. You get a sense of satisfaction from it.”

“You do not,” Brandee cries.

“Woman, tell me you did not just compare popping pimples to sex,” Weston demands.

“Don’t knock it till you try it. My man works outside and gets all kinds of sweaty. I can’t wait for him to get home and shower so I can attack the heat breakouts on his back,” Erin says.

“That is profoundly twisted,” Maxi says.

Erin looks at her friend and grins. “That’s not the only profoundly twisted thing I do to him.”

“Really?” I gasp.

“Shh, don’t ask. For the love of God, don’t. Because that crazy bitch will tell us,” Jena exclaims.

“I’m so intrigued yet terrified of this conversation,” Morris states.

“You’d better be scared. She gets enough pineapple crap in her, and she’ll attack your face. It’s a fucking gold mine,” Weston teases.

Morris frowns and brings a hand to his chin. “It is not.”



Maxi orders us all out to the deck so they can clean the floor.

Normally, the place would be closing and kicking us all out, but with Garrett in town, Reed, Maxi's boss, agreed to let us all have a private after-hours party.

I'm still a little fuzzy on how Brandee and I became part of their group, but here we sit, with the rest of them, around the large picnic tables that overlook the creek.

"You should have seen him. He was so uncomfortable in front of the camera," Garrett says.

"Not all of us have practiced showing off for others, like you have," Langford retorts.

"How do you plan to get up in front of the crowd at the debate?"

"That's different. That's just me talking to folks, like I'm here, talking to you guys now."

"Not quite," I interrupt.

"What's it like then?" Langford asks.

"It's like being in class and the teacher calling out that you're about to have a pop quiz. You don't know the questions or how many questions you'll be asked, and instead of writing the answers down, you have to stand and give them aloud. You can prepare what you'd say to commonly addressed topics, but you mostly have to think on your feet. Good luck with that, Tuttle," I say.

"I don't need luck, sweetheart."

Weston lets out a low whistle, and the two of us are locked into a staring showdown.

"You know what you two need? One of those Geneva things that leaders of countries do," Erin suggests.

"A what thing?" Brandee asks.

"You know ... where they all go to Switzerland and talk about peace and their common goals."

"A summit?" Taeli asks.

“Yes! That’s it. You two should have a Balsam Ridge summit. Because I like you both. You’re both smart, and you could figure shit out. Like a tag team.”

“That’s not how it works. The office of mayor is not a team position,” Brandee tells her.

“Maybe it should be.”

“Can you imagine these two working together? They’d kill each other,” Morris quips.

“I have a question. We know that you were a complete shrew in high school. What exactly did you do to get under this guy’s skin?” Ansley asks.

I glance at Langford. “You want a list?”

“There’s a list? Hell yeah, we want it,” Jena says.

I blow out a breath. “Let’s see. Other than your basic everyday rudeness, I told the guidance counselor I saw him doing steroids at a party with other guys on the football team. Once, I had a friend of mine offer him the answers to our history midterm, and they were all the wrong answers. Then, there was the time I told my boyfriend that he made a pass at me at one of the pep rallies, and he keyed his car and slashed all his tires.”

“That was you? Damn, he lost his mind when that happened. He had such a hard-on for that car. I thought he was gonna end up in jail,” Weston informs us.

“Yeah, that was a bad one,” I admit.

“Coach had all of us drug tested once a week for the rest of senior year,” Graham says.

“And Pop wouldn’t let him go to the homecoming dance because he had tanked the mid-term. His girlfriend was livid,” Weston gasps through tears.

“Sorry that my pranks spilled over into everyone’s lives. I was intolerable. I began hating myself as much as you guys did,” I confess.

“I didn’t hate you.”

All our eyes turn to Langford.

“How could you not?” I ask.

“I thought you were annoying as hell, a thorn in my side, kinda like my younger brothers, but there wasn’t hate. Not then and not now.”

I smile, and, dammit, I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

“But your fucking brothers, I hated them,” he says.



Chapter thirteen

Langford

Everyone starts dispersing. Graham and Taeli and Garrett and Ansley are the first ones to take off.

Jena's husband arrives to pick her up, but he stays and has a beer first. Then, he and Ted corral their wives while Weston and Morris vie for Brandee's attention at another table.

"Did I hear that you lived in New Orleans before moving back here?" Maxi asks Isley.

"I did."

"Why NOLA?"

"I went to Tulane University and decided to stay after graduation. Moving and experiencing the city was the first independent thing I ever did, and I was able to figure out who I was without the overbearing guidance of my parents."

"Do you ever miss it?" Maxi asks.

"Sometimes."

“What do you miss about it?”

“I don’t know. It’s a fun place, full of unique and interesting people, art, food, and culture. When I first moved to the city after college, I loved going on ghost tours, dancing all night to jazz with friends, and eating the most delicious Cajun dishes in the French Quarter. It just has such a rich history. I mean, an actual pirate rallied his pirate friends to help Andrew Jackson protect the city from a British invasion.”

“That’s badass. I’ve always wanted to visit Bourbon Street.”

“We should go. I could show you around, and we could binge on beignets and take a boat cruise on the Mississippi River. And fun fact: Bourbon Street wasn’t named after the whiskey. It was named after a French royal family, the House of Bourbon.”

“I might take you up on that one day.”

“You should.”

“Sounds like you miss it. Are you sure you don’t want to move back?” I ask.

She beams a smile in my direction. “You wish.”

“I’m serious. Why did you decide to stay in Balsam Ridge?”

“It’s home. New Orleans was fun in my twenties. I was ready to get out from under my parents’ thumbs and experience something different, but this is where I want to plant roots. Besides, I can visit NOLA or anywhere else I want when I get an itch.”

“I think Erin was onto something with that whole summit idea of hers. You two both seem to love this town, and you both have unique things to bring to the table. I, for one, can see the benefit in both of you serving as mayor. Not that I can vote.”

“You can’t?” Isley asks.

“Nope. I haven’t been a full-time resident long enough.”

“From what I hear around the firehouse, you guys are nose to nose. Seriously, this thing could go either way,” Corbin states.

“That’s what the debate is for. To help people make up their minds,” Isley says.

“Too bad you can’t join forces. Imagine the good you could do then. Your platforms are very similar,” Maxi adds.

“Not that similar. We have very different outlooks on some issues,” Isley mutters.

“I respect that, and I think the things that make us different are what’s going to make this interesting,” I say.

“Most men either respect me or disagree with me.”

“I can respect you and disagree with you. They aren’t mutually exclusive,” I say.

She looks up at me through those long lashes and bites down on her bottom lip.

“How very progressive of you,” she utters.

Suddenly, I have the urge to lean and sink my teeth into that lip.

“Stop looking at me like that, Tuttle,” she commands.

“Like what?”

“Like a man.”

“I am a man, sweetheart.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.”

A throat clears, and I drag my attention from her mouth back to my brother and Maxi.

“I hate to break this up just as it’s getting interesting, but it’s late, and Reed wants to get going,” Maxi informs us.

Corbin whistles and gets Weston’s and Morris’s attention. “Gotta wrap it up, guys.”

Maxi gathers the bottle and glasses and takes them inside before wiping down the tables.

“Morris is going to drop me off at my house so you don’t have to go so far out of your way. See you in the morning?” Brandee informs Isley.

“Sure. Text me when you get there.”

“Will do.”

“I’m riding with them,” Weston calls.

Isley stands. “I’d better head too.”

Corbin looks out to the parking lot, where only two vehicles remain. “Do you need a ride?”

“Oh, no, but thank you. Brandee and I walked up to grab a bite after work. We hadn’t planned to make a night of it. I can walk back down and get my truck,” she explains.

“You don’t have to walk. Langford will take you to your truck.” Maxi says.

I will?

She turns to me. “Won’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s not necessary,” Isley begins, and I raise my hand to halt her argument.

“My mother would have my hide if she knew I let a lady walk by herself in the dark.”

“I feel completely safe in the valley,” she says.

“That’s beside the point.”

She huffs, “Fine.”

I gesture toward the steps that lead from the deck to the parking lot. “After you.”



She climbs inside my truck, and when I turn the key, her hands go immediately to the vent.

I reach over and press a button to up the temperature of the heat.

Late August in the valley consists of warm, long days and cool nights, and tonight is nippier than others. I noticed her shivering earlier, and if I had worn a jacket, I would have offered it to her.

“Thanks,” she says.

I put the truck in reverse and pull out onto Main Street.

We ride in silence the mile to her office. I pull in beside a pea-green Ford F-150. The paint is faded on the old thirty-year-old ranch field truck.

“Are you driving that?” I ask.

She looks at the rusty hunk of metal with tires.

“Yeah, that’s Hank, Grandpa’s old truck. Named after his favorite country and western singer Hank Williams. He’s cranky, and he sputters a bit, but other than that, he’s a reliable old horse,” she says with fondness.

“Interesting.”

She turns her gaze to me. “What?”

“I pictured you as more of a luxury car aficionado.”

“Yeah, you caught me. The Maybach is in the shop,” she snips.

“I wasn’t trying to offend you, Isley.”

She shrugs. “Not everything has to be highbrow. I like simple things too. Grandpa, my brothers, and I had a lot of fun riding around in Hank on the farm.”

“I’m a fan of old cars myself. Graham and I like to tinker around with vintage restorations when we have free time. Not that either of us has much of it to go around lately.”

Silence fills the cab again.

“Well, thanks again for the ride. It was certainly an interesting evening,” she says.

“Reminiscing about who we were way back when.” I nod.

“I was surprised to hear you say you didn’t hate me.”

I slide my eyes to her. “Nope. That was all you.”



Chapter fourteen

Isley

“That’s not true. I distinctly remember your hostility toward me,” I insist.

He shakes his head.

“Oh, come, on, Langford. You even entered this race to get under my skin.”

“No, I entered the race because I oppose your politics. Not because I harbor some juvenile malice toward you.”

“Whatever.”

“Why did you hate me so much? I mean, I get why your brothers did. Our dads were always at each other’s throat, and then we were constantly vying for the same position on the football team or the same girl, but your hate was epic,” he points out.

I roll my eyes. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Nah, you put Regina George to shame,” he says.

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“A *Mean Girls* reference? Nice. Are we a closeted angsty teenage drama fan, Tuttle?” I ask.

He grunts.

“No. But my ex-wife watched that damn movie on repeat when she was pregnant with Tucker.”

“If you say so.”

“Seriously, what the fuck was your problem with me? You delighted yourself in making my life miserable.”

It’s true. I did. Nothing made my adolescent heart happier than being a thorn in Langford Tuttle’s side.

“Do remember Joanna Brown’s fifteenth birthday party?” I ask.

He scratches the back of his neck. “Should I?”

It figures that he wouldn’t. One of the defining moments of my young adult life wasn’t even important enough for him to recollect.

“You showed up with her brother, Evan, and other members of the varsity football team,” I remind him.

I can see his brain working behind his eyes, trying to pull forth the memory.

“Vaguely. We had just finished practice, and we headed to Evan’s house to raid his little sister’s birthday party food.”

“Yeah, well, you guys also talked us girls into sneaking down to the basement with you to play a scandalous game of Spin the Bottle.”

He chuckles. “That’s right. Jason had a mad crush on Joanna’s friend, the redhead—what was her name?” he asks.

“Candy.”

“Yep. Candy. She was older than the rest of you gals, wasn’t she?”

“She was. She turned sixteen in the ninth grade. Something about her parents holding her back, I think,” I

affirm.

“Jason was so pissed when Evan’s spin landed on Candy and he kissed her,” he muses.

“So mad he made his spin land on Jo so he could plant one on Evan’s baby sister right in front of him,” I add.

“That’s right. He sure did. Didn’t Evan’s dad come down and bust us after that?” he asks.

“Uh huh, but not before your turn to spin,” I sneer.

His eyebrows rise at my tone, and then they furrow, causing a slight ridge of confusion to form between his dark whiskey-colored eyes.

“I don’t remember kissing anyone that night.”

A tinge of red heat flushes my cheeks as the emotions I felt that night wash over me.

“You didn’t. When the bottle landed on me, you turned to Jason and said, ‘Not gonna happen,’ before standing and walking off. Evan followed you, and you told him, loud enough for the entire room to hear, ‘For fuck’s sake, Evan, the girl has a mouthful of braces.’”

It was the single most humiliating moment in my life. Here I am, a grown-ass woman, and I can still see the faces of my so-called friends in that circle. The looks of pity from Joanna and the evil snickers from Candy and her best friend. In junior high, I wasn’t the most popular girl in class, but I wasn’t a reject either. I was stuck somewhere in the abyss of the in-between. Quiet, studious, and mousy. While all the other tweens were pairing up to go steady, I was spending my evenings at choir practice and drama club or on the farm, hanging out with my grandfather.

When I made it to high school, I was once again somewhere on the outskirts of popularity. With my lanky frame and braces that wouldn’t be removed until the summer, I was basically invisible. I didn’t mind, but Heath and Everette were not having it.

My big brothers were kings of the castle. Jocks, who were handsome and funny. Everette made it his personal mission, at the urging of our mother, to fix my social dilemma, and he began to drag me along with him to football games and parties and forced people to like me. That was how I became friends with Joanna. She was one of Everette's friend's sisters.

What people thought of me didn't matter to me much, especially what any one of the Tuttle brothers thought. My dad and their dad hated one another, and that hate spilled down to my brothers. I was indifferent to them and their silly feud until that moment in Joanna's basement. Langford Tuttle, one of the hottest juniors at school, just labeled me undesirable in front of everyone I knew. Hate rose in my thoughts along with the bile of humiliation and a pulsing need for revenge. Isley Paysour, queen bee, was born at that moment. I just didn't know it yet.

"That's not how I remember it," he states, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Trust me, it's an accurate account. I'll never forget how mortified I was."

"And I'll never forget how young you girls were. Evan was such a prick for letting Jason talk him into that stunt. There was no way I was getting caught with my hands or mouth on a fourteen-year-old. That shit was twisted. That was why I bailed. And the braces comment was just my way of pointing out that you were too young."

"You were only two years older than us," I say.

"At fourteen, two years is two too many. I bet you hadn't even been kissed before," he says.

I hadn't, but that was beside the point.

"You were cute. But if I were Heath or Everette and found out one of my teammates had his lips on my fourteen-year-old sister, I'd have killed the asshole. I never let Evan forget it either. He let his horny friend kiss his baby sister. What kind of dick does that?"

Looking back on it now, I realize he's right. Heath and Everette would never have let one of their friends touch me.

“That’s what started it all, huh?”

I shrug. “I was an emotional teenage girl. I blame puberty and an overactive imagination. At least I’ll know how to navigate my own daughter through the pitfalls of embarrassment and high school crushes,” I defend.

“So, you’re saying you had a crush on me?”

“Trust me, it faded quickly,” I say.

“That’s too bad.”

“What does that mean?”

“You might have been fourteen, but you didn’t stay fourteen.”

I turn my head to look out the window so he can’t look at me.

“I love that you still do that.”

“Do what?” I ask.

“Blush when you’re angry, embarrassed, or excited. I used to rile you up just to see if I could get you to turn red.”

I turn around at that statement.

“Here we were, having a perfectly nice moment, and leave it to you to ruin it,” I snap.

Before I have a chance to say anything else, his hand is in my hair, and he is crushing his mouth to mine.

A whirl of emotions flows through me in a flash—surprise, anger, frustration, and lust.

I settle on lust.

Grabbing hold of the collar of his shirt, I pull him closer and kiss him back.

Like the hormonal teenagers we once were, we are all hands and lips and tongues.

One moment, I’m pressed against the passenger window, and the next, I’m being lifted over the steering column and into his lap. My skirt rises to my waist.

I wrap my arms around his neck, and he caresses my thighs, which are resting on either side of his legs.

I bring my forehead to rest against his and start to rotate my hips, moving against him. He groans as I slide against his cock.

His hand on my thigh moves around to cup my behind and guide my movement.

The friction of his jeans against the silk of my panties is almost enough to set me on fire.

He glides his right hand around my side and then between us, cupping me.

I rest my head against his shoulder and rock as he touches me.

“Langford,” I moan his name.

“Come for me, Isley,” he demands.

I start shaking my head.

“Yes, let me feel you let go,” he says into my hair.

“I can’t,” I whisper.

“Yes, you can.”

He slides a finger under the silk and dips it into me while his palm continues to press against my clit.

“Let go,” he demands.

I can’t fight it. I don’t want to fight it. I bite down on his shoulder and moan as the orgasm washes over me.

“That’s a good girl,” he whispers in my ear.

I’m in so much trouble.



Chapter fifteen

Langford

Fuck me.

I hold her as her breathing calms. My cock throbs painfully against my zipper.

I want to drive her straight to my place and spend the rest of the night exploring the curves that I just previewed, but my stupid brothers will be there, and the last thing we need is an audience with Tweedledee and Tweedledumbass.

“Langford?” she mutters against my neck.

“Yeah?”

“Did that just happen?” she asks.

“Yep.”

She lifts her head and brings her shocked eyes to mine, her body trembling.

“Relax. We’re two consenting adults,” I whisper.

She looks over my shoulder and out the rear windshield.

“We’re in a public place. Anyone could have seen us. Oh my God, what if someone did see us? We’re running for mayor.”

“Calm down. No one saw a thing.”

She crawls off my lap, and I groan as her knee grazes my crotch.

“Sorry,” she bellows.

“Just wait a minute,” I say.

“How do you know no one saw us?” she asks as she shimmies her skirt back down her thighs.

“Because it’s three in the morning in Balsam Ridge. No one is out and about. Look around.”

She scans the parking lot and street and takes a deep breath.

Then, she looks at me.

“What now?”

“What’s your favorite dish?” I ask.

“My favorite what?”

“Dish. Food. What do you like to eat?”

“Sesame chicken.”

“Come to my house tomorrow night, and I’ll make you the best sesame chicken you’ve ever tasted.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to dine with the enemy.”

I lean in, grasp a piece of her hair that has escaped her ponytail, and twirl it in my fingers.

“You just made out with the enemy. Besides, you know what they say. Keep your friends close; keep your enemies closer.”

She scoffs. “Did you just quote Niccolò Machiavelli?”

“Who?”

“Machiavelli, the Italian author and philosopher? The father of modern political philosophy and political science?”

I shake my head.

Leave it to her to get all smart on me now.

“Nope. I was quoting the wise sage of modern parenthood, Hilton Tuttle. Now, about dinner, we can discuss your ideas for the development off Hickory Camp Road.” I dangle the carrot in front of her.

“Fine. I’ll meet you at your house at seven.”

“Seven it is.”

“Where is your house exactly?”

“I’ll text you the address.”

“You have my number?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Thank you again for the ride,” she says and then opens the door and hops out.

I sit and watch as she fumbles her way into her old truck.

Things just got very interesting.



I wait for Isley to pull out onto Main Street, and I follow her until the road that leads up the mountain to her parents’ house comes into sight before veering off toward my place.

When I get there, Weston and Morris are parked on my couch with game controllers in their hands.

“Hey, man. What took you so long?” Weston asks as I kick my boots onto the floor beside theirs.

“Cor and I waited for Maxi to get things cleaned up. I guess Brandee didn’t invite either of you in for a nightcap.”

“She’s too much woman for baby bro, and I would never go there,” Weston says.

“You spent the whole night hitting on her,” I point out.

He shrugs. “That’s because she and Isley were the only single women there tonight. I’d never sleep with either of them though. Isley is your rival, and Brandee is her best friend. I’d never sleep with the enemy.”

“In other words, she wasn’t interested,” Morris says.

“Whatever. Do you want to play? I can kick your ass at Madden next.”

I shake my head. “It’s almost four in the morning. Some of us have shit to do tomorrow.”

“Fine, old man. Go get your beauty sleep,” Weston says.

“About tomorrow, I’m going to need you to make yourself scarce.”

Weston’s eyes slide to me. “Why’s that?”

“Because I do, and if you don’t mind, I need the two of you to entertain Tucker for the night.”

At that, he sets the controller down and turns to me. “You got a hot date or something?”

“None of your business,” I snap.

“You do. Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Nobody you know.”

“Fine. Tuck and I’ll go fishing and then stay at Garrett’s man cave for the night.”

Weston owns a cannabis farm that borders the river, where he had several boat docks built. Each dock has a small, rustic studio apartment above it with a futon that pulls into a full-size bed along with a toilet, sink, and mini fridge. He calls them the Man Caves. Men rent the spots to store their boats and spend a weekend fishing on the river. It’s like camping, but with a real bed and running water. Garrett rents one of them to keep his boat. It’s where he’d crash when he came into town before he and Ansley got together.

“Thanks.”

“You can pay me with details.”

“I fucking pay you with a free place to stay,” I retort.

“Now, I’m beat, so take it downstairs,” I command.

I leave them to it and head to my bedroom.

Shit, I am getting too old for these late nights.

I grab a towel off the bedpost and sniff it. Then, I head into the bathroom.

I turn on the shower and let the steam fill the tiny space before I step inside.

The hot water washes over my body and soothes the knotted muscles in my back and arms.

A visual of Isley’s ass in one of her tight skirts flashes in my mind.

I raise an arm and brace myself against the wall near the showerhead.

Closing my eyes, I call to mind the image of Isley’s face as she sat astride me, and I take my cock in hand.

The recollection of her teeth sinking into my shoulder and the sound of the sexy mewls she made as I got her off in the cab of my truck cause me to grow harder.

I squeeze the base and start to slowly stroke myself, increasing the pace as the image morphs into Isley underneath me, naked. My cock throbs in my fist as it thickens. Tension slides up my spine as the fantasy expands to Isley on all fours, that luscious ass in the air, and me behind her.

I lock my legs, and the muscles in my jaw clench. Then, I groan as my cock pulses, and I start to come.

White-hot cords of relief cover the wall in front of me as the tightly coiled pressure releases.

I continue to stroke until I’m spent.

Stepping back, I stand under the spray until the water chills and cools my overheated skin.

It’s been a minute since I’ve had such an intense reaction to a woman. It’s just my luck that the woman is Isley Paysour.

I get out and dry off. Then, I fall into bed with my hair still damp and try to go to sleep.

I fight the urge to text her, to see if she's having as hard of a time sleeping as I am tonight. To see if I can make her come again with the sound of my voice.

Fuck, I'm gonna need another shower.



Chapter sixteen

Isley

I unlock the door, slide my heels off, and carry them, tiptoeing inside, trying to be quiet so as not to wake Mom and Daddy.

The kitchen is dark, and instead of turning on a light, I use the flashlight on my phone to illuminate my way as I hang my purse on the hook.

I turn to make my way to the fridge for a bottle of water to take to my room and scream when the light lands on a figure standing at the sink.

I flip the light on and find my father staring at the counter.

“Daddy, you scared me. What are you doing up?” I gasp.

He turns to me, and his face draws up. “I don’t know.”

“Do you have any idea what time it is?”

He shakes his head.

Something isn’t right.

Alarm bells begin to ring in my head.

I grab his pocket watch from the table by the door, where he always sets it when he empties his pockets.

“Can you read this?” I ask, handing him the pocket watch.

He stares at it for a few moments, and I can see him struggling to come up with the right words.

“Do you know what it is?”

“I can’t think of it right now,” he says.

“Do you know what it does?”

“It tells me what time it is,” he says as if the question is ridiculous.

“That’s right. It’s called a watch.”

He furrows his brow and looks up at me. “How could I not recall the name of a watch?”

“That’s okay,” I murmur.

He lets out a huff of frustration.

“Do you know how to set it?”

“Of course I do!”

“Wonderful. Can you set it for forty-five minutes past eleven?”

He brings his fingers to the knob at the top and begins to turn it, and then he stops and stares at the watch.

“Forty-five minutes past eleven, you say?” he asks.

“Yes, Daddy. Fifteen minutes until noon,” I state.

He gets frustrated and emotional as he winds the arms to the correct positions. Then, he shoves the device back to me.

“There. Fifteen till twelve. You could have said that the first time.”

I could have, but he should have been able to set it to the correct time either way.

He’s getting worse.

We both know it.

His eyes meet mine. Fear is evident in his.

“It’s going to be okay, Daddy,” I whisper.

“No, baby girl, it’s not.”

I take the watch and put it back where he can find it in the morning, and then I take his hand and walk him back to his bedroom.

“I’m sorry I frightened you,” he says.

“That’s okay. I’m sorry I was sneaking in the house at four in the morning.”

“That is a first. I hope whatever you were up to was fun.”

I smile at him. “It was.”

He leans in and kisses my cheek. “Good night, baby girl. You have sweet dreams.”

“You too, Daddy.”

I stop in the hall bathroom and change into my nightshirt and wrap up in my terry-cloth robe.

Then, I retreat to my bedroom. It’s the same one I had as a kid. When I moved back home, Mom and I redecorated it, and the purple walls and white daybed were replaced with light-gray walls and a black king-size platform bed.

I lie down and try to relax.

Thoughts of Langford Tuttle and worries over my father chase the sleep away, so I finally give up and grab the paperback on my nightstand.

Whenever sleep eludes me, I get out of my head and lose myself in a good romance novel.



“I can’t believe you’re going out on a date with Langford Tuttle,” Brandee says as we peruse the racks at Southern Rose Boutique.

It’s one of the new quaint shops that opened recently in Market Square.

“It’s not a date.”

“What is it then?” she asks.

“It’s a white flag. We’re going to hear each other out and see if we can reach some common ground.”

She eyes me suspiciously as I take a hanger from the rack, holding a yellow dress with white polka dots.

“Yeah, because all political opponents do that.”

“They should,” I remark.

“Maybe, but that’s beside the point. You’re going out on a date with Langford Tuttle.”

“Do you like this?” I ask, turning to the mirror and holding the dress up to my reflection.

“It’s nice and the perfect date dress. Not too dressy and not too casual.”

“It’s not a date,” I insist as I glare at her in the mirror.

“I bet you your tan Jimmy Choo bag it is.”

“You’re on.”

She grins and then holds a sleeveless, backless black silk blouse that ties around the neck up for me to see. “What about this?”

“I like it.”

She leans over and holds it against my chest, and I frown.

“I think this campaign is making my tits smaller.”

“What?” she sputters.

I tug at my shirt. “They’ve deflated.”

“Your tits have not deflated. You look amazing. Besides, anything more than a handful is a waste and causes back pain and bad posture.”

The door chimes, and in walk Sara-Beth and Leona.

I give Brandee the look, effectively shutting down our conversation.

We try on the pieces in our shopping bags, make our final selections, and head to the front of the shop to pay.

Sara-Beth and Leona are at the counter, chatting with the owner, Elvira Sutton, who motions for us to come forward.

“Did you ladies find everything you needed?” Elvira asks.

“Yes, ma’am. I love your shop,” I tell her.

“Thank you. Please take a card and register online. You get points for every purchase, and once you reach fifty, you’re emailed a twenty percent discount code.”

She rings us up, all the while continuing her chat with the other ladies.

After Brandee finishes her purchase, we turn to leave.

“Isley,” Sara-Beth calls.

I turn to her.

“We were just on our way to grab lunch at the Purple Onion. Would you girls like to join us?”

I look at Brandee, and she lifts her shoulders.

“Um, sure.”

“Wonderful.”

She turns back to the counter. “Don’t forget: my house, five o’clock,” she says to Elvira. Then, she takes Leona’s elbow, and the two of them follow us out to the sidewalk.

“Should we take the car?” Leona asks.

“It’s a beautiful day. Let’s walk,” Sara-Beth suggests.

We walk the five blocks to the restaurant. Leona fills us in on her and Mayor Gentry’s plans to go on a cruise when he retires.

Once we’re seated and place our orders, the conversation turns to the election.

“How are you holding up, dear?” Sara-Beth asks.

“I’m good.”

Brandee cocks an eyebrow at her.

“Did you invite us here to spy on the competition?” she teases.

“Goodness’ sake, no. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. You look tired. Is everything okay with Evelyn?”

“Mom’s fine. Better than fine. Her last test results showed no signs of cancer.”

“It’s a miracle. We all prayed she’d beat it,” Leona says.

“Thank you.”

“And Langford hasn’t been rude to you again, has he?” Sara-Beth asks.

Brandee giggles. “How can you tell when he’s being rude?”

Sara-Beth smiles to herself. “Langford is my brute,” she says.

“Your brute?”

“Yes. Each of my boys has their own special personality. Langford is the brute, the strong, determined man. He is the one who his brothers go to when they need advice. Real advice, not someone to blow smoke up their behinds. He’s honest and fair, and he doesn’t mince words. He’s like his father in that way. It can come off as rude, even when he doesn’t intend it that way. Graham is my dependable one, always willing to lend a hand, and he’s the one everyone goes to when they need help. He’s gentle and kind. Garrett is my talented devil. He’s a flirt and a wild one. At least, he was before Ansley worked her magic on him. Weston is the wily one. He’s smart and funny and playful. A prankster who loves to rile his brothers up,” she explains.

“What about Morris?” Brandee asks.

She sighs. “He’s my baby. A bit spoiled, and—God help me—he is a combination of them all. He has the best qualities of his father and each of his brothers. When he finally comes into his own, that boy will be a force of nature.”

“I can see that,” Brandee says.

“Langford’s been a gentleman as of late. I think the scolding you gave him at the picnic worked like a charm,” I tell her.

“Excellent,” she replies before she and Leona share a look.

“I have a feeling you two are a force of nature yourselves,” Brandee says.

“With a family like mine, I have to be,” Sara-Beth quips.

We enjoy the rest of our meal, chatting about weddings and grandchildren and all the things. It’s nice.

Afterward, we walk them back to their cars and say our good-byes.

“It’s a shame they’re on Langford’s side. Our campaign could use some of their old-lady magic,” Brandee muses.



Chapter seventeen

Langford

“Tuck, come feed your dog before you have to leave,” I call down the hall.

His bedroom door opens, and he has his backpack slung over one shoulder and his sneakers in his hand. Tossing them onto the couch, he makes his way to the kitchen, where I’m wiping down the countertops, and scoops food from the bag on the floor of the pantry into the ceramic bowl.

“Come on, boy. It’s dinnertime,” he says, and the old hound stands from his napping spot in front of the fireplace and waddles to his meal.

“Do you have a date tonight?” Tucker asks as he sits at the island.

“No.”

“Uncle Weston says you’re having a lady over and that’s why you’re kicking us out,” Tucker says.

“Your uncle is an asshat.”

He giggles.

“I do have someone coming over, and I’m not kicking you out. I just figure you’ll have more fun fishing than hanging out here while we talk business.”

“It would be okay, you know, if you did have a date,” he says.

“Thanks, bud.”

“If you ever do have a date over, will I get to meet them?” he asks.

I drop the washcloth and turn to face him.

“I promise, if there ever comes a time that I meet someone I want to have a relationship with, the first thing I’ll do is introduce them to you. You and I are a package deal, kid. If you don’t like her or she doesn’t like you, it’s a deal-breaker.”

“I promise too.”

I lift an eyebrow in question.

“If I ever find a girl I want to date, you’ll have to like her, too, before I take her to dinner and the movies.”

“I appreciate that.”

“We’ve had a good run, Pop, but we can’t live this bachelor life forever. We need a woman to keep us straight and make us clean up and eat better.”

I chuckle. “That sounds like your grandma talking.”

“Look at this place. She’s not wrong.”

No, she’s not.

Weston arrives home from the hemp farm and takes a quick shower. Then, he loads the fishing gear into the back of his truck, and he and Tucker take off.

I check the time, and I call out for dinner.

Looking around the living space, I realize Tucker is right, so while I wait for the delivery, I decide to straighten up the house, which looks like three men live in it.

Our home is a nice size. The living room opens to the eat-in kitchen. The space that was designated as a dining room has been converted into my home office and the place where Tucker does his homework because we don't need a fucking dining room. The master bedroom with an en suite bath is on the main floor, and Tucker's bedroom and bath are across the hall. A door at the end of the hallway leads down into the finished basement, which has a guest bedroom, full bath, and a large recreation room that houses a pool table, built-in bar, and a set of weight benches.

I used to keep it decently picked up, but with Weston moving in and me being busy with the resort construction and campaign, I've lost control of it.

Boots are in a pile by the back door, clothing and towels are on bedroom and bathroom floors, not a single bed is made, there are empty soda cans and beer bottles on every coffee and end table and nightstand, and game system controllers are connected to every television.

I need to hire a cleaning service.

I make a mental note to ask Mom who they use to clean the rental cabins and get to work.

An hour later, the food arrives, and I take a quick shower before Isley is expected.

At seven on the dot, the doorbell chimes.

I open the door, and she stands there, holding a pecan pie.

Both she and the pie look delicious.

She has on a knee-length black skirt with a tan leather belt and a black crop tank that exposes her stomach, covered with a black-white-and-tan print drop-shoulder jacket.

A much more relaxed look than she usually sports, but, damn, she looks good.

“Are you gonna invite me in?” she asks.

I don't reply. I simply step aside so she can slide past me and into the living room.

I shut the door behind her and lead her to the kitchen island.

She eyes the cartons that I've set out as she places the pie on the surface.

"Takeout? I thought you said you were gonna make me dinner," she says.

"Did I? I meant, I'd make a phone call to China King," I confess.

"Liar, liar."

"I promised you the best sesame chicken, and trust me, this is the best."

"Well, that is a homemade pie," she says.

"You made me a pie?"

"Technically, my mom made it. But I did help. I just haven't perfected the art of making a pie crust yet," she admits.

"It looks good. Pecan pie is my favorite."

She smiles.

There's a brief silence, and her eyes bounce around, looking at everything, except me.

"Should I take off my shoes?" she blurts.

I look down at the tan suede ankle boots on her feet. "Um ..."

"My parents make everyone who comes inside take their shoes off. I saw the pile of boots by the door and didn't know if it was your rule too."

"Not a rule. But if you like, feel free to make yourself comfortable."

"Maybe later."

Her awareness amuses me, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from teasing her about it.

She's normally so self-confident and outspoken. I like that about her, but this demure, nervous side of her is nice too.

"Ahhh, who's this?" she asks as she goes down on a knee.

I look over the island to see that the dog has come into the kitchen to say hello.

"That's Tuck's basset, Ole Fatticus," I say.

She begins to scratch the old hound behind his right ear, and Fatticus takes that as an opportunity to lie down and roll to his side.

"You want a tummy rub, don't you?"

She brings her hands to the animal's protruding gut and runs circles over his sensitive skin.

Fatticus's tongue lolls out, and his eyes close. When she hits the spot, his hind leg starts to jerk in ecstasy.

"Why do you call him Fatticus?"

"Because my boy named him Atticus and his belly and balls drag on the damn ground," I tell her.

That earns me a giggle.

"It's nice to meet you, Fatticus," she coos.

He rolls back over and stands and licks her cheek.

"I think he likes me," she declares.

She stands back up.

"Where is Tucker this evening?"

"He's doing a little overnight fishing with his uncle."

"So, they're not coming back tonight?"

I shake my head, and I can see the rise and fall of her chest quicken.

"I'm starving. Do I just grab a box and dig in?"

"Do you want to eat here or in the living room?" I ask.

She looks over her shoulder.

“Let’s eat in there, in front of the fireplace.”

“You got it.”



I build a fire, and we take the cartons of Chinese and sit on the floor in front of the coffee table.

“Wine?” I ask.

“Yes, please.”

I get to my feet and walk to the rack beside the pantry, grab the bottle from the top, and return to her with a glass and the pinot noir.

“I hope this is okay. Mom said it’s a good wine.”

Fumbling with the opener, I dislodge the cork and pour a generous amount into her glass.

“Aren’t you having any?” she asks.

“I’m a beer man,” I say.

I set the opened bottle on the table and make my way to the refrigerator and retrieve an amber bottle.

Armed with a pair of wooden chopsticks, she makes quick work of the food.

“You’re correct. The sesame chicken is amazing,” she says between bites.

“Told you.”

“I like your home.”

“Thanks. It could use a woman’s touch, but Tuck and I like it.”

She takes the opening to ask a question that has obviously been on her mind. “Where’s Tucker’s mom?”

“Over the Atlantic,” I say.

I can see the question on her face, so I elaborate. “She’s a flight attendant. She works on international flights out of Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina.”

“I assume you guys weren’t married?”

“No, we were. We’re divorced.”

“What happened?” she asks. “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“I don’t mind talking about it. I was twenty-five, and she was twenty-two and had just graduated college. She lived in Nashville and worked as a flight attendant there. We met when she moved into the same building as Garrett. We dated long distance for a while, and then she quit her job and moved to the valley. We got married a year later. Then, Tuck came along. She had horrible postpartum depression. I’d come home from work and find her with Tucker in her arms, sobbing. I thought it would get better, but it just got worse the older Tuck got. We were happy sometimes, and other times, not. Then, one day, the not days outnumbered the sometimes days. She loved us, but she missed her old life, and staying here was slowly killing her. So, I let her go. She got the job with American Airlines, based out of Charlotte, and we agreed that because of all the traveling it entailed, it would be best for Tucker if he stayed with me.”

“And he’s okay with that arrangement?”

“Yep. He gets to see her from time to time, and when she has vacation, he’ll go down to Charlotte and stay with her and her new husband. Plus, they text and video chat all the time. Being a single dad wasn’t the plan. It’s tough sometimes, and a boy needs his mom, but when those times arise, I do the best I can to navigate it.”

“Well, from this outsider, looking in, you’re doing a pretty good job,” she says.

“What about you? How come you never got married?” I ask.

“I came close once, but then I ran for city council in NOLA, and he hated dealing with a fiancée running for office. Everything became an argument or competition for my attention. And it dawned on me that a spouse should be a partner in my dreams; they aren’t supposed to make achieving

them more difficult. So, I gave him back his ring, and he gave me back my heart.”

“You didn’t give him back his heart?” I ask.

“I don’t think he ever truly gave it to me.”

“He sounds like a loser.”

She laughs.

“Do you ever get scared that you’re going to end up alone?” she asks.

“Nothing really scares me.”

“You’re lucky.”

“It’s all perspective. You come home from work to a quiet little home, build a fire, and pour yourself a glass of wine. One person looks around and thinks this is loneliness, and another looks around and thinks this is peace and freedom. Which one is right?”

“Both,” she replies.

“Yep. Depends on the person.”

She takes her glass of wine and stretches her legs out on the rug.

I gather our empty cartons and begin dumping them into the plastic bag they came in when I notice the cookies in the bottom. I dump them onto the table and continue to gather the mess.

Isley sits up.

“Ah, the best part,” she squeals.

I grab one of the wrapped fortune cookies.

“Hey, I wanted that one,” she says.

“This one?” I hold it up, just out of her reach.

“Yes, I had my eye on it since you emptied the bag.”

“What’s wrong with the other one?”

“Nothing. It’s just not mine. That one is,” she says as she tries to grab it from my hand.

“Nope. I touched it first.”

“Fine.”

She takes the other one from the table, unwraps it, and cracks it open, and I follow suit.

“*Pass the ball to the person on your right.*” I toss it on the table. “That’s stupid, cookie writer. Where do they come up with these?” I gripe.

She snatches it from its landing spot.

“Sounds pretty profound to me, and you were right. This one does belong to you.”

“What does yours say?” I ask.

She holds it close to her chest. “It’s private,” she says.

“I showed you mine. Show me yours,” I demand.

She gives in and reads the tiny slip of paper. “*You will go on a date with a semi-attractive man. You can do so much better.*”

“It does not say that.”

She grins and turns it around for me to see.

Well, damn.



Chapter eighteen

Isley

Langford takes our trash to the kitchen and returns with another beer.

I remove my boots and join him on the couch with my wine, curling my legs beneath me.

“Before we start talking shop, let’s get to know each other better,” I say.

He leans back and assesses me. “What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s play Twenty Questions.”

“All right. I’ll start. What’s your favorite television show?” he asks.

“*Golden Girls*.”

“Really? *The Golden Girls*? What are you, sixty?”

“Hey, those women are hilarious, and honestly, there’s no self-help guru better equipped to dole out sage life advice

better than Sophia Petrillo over a slice of cheesecake,” I defend.

“Okay. If you say so.”

“What about you?” I ask.

“Anything on ESPN.”

I roll my eyes. “Figures.”

“Favorite flower?” he asks.

“White tulips.”

“Favorite book?” I ask.

“I don’t have one,” he says.

“You don’t read?”

“Why would you make that leap?”

I shrug as I bring my glass to my lips. “It just doesn’t seem like something you would enjoy. Not manly enough. I mean, your favorite television show is all of ESPN,” I point out.

He leans over and whispers, “You think I’m manly, huh?”

Feeling the warm blush creep up my cheeks, I deflect. “Macho. I meant, macho.”

He grins. “For your information, I don’t have a favorite book because, usually, the one I’m reading at the moment is my favorite. The Boxcar Children is my favorite series from my childhood. *Where the Wild Things Are* is my favorite that I used to read to Tuck when he was younger. I enjoy a good thriller, so I’m a big Stephen King fan, but sometimes, I want a historical nonfiction that dives deep into something that interests me, like *The Forgotten 500* by Gregory Freeman, which covers the greatest rescue mission in World War II.”

Wow.

“I like that,” he muses.

“What?”

“The surprised look on your face.”

“Your turn,” I tell him.

“Favorite vacation spot?”

I consider the question carefully.

“I prefer places off the beaten path. A bed-and-breakfast or Airbnb. A quaint country motel, tucked on some obscure road. A lakeside cottage.”

“Hmm, I figured you as more of a *five-star resort* kinda gal.”

“I like that,” I say.

He gives me a quizzical glance.

“The surprised look on your face,” I clarify.

That makes him chuckle.

“I guess we’re both full of surprises, aren’t we?”

“I guess we are.”

“What made you want to build a ski resort?” I ask.

“When we were little, our grandfather used to take us up on Misty Mountain every time it snowed. We’d spend hours chasing each other down the slope in old inner tubes or a sled. I’d think to myself that it was a shame my friends would go on vacation to Gatlinburg to ski. We have the best powder and plenty of good slopes right here.”

“Chasing dreams.”

He takes a deep breath. “I don’t want to ruin the night, but we should probably talk about business.”

“Who says it will ruin the night? I like a good debate. I like stimulating conversations. They’re better than sex.”

He chuckles.

“What?”

“You obviously haven’t had sex with the right person.” He leans in and mutters, “Yet.”

“You are so cocky,” I quip.

He sits back, and the levity of the moment evaporates.

“Why are you and your father opposed to the resort?” he asks.

“I’m not against the ski resort, Langford. I love the idea of families coming here for their holidays and making lifelong memories here in Balsam Ridge.”

“But I thought ...”

“It’s not the Misty Mountain Ranch and Ski Area that I have a problem with. It’s about all the proposed development that is coming with the project,” I explain.

“You mean, the development of the property off Hickory Camp Road?” he asks.

“It’s one of the major thoroughfares leading into the valley from the east. The drive is beautiful, and people use it to access the parkway.”

“Yeah, and it’s also the route that will be taken to Misty Mountain,” he says.

“Exactly. It’s acres and acres of blue spruce and wildflowers. The elk and rabbits and black bears call it home. You want to bulldoze it to add two more RV and mobile home parks in town.”

“The investors have offered a fair price for the land. It will bring new rental options for guests who want to ski but don’t want the expense of staying at the resort as well as provide affordable housing options for the temporary residents who are here to work at the resort during the season.”

“The Tuttles already have the largest RV park in the Tennessee mountains. Surely, it can accommodate the influx of needed RV space,” I argue.

He shakes his head. “Most of Pop’s RV hookup sites are taken by permanent renters. They’ve been grandfathered in for generations, and they won’t be willing to give up their spaces. Besides, he only has a few spots that can hold anything larger than a twenty-five-footer, and he’s located on the other end of the valley.”

“Why does it have to be a mobile home site? Why not rental cabins that can be built within the landscape?” I ask.

“It’s not meant for weekly or weekend stays, Isley. The workers will be coming in for four months at a time. They can’t afford to rent cabins that long. They’ll want to be able to bring their pets, and they don’t want to spend all their income on rentals. They’ll want to pull their RVs up and then pull them back home.”

I haven’t looked at it from that perspective before. There has to be a solution that would satisfy both sides of the issue.

“If the investors were willing to consider smaller cabins and offer an exclusive contract to you for a set number of homes for the season at a discount, would you consider it?” I ask.

He sits back, and I can see his mind working.

“As in me provide housing for the employees?” he asks.

“Yeah. Make it part of their employment contract. You could pass the cost to them as part of their salary? You could even charge an extra couple of dollars per lift ticket to help cover the costs. I saw your business plan, and honestly, you could charge eight to ten times more per ticket, and you’d be on market price point with Gatlinburg and the North Carolina ski resorts.”

“I know, but the plan is to charge less and drive some of the traffic from those other resorts to Balsam Ridge. Then, after we’ve built a reputation, we’d reexamine our fees.”

I shake my head. “You’re risking people thinking you’re a poor man’s ski mountain. Let the resort speak for itself and charge what the vacation and accommodations are worth. Don’t settle for less. Offer them a great experience, and word of mouth will spread. You’ll also have more capital for advertising and marketing too.”

“You get what you pay for,” he mutters.

“Exactly.”

“I’m not an unreasonable man, Isley, and neither are the men who want to invest in the land development. Would you be willing to meet with them to discuss your suggestions?” he asks.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Consider it a dry run at your first chamber meeting if you were to somehow pull off a miracle and beat me,” he says, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I sit up and get into his face. “You don’t stand a chance, Tuttle.”

Heat flashes in his eyes at my challenge, and then they fall to my mouth.

One minute, we’re talking issues, and the next, I’m in his arms, and his lips are crushing mine.

We make out like teenagers for what seems like hours before he stands, taking me with him. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he starts walking us down the hallway.



Chapter nineteen

Langford

It has been a long time since I've felt this intense attraction to a woman.

The way those damn skirts hug her curves and her cheeks flush bright red when her temper flares, which is all the fucking time, makes me hard like a teenage prick.

I'm thirty-nine years old, for fuck's sake, and I've never had a problem with controlling my hormones or my dick before.

But Isley Paysour makes me want it all—flirty foreplay and hot, sweaty sex.

I must have lost my damn mind.

I need my head examined because she is one crazy-ass female. I don't do crazy. Crazy is Weston's specialty.

Despite all the reasons this is a bad idea, I walk us into my bedroom and kick the door shut. Then, I drop her to her feet, reach behind her, and click the lock in place.

“What are you doing?” she asks as her eyes move from mine to my lips.

A beautiful pink crawls up the slope of her pale throat to her cheeks.

I wonder if other parts of her body flush as well.

I rest a hand on the door above her and lean in. She takes a step backward until she is pinned against the door.

“What I’ve wanted to do since I got that small taste last night,” I mutter before bringing my free hand and fisting it in her long locks.

She gasps as I pull her to me, and the evidence of my arousal presses into her stomach. My leg settles between hers, and my thigh nestles into her heat.

I hold her in place as I tilt her head back and lower my mouth to hers.

It isn’t sweet or soft, but rough and claiming. My want for her has been coiled so fucking tight that I’m unable to control myself.

She is still at first, caught off guard by the kiss, but then she relaxes. Before I know it, her hands are in my hair, and she is kissing me back with the same urgency I feel.

My cock grows painfully hard at the triumph of her giving up the fight.

Our mouths disengage as I hoist her up and turn us from the door.

“This is insane,” she mutters as I walk us toward the bed.

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask.

“God, no,” she declares before taking my bottom lip between her teeth and tugging.

I groan as the sensation makes my dick twitch.

Stopping at the foot of the bed, I drop her, and a gasp escapes her lips as I fall to my knees and grasp her hips to pull her forward.

The fabric of her skirt is gathered and bunched at her sides, exposing a tiny pair of cream silk panties.

I slide my hands up her legs and to the inside of her thighs, gently tugging them apart.

The scent of her arousal lingers in the air between us, and I bring my eyes to hers as my fingers glide under the fabric to her pussy, warm and wet.

Gorgeous honey-colored eyes, filled with pulsating need, hold my gaze as her breath hitches when she brings her hips forward to meet my touch.

I make quick work of her panties, slide them down, and discard them on the floor.

“Let’s see if you taste as sweet as you smell,” I say.

I glide my tongue through her folds and twirl it around her clit. Sucking it gently between my lips and biting down.

Her hips buck off the bed as she cries my name into the darkness.

I chuckle as she tangles her fingers in my hair once again and holds my face to her pussy.

“Less laughing, more licking,” she whimpers.

Challenge accepted.

My tongue gets back to work, licking every inch of her.

Her body shifts and writhes as I find her opening and slide in a finger and leisurely pump it in and out of her.

“Langford,” she pants, growing frantic with impatience.

I add another finger, stretching her wide, as I suck and nip at her tender flesh.

“Yes, right there,” she mutters.

My erection is painful in my jeans, but I’m determined to make her come on my face before she comes on my cock.

I curl my fingers deeper inside of her, and I know I’ve hit the right spot when she jerks and a string of unladylike curses fill the air.

I flick the tip of my tongue over her swollen clit, and that's all it takes to set her off like a rocket.

I continue to pump and curl my fingers while her inner muscles ripple, and she comes, coating my fingers with her sweetness.

Once her body calms, I look up to see her head thrown back, her eyes closed, with a very satisfied look on her face.

I did that.

A feeling of possessiveness creeps up my chest, and I have to stop myself from mounting her and declaring, *Mine*, as I ravish her.

Instead, I stand and quickly undress. I kick my boots against the wall and throw my jeans and henley to the floor before retrieving a condom from my wallet.

Isley recovers, twists, and crawls her way up the bed. She is stunning with that curvaceous ass in the air, begging for my hands to reach out and grab it, but before I can reach her, she goes up to her knees and pulls the dress over her head, and then she lies back down, extending her arms and beckoning me.

I place one knee on the edge of the bed and take my cock in my hand. I rip the foil packet open with my teeth, and Isley watches with intense fascination as I roll the condom over my length.

I want to take my time. To feel the weight of her tits in the palms of my hands, to suck her nipples into tender, tightened peaks, but I'm too far gone for that. Her taste lingers on my lips, and my balls are so heavy that any control I have is slipping away.

I climb on top of her and guide myself to her opening. She drops her knees to the sides to give me better access, and as my hips buck forward, the tip of my cock slips inside.

"Fuck," I groan as the hot feel of her surrounds me.

She is so damn wet and ready that the hard length of me sinks in easily as she clenches her inner muscles.

Her eyes meet my gaze and hold it as I begin to fuck her, pushing deeper and deeper, and it drives me wild.

My body takes over as she wraps her legs around my waist and begins to raise her hips to meet mine, making sure that her clit rubs against my pelvis.

The need for this woman is so out of control that I swear I almost black out.

“Oh God, Langford,” she cries.

“That’s it. Say my name, baby.”

“You feel so good,” she whispers as I clutch her backside and pull her into every thrust.

I can feel her inner walls tightening around my cock, and I know she is about to come again.

Seconds later, she squeezes her eyes shut as her entire body spasms underneath me.

Thank fuck.

Unable to hold on any longer, I bear up and let go as my balls tighten and my own orgasm empties into her.

I’m so spent that I don’t know how long I lie there with my forehead against her chest while my breathing returns to normal.

“Langford?” My name is a question on her lips.

I look up and meet her eyes. “Yeah?”

“You’re heavy,” she squeaks out.

I kiss her forehead, hop up, and walk to the bathroom.

I remove the condom, tie it off, and toss it in the trash can by the sink.

I quickly clean up and rejoin her. She’s rolled to her side and curled into a ball.

Sliding in, I wrap an arm around her and tug her into my chest. Then, I grab the sheet and comforter and pull them over us.

I close my eyes and begin to drift off to sleep when I feel her stir.

“Fuck,” she mutters.

“What was that, sweetheart?”

“This was a date,” she states.

“Yep,” I agree.

She grunts, “Dammit, I love that bag.”



Chapter twenty

Langford

Light peers through the curtain and rouses me from a restful sleep.

I move to toss my arm across my face, but it's pinned under something warm.

Opening one eye, I look down to find Isley snuggled into my side. She has her arm hooked around my middle, and her head is resting against my chest.

I pull her in tighter and adjust my body away from the sunlight.

She lets out a faint protest as she's jostled, but she settles back into my side and drifts back off to dreamland.

About an hour later, my phone rings. I reach over and pat around on the nightstand until I find it and bring it to my ear.

"What?" I bark.

"Whoa, grumpy. I guess you didn't get any last night." Weston's voice is full of amusement.

“Why are you calling me?”

“Tucker asked me if we could stop by and get you before we go to The Hot Little Biscuit for breakfast. I just wanted to give you a heads-up and make sure the coast was clear before we headed that way.”

Shit.

“Can you give me an hour?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Yeah, lover boy, I can stall.”

“Thanks.”

I click off the line and drop the phone back onto the stand.

“Time to go?”

Isley’s sleepy voice brings my eyes to her.

She looks sexy as hell with her hair all over the place.

“Yeah, Tucker wants to come get me for breakfast,” I tell her as regret washes over me.

The last thing I want to do is kick her out of my bed. I’d rather spend all morning and afternoon in bed with her.

“Okay,” she says, sitting up and taking the sheet with her.

She starts looking around the room, then slides out of the bed, and starts quickly gathering her clothes. She opens the door and takes two steps into the dark closet before she realizes her mistake and turns back around.

I point to the door to the right, and she stumbles into the bathroom and clicks on the light.

I hear the shower start, and I have to resist the urge to join her. If I do, she’ll never get out of here before Tucker and Weston arrive.

Instead, I walk in and place a clean towel on the vanity for her and go out to start a pot of coffee.

I return to the room, carrying two mugs.

She is dressed and standing at the vanity. I set her coffee on top of the dresser and take a seat on the edge of the bed.

I hear a text message alert and check my phone.

Not me.

“Your phone is dinging,” I call to her.

“It’s in my purse. Can you bring it to me?” she asks.

I walk into the living room and over to where her purse was tossed in the armchair beside the window and fish it out. The screen illuminates, and I glance down at it as I walk into the bathroom to her.

She has pulled her damp hair up into a knot on the top of her head, her face is clean, and she is brushing her teeth. Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, and she talks around the toothbrush.

“I hope you don’t mind. I found it in your vanity.”

I always keep a few extra toothbrushes in the house in case one of my brothers stays over and needs one.

“Not at all.”

I wave her phone in the air. “What is this?” I ask.

She leans over, spits, and then rinses her mouth.

“It’s my to-do list,” she says when she finishes.

I turn the screen back around as she reaches for it and begin reading. *“Wake up by six. Eat breakfast. Shower. Brush teeth. Meet with parents’ attorney at one. Dinner meeting with Councilman Grammer at five.”*

I look up at her. “Really?”

She raises her hand, and as if she were holding an invisible pen, she bellows, “Check, check, and check. Now I need breakfast.”

I shake my head, and she puts her hands on her hips.

“I like to start my day ahead of the game. Now, I’m over halfway through my list, and it’s only nine in the morning,” she states.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit too regimented?”

“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail,” she mutters.

“What was that?”

“It’s a Benjamin Franklin quote my daddy had hanging in his office when we were young.”

She extends her hand, and I drop the phone into it.

She checks her message and then gives herself one last once-over before walking past me.

“The coffee on the dresser is for you. I didn’t know how you took it, so I added a little sugar and a dollop of cream.”

She wraps her hand around the handle and brings it to her nose and inhales. “Thanks.”

She blows the top of the steaming liquid and takes a sip.

“I’m sorry to rush you off. I’d take you to breakfast, but —”

“You don’t have to explain. I get it. I wouldn’t want my son to come home and find a stranger in my bed either,” she interrupts.

She sets the mug back on the dresser and picks up her purse.

“I need to get going anyway. I didn’t tell Mom I was going to be out all night.”

I walk her to the door, and she hurries down the steps. She stops a few feet from her truck and looks back at me.

“I had a good time last night,” she says.

“So did I.”

She smiles. “See you later.”

With that, she unlocks the door and hops inside.

I stand in the doorway and wave until she is down the road and out of sight.

Then, I get ready for breakfast.



Weston's truck pulls up to the house, and I hop in. The three of us drive out to Tucker's favorite breakfast spot, and Pop's truck is sitting out front.

Tucker is thrilled to see his grandparents waiting for a table.

"Grandpa, did you know we were coming here?"

"Nope. I just woke up and decided to take your grandma to breakfast. Your showing up is just a bonus. We'd be happy for our boys to join us."

I tell the hostess to change their Tuttle party of two to a Tuttle party of five, and we wait with them for about fifteen minutes until our table is ready.

The waitress takes our order, and Mom tells us about the gala that the city council has planned for next week.

"It's a pre-election gala at town hall. All donors to both your and Isley's campaigns are invited, and town voters can request tickets," she says.

"A gala? Since when does Balsam Ridge's town hall host galas?" I ask.

"Since now. The council members think it's an opportunity for you and Isley to mingle with the voters and for them to get to know you better."

"If I want to mingle with voters, I'll just pop into the diner for breakfast or get a haircut at Gill's Barber Shop. Besides, they already know me. I've lived here my entire life."

"True, but this is different. They need to hear the details of your plans for the community. Why they should vote for you for this particular job," she explains.

I shake my head. "Isn't that what the debate is for?"

Yet another event that I'm dreading.

"Yes, but this will be a more intimate chance for people to get to know the two of you."

"Black-tie events aren't really my thing," I grumble.

“Oh, really? Do you think you can win this election on your good looks and charm? That’s awfully arrogant, even for you, bro,” Weston says.

“Ah, you think I’m good-looking. I’m flattered,” I say.

He reaches over and pinches my cheek. “As handsome as the day is long.”

I slap his hand away from me.

“Son, you signed up for this, and you have to do what’s asked of you. You can’t half-ass your way through the process,” Pop says.

I sigh. “I know, Pop. I’ll go buy a tux. I’ll need one for Graham’s wedding in April anyway.”

Mom beams. She lives for this kind of thing.

“But I’m not dancing,” I say.

“Not even a slow dance with your mother?”

“No.”

That’s where I draw the line.

“I’ll dance with you, Grandma,” Tucker offers.

She smiles at him. “Why, thank you, Tucker.”

Pop leans over and kisses her cheek. “I’ll dance with my girl too.”

Mom looks at him lovingly as she reaches over to squeeze his hand. “My forever dance partner.”



Chapter twenty-one

Isley

I stand outside Brandee's front door, knocking.

"I'm coming. Hold your horses," she shouts.

A few minutes later, she opens the door and peers at me.

"I thought we were taking the day off so you could meet with your parents' lawyers," she mumbles as I rush past her.

"We are," I confirm.

She shuts the door and follows me to the living room.

"Then, why are you here, waking me up?" she asks.

I extend my arm in her direction. Clutched in my hand is the Jimmy Choo bag.

She blinks at it and then looks up at me.

"Take it," I say.

She clasps the strap, and I release it.

“Wait, so it was a date?” she asks, and then she steps closer as she examines my clothing. “Is that the same outfit you left in yesterday?”

I don’t say anything.

“It is. Why are you still wearing that?”

“Um ...”

“Isley Nicole Paysour, did you have dirty, dirty sex with Langford Tuttle last night?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“You did not!” she exclaims.

“I did.”

She starts to stalk out of the room.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“I’m going to get dressed and switch to my awesome new purse so you can take me to Well-Bred for coffee and give me every naughty detail,” she shouts.

“Okay, hurry up.”

I’m dying to tell her everything. I had a couple of minor freak-outs on my way here.

Five minutes later, she is dressed in a tracksuit and sporting a pair of oversize sunglasses.

“Can I borrow one of your other purses? I just dumped all my stuff out on my truck seat,” I say.

“Yeah, go pick one out of my closet.”

I grab the first one I see. Brandee locks up and follows me out. She helps me gather my things and shoves them into the quilted handbag.

She lifts a small leather-bound book and waves it in the air. “What’s this?” she asks.

“It’s my journal.”

“You keep a journal?”

“I used to. I found it in my bedroom when I moved back from Louisiana.”

“Oh, anything juicy in here?”

“Just my teenage dreams,” I reply.

“Dreams, huh? Let’s see if you’ve achieved any of them.”

She opens the book and starts to thumb through its pages.

Reaching across the truck, I snatch it from her grasp.

“I no longer plan to marry Justin Timberlake, so I guess some of my life goals have changed,” I quip.

“Hmm, I figured you were more of a Donnie Wahlberg girl.”

“What? Am I fifty? I was a NSYNC or Backstreet Boys girl, thank you very much,” I snap.

“God, you’re so old,” she says as she gets in and shuts the door.

“We’re the same age, Brandee.”



“Wow, that sounds hot as hell. I need a cigarette or a cold shower or something,” Brandee mutters.

I just spilled every detail of my night with Langford to her over cream-filled doughnuts and coffee.

“It was so hot,” I admit.

“You’re freaked out, aren’t you?” she asks.

“Maybe a little. I don’t know what came over me. It was like the night before in his truck. My body lit on fire, and it was like I had no control of it.”

“Or maybe a lot. Your leg hasn’t stopped bouncing since we got here.”

I bring the offending leg up and tuck it under my behind on the chair.

“How should I feel? I just slept with the enemy,” I cry.

“Slow down, Julia Roberts. He’s not a monster, and it’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a very big deal,” I disagree.

“I forgot who I was talking to. Of course it’s a big deal to you.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means you’re not the type to have casual sex, and that’s okay.”

“Are you?” I ask.

“It has its benefits. Guys do it all the time. Why should we feel guilty if we enjoy it? Not we, me. I can have sex like a man.”

“I can have sex like a man too,” I say.

“And how does a man have sex?” she asks.

I shrug. “He just does it. It’s a physical release. No emotion. No entanglement. Like scratching an itch,” I say.

“Not if he’s doing it right.”

“What?”

“If he’s doing it right, there will be a physical and emotional entanglement that you’ll both feel all the way to your toes.”

Dear Lord.

“Are you trying to talk me into enjoying no-strings-attached sex or not?”

She lowers her voice. “It’s okay if you like him, Isley.”

“I loathe him,” I say. Trying to convince myself more than her.

“Loathe? Is that right? Hmm, seems like an emotional entanglement to me.”

She takes a bite of a doughnut.

“I just don’t see the benefit of casual relationships if you want a husband and kids one day,” I say.

“One day. That’s very vague.”

“Yeah, one day,” I repeat.

“Everyone puts things off for one day. What if one day never comes?” she asks.

“Damn. You sure know how to ruin a doughnut party,” I say.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t want to see you get hurt. I mean, it is Langford Tuttle we’re talking about. If it were any other man on the planet, I’d be all about you having a fuck buddy, but Langford? Whew, this can get complicated.”

It already is complicated. What was I thinking?

I place my head in my hands and groan.

“Look on the bright side. At least you guys will have something to distract you at next week’s gala. When you start to get bored, listening to all the voters complaining, you can tune them out while you picture him naked.”

“I forgot about the gala. I need to buy a gown.”

“So do I. I need a new frock to go with my new designer handbag,” she says.

“I can reschedule today’s meetings, and we can drive to Knoxville to look for one,” I suggest.

There’ll be much less of a chance of running into Langford or any of his family members there.

“Let’s do it,” she agrees.



Chapter twenty-two

Isley

“Thank you all for being here. Today’s guest of honor is the embodiment of all the values that our little valley stands for—hard work, faith, and family—and we are so happy she’s here to spend the afternoon getting to know us all. Without further ado, I’d like you to help me in giving a warm welcome to the next mayor of Balsam Ridge, Isley Paysour,” Gale Clarke introduces me.

Mom’s country club is hosting a luncheon in my honor. I stand and make my way to the podium to roaring applause.

“Thank you all for having me, and thank you, Gale, for that lovely introduction. I’m honored to be here today. It’s my goal to fight for the women in this town, to focus on funding and lending for women-owned businesses, and to help them expand and grow. Not just for you and me, but also for our daughters and granddaughters. I promise a vote for me is a vote for your future. Now, let’s enjoy this wonderful meal and spend the next hour getting to know one another, shall we?”

I make my way back to the table, where Brandee, Ansley, Taeli, Jena, and my mother are seated.

“You did great, sweetheart,” Mom says.

We chat as the waitstaff serves everyone. Ladies come over and introduce themselves and pass me their business cards so Brandee can add them to our mailing list. Several pledge sizable campaign donations.

All in all, it’s a very successful event.

After lunch, Mom heads home to Daddy, and the rest of us meet Erin and Leona at Shining Rock Winery.

It’s a beautiful vineyard, nestled on the side of the mountain, that bottles a variety of wines and houses a café and event space.

Graham and Taeli chose the vineyard as the venue for their upcoming spring wedding.

Today, we are all here to sample wines and the café’s food menu to help Taeli make some decisions for her big day.

“I’m not sure why we’re here. We’re not bridesmaids or family,” I tell Brandee as we walk from the car to the tasting room.

“Because we are the bride’s NBFFs and she wants our opinion,” she says.

“I guess.”

The winery has a long pub table set up for us when we arrive. Each stool has a flight of wine and a tasting card waiting for us.

“Okay, girls. Give your honest opinion on these cards. I’m going to be using them to help me pick a white and a red for the wedding reception,” Taeli announces.

A staff member walks us through the tasting, explaining each wine before we taste and score it.

“How was the luncheon?” Sara-Beth asks as we await the second flight.

“It was good. I’m glad I let my mom talk me into it,” I reply.

“You should have invited your mother to come here with you,” Taeli says.

My eyes flutter to Sara-Beth for a second.

“I’m sure she would have appreciated that, but she needed to get home to my father anyway.”

“Seriously? Your mom wouldn’t come to hang out with us because Sara-Beth is here?” Erin asks.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. Your face said it for you.”

“I just thought it might be awkward, and this is about Taeli, not our drama,” I explain.

Erin turns to Sara-Beth. “Why did your husbands start feuding? Isley said it had something to do with a fire that ruined her dad’s crops one year, but there has to be more to the story than that, right?” Erin asks.

Sara-Beth looks at me. “What did Evelyn say about it?”

“I never asked,” I say.

“You weren’t curious?” Jena asks.

“It just was. I don’t remember a time when they weren’t at each other’s throat. When you grow up with something as normal, you don’t question it, I guess.”

It sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud.

Erin turns to Sara-Beth. “There is more to it. I can see it on your face. Come on, tell us. Please.”

Everyone’s focus turns to the Tuttle family matriarch.

“They were friends once. Best friends,” she begins.

“Friends? How did they come to hate each other so much?” I ask.

“Most feuds don’t start with hate. Hate usually starts with love. To hate someone that much, you have to have loved them

even more,” she states.

They loved each other?

“I find it hard to believe they ever had love for one another,” I say.

“They did,” she insists.

“And they loved the same girl,” Leona interjects.

“Oh, scandalous. A woman broke up their bromance,” Brandee chirps.

“It’s always about a woman,” Erin adds.

“Yes. They were all friends. The three of them were inseparable as children. As they got older though, both of the boys began to develop feelings for the girl. She cared deeply for them both, but love blossomed between her and one of them, and she had no control over it. Her heart was lost.”

“You?” I guess.

She brings her watery eyes to mine and smiles.

“Once upon a time and long before he met your mother. The three of us were thick as thieves, but somewhere along the way, the friendship between Hilton and me grew into something more. Asa never really forgave either of us, and then the fire happened. It added fuel to the animosity until it was too much.”

“Do you think they could ever be friends again?” I ask.

“I think it’s way overdue for them to bury the hatchet.”

It might be too late.



The men descend on us at seven, and after three flights and six bottles, just to double-check our choices, we are all a hair past tipsy when they arrive.

Taeli introduces Brandee and me to her son.

“It’s nice to meet you, Caleb,” I say.

“You too.”

A tall boy with dark brown hair and whiskey-colored eyes joins them.

“And this is his cousin, Tucker. He’s Langford’s son.”

The boy smiles at me, and, yep, there are the Tuttle dimples. He’s going to be a heartbreaker soon.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi, Tucker. It’s very nice to meet you as well.”

Langford strolls up and stands beside his boy.

“Dad, can we go sit at the firepit outside? The lady said the café has marshmallows,” he asks.

“Sure, bud.”

“Thanks.”

He and Caleb sprint off to the café.

“He’s a handsome young man,” I say as I watch them disappear.

“Of course he is. He’s mine.”

My eyes snap to him, and he’s wearing a cocky grin.

He steps closer and whispers, “You, in that dress, are making it hard for me to concentrate on the menu.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh, yeah.”

He brushes the back of his hand across my hip, and I shiver.

I notice Sara-Beth watching us closely from across the room.

“We have an audience,” I tell him.

He glances over his shoulder and then turns back to me.

“You want to go somewhere more private once we’re done with this?” he asks.

“What about Tucker?” I ask.

“I’ve got to be at the resort early tomorrow to meet with the contractors. Tuck’s staying the night with Caleb so Graham can take them to Scouts in the morning.”

“Weston?”

He shrugs. “I don’t give a shit if he knows we’re spending time together. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how good you taste all week,” he growls.

Oh.

“I don’t know. It’s awful short notice. I’ll have to see how the rest of the evening goes.”

Several employees come in, carrying trays full of the event menu options the café offers.

“Yummy. That looks mouthwatering. I can’t wait to taste it.”

I follow the servers to the table and join the rest of the group. I feel the heat of his stare on my body like a physical touch.

Taking a seat between Brandee and Erin, I try to focus on the task at hand and not the fact that Langford thinks I’m delicious.



Chapter twenty-three

Langford

The men are banished to the deck outside while the women sit and continue to discuss the merits of béarnaise over hollandaise sauce. It wasn't appreciated when, after thirty minutes of discussion, both Weston and I pointed out that they tasted exactly the fucking same, so Mom chased us off before Leona and Taeli blew a gasket.

Women get worked up over the craziest shit.

“How much longer do we have to stay? I mean, you know I love you, and I want to be supportive and do my brotherly duties, but I can't drink any more of this grape vinegar. I want a beer and a burger,” Weston says.

“I think it'd be fine for you to sneak out,” Graham says.

“Thanks, bro.” He turns to me. “You want to come with?”

“Nah, I'm going to tough it out a bit longer,” I reply.

“Suit yourself. I'll see you back at the house.”

He ducks down the steps that lead to the parking area, leaving Pop, Graham, and me sitting under heat lamps at a table that overlooks the hillside of grape vines.

Graham watches the girls through the window, a content smile on his face.

“I can’t wait to marry her,” he mutters, and Pop clasps him on the shoulder and squeezes.

“There ain’t nothing better than coming home to the right woman every night.”

He would know. He and Mom have been together since they were kids.

“What’s the secret, Pop?” I ask.

“The secret to what?”

“To a marriage that lasts as long as yours and Mom’s?”

“A lot of fighting, followed by a lot of making up,” he says, wagging his eyebrows.

“That’s it, huh?” I chuckle.

“Yep. It’s easy to fight and walk away, son. To insist that you’re always right and the other person is always wrong. It takes strength to push through your ego and humble yourself to another’s point of view. We’ve both had to apologize, and we’ve both had to give in. But the one thing I’ve never doubted is that we’re stronger together.”

“Even if you’re opposites in every way?” I ask.

“Because we’re opposites in every way. How boring would life be if we were carbon copies of one another? You want a woman who will challenge you intellectually and emotionally and put you in your place when you need to be. It makes the days and nights interesting, and there is no greater gift than an interesting life,” he muses.

“The shit moments make life interesting,” I mutter.

He smiles a knowing smile. “They do. They also pass. You have to cling to the small things because, in the end, you realize they’re the big things. Like the first time you see her in

her wedding gown. The first time you lay your hand on her swollen belly and feel your baby kick. The moment the doctor places that baby in your arms for the first time. Sitting outside and watching her drinking wine with a room full of women who are there to love and celebrate her or watching her help your future daughter-in-law plan her own wedding and see the joy it brings her. You have to collect those moments, hold them close, and pray they outweigh all the bad ones that come along.”

“I hope to find that one day,” I say.

“The minute you’re not looking, it will find you, son,” he states, and then he brings his eyes to mine. “It might even be right under your nose.”

“I don’t know, Pop. He and Tucker have a sweet life now,” Graham muses.

“True, but when she comes along, she’ll be the icing that makes it a little bit sweeter.”



Tucker and Caleb find us and start begging us to leave and get pizza.

“We have to wait for Taeli,” Graham tells them.

“But we’re hungry,” Caleb gripes.

“And bored,” Tucker adds.

“Sometimes, men have to suffer through stuff that bores them to make the women in their life happy,” Graham tells them.

“How much longer?” Tucker asks.

“It’s been hours,” Caleb mumbles.

I chuckle and look up at Graham and Pop.

“What do you think, guys? Have they suffered enough?”

“I guess, and by the looks of things in there, we’re gonna be here a while,” Graham says.

I turn to see three new bottles of wine being delivered to the table. The girls are all laughing and enjoying themselves.

“Come on, boys. Let’s go. I think you’ve earned a pizza and a round of miniature golf tonight,” I say.

“Yay!”

They race down to the truck.

“We’ll stop in town and scoop them up when we finish here,” Graham says.

“That’ll work. Good night, Pop.”

“Night, son.”

I head down to join the boys in my truck, happy as they are to escape the winery and go have some fun.

We stop at Village Pizza and devour an extra-large pie before walking across the street to Fantasy Golf and Arcade Room. Where the two of them proceed to kick my ass at two rounds of miniature golf before I hand them each a fistful of tokens to play arcade games.

I miss nights like this with the boys. Between overseeing the resort construction, managing the other properties I own, and now having to show my face at every function Mom and Leona sign me up for, I don’t get much time to just be a dad.

A tinge of guilt tightens my chest as I hear my grandpa’s voice in my head. “*A man shouldn’t work himself out of a life.*”

I didn’t even realize I had been doing that until I saw the joy on Tuck’s face when he sank a trick shot on me.

I can’t even remember the last time I took him fishing.

He’s always going with Scouts, Pop, or one of his uncles, but he and I haven’t spent a day on the riverbank together in forever.

I keep telling myself that once the resort is open, things will slow down, but what’s going to happen once it’s in full swing? Will I be spending all my time there?

My goal is to build something for him. For his future. Something I can pass down to him one day and he can pass down to his children, but what good is that if it keeps him from having a present with me?

I've got to stop scheduling myself out of time with my son.

“Dad? Do you want to play air hockey with us?”

Tucker's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“I sure do, buddy.”



Chapter twenty-four

Isley

We gather around the screen to look at the profile.

“Damn, he’s hot,” Jena says.

“I know, and he lives right outside Sevierville,” Brandee says.

“That’s totally doable,” Ansley says.

“So, you guys agree she should go out with him?” Brandee asks.

“Girl, he’s handsome, single, and a doctor. The man saves lives, for goodness’ sake,” Erin answers.

“He’s a plastic surgeon,” I correct.

Mom gave the doctor who performed her reconstructive breast surgery my phone number, and he’s been texting me, asking me to dinner.

“Even better. He saves women from having to live with big noses, floppy stomachs, and lopsided boobs.”

“She has a point,” Jena agrees.

“Hand me your phone. I’ll text him for you,” Erin says, extending her hand.

“No, thank you,” I decline.

“Just take him for a test drive. Why not?”

“Because someone else is revving her engine at the moment,” Brandee blabs.

“Don’t,” I plead.

“Too late. You can’t shove shaving cream back into the bottle,” Leona says.

“Spill,” Erin demands.

I mouth, *I’m going to kill you*, to Brandee, and my eyes flit to Sara-Beth, seated at the end of the table with Maxi, who joined the party when she got off her shift.

“Fine, you tell us,” Erin says, pointing to Brandee.

“Seems our candidate is sleeping with the enemy.”

A symphony of gasps fills the air, and all eyes come to me.

“Langford?” Erin asks.

“It only happened once,” I say.

“So far,” Brandee mutters.

I cut my eyes to her.

“Hey, no, you can’t be angry with her.” Erin snaps her fingers in my face to bring my focus back to her.

“We’re your BFFs, remember? We tell each other everything, and trust me, you’re gonna need us to navigate a romantic thing with Grumpy Bear.”

“I’m shocked,” Taeli says.

“I’m not,” Maxi says.

“Me neither,” Sara-Beth says.

They’re not? I am.

“I had no idea you two even liked each other,” Taeli adds.

“We don’t. We just ... it wasn’t a big deal. It was an *in the heat of the moment* thing,” I stutter.

“Ah, that’s the best kind of things,” Leona says.

Are these women crazy?

Locking eyes with Sara-Beth, I give her an apologetic look.

“It’s not any kind of thing. Honestly,” I declare.

Maxi stands and walks over to me. “Everyone, back off,” she demands.

She sits in the empty chair between me and Jena, grabs the bottle of wine in the middle of the table, and fills my glass to the top.

“First of all, you don’t have to apologize to Sara-Beth. She raised six boys, so there isn’t a lot that surprises her. She knows they have sex. Second of all, you two have chemistry. I’ve seen it. Maybe it’s born of animosity, but connection is connection, and you can’t fight it. Might as well not try. Third of all, Langford is hot and single, and you are hot and single. If nothing else, have fun. And give him hell.”

“Give him hell?”

She grins. “A man like Langford likes the challenge. Give. Him. Hell.”

“I like this plan,” Erin says.

I wrap my fingers around the stem of the wineglass and slide it to me. Then, I drink it in two gulps.

Give him hell.



I drink until I no longer feel the mortification of having my dalliance with Langford Tuttle blurted out in front of his mother.

Once all the wine is gone, everyone decides to call it a night.

Graham and Taeli leave to pick up the boys.

Wait, I thought the boys were here?

Pop guides Sara-Beth and Leona into his truck.

Maxi leaves on her motorcycle, and the rest of us wait in the parking lot for Erin's husband to pick us up.

"Oh boy, you guys are a hot mess," Ted says as he wrangles us into his Jeep.

Once he gets us all settled and belted in, he turns to me and Brandee. "Where to, ladies?"

Erin turns and gives us a devious grin.

"What?" I ask.

"Let's go give him hell."

"Yes," Brandee and Jena cry.

Yes.

She instructs Ted to take us to Langford's house. Then, she turns the radio on, and we all belt "Love Is a Battlefield" at the top of our lungs while Ted shakes his head.

Ted helps me out of the Jeep, and all the girls hang out the windows.

"Good luck."

"Go get him."

"Give it to him."

I wave and almost face-plant on the concrete.

"Whoa. Come on. I'll walk you to the door," Ted says, and I clutch the arm of his jacket as he leads me to the front door.

He knocks, and then I knock. Then, I start ringing the doorbell.

Finally, the porch light blinks on, and the door swings open.

Langford stands there in a pair of gray sweatpants. His hair is disheveled, and he's rubbing sleep from his eyes.

He looks like a dream.

"Ted? Isley?"

Ted pushes me forward.

"Sorry, man, or you're welcome. It could go either way."

He sprints back to the Jeep, and all the girls wave and blow kisses as they pull away.

I look back to Langford. "Hey."

"Hi," he says, and those damn dimples pops out on his cheek.

I want to bite them.

Focus, Isley.

"I'm here to give it to you," I say, leaning to poke my finger in his chest.

His rock-hard chest. I'm momentarily distracted as I bring both my hands up to caress his pecs.

Wow.

"Give what to me exactly?" he asks.

I lean in and whisper, "Hell."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, and it will be your pleasure," I say.

Wait.

"No, that's not right. Mine," I declare.

"Yours?"

"Yes. My pleasure," I state proudly.

I told him.

He folds his arms across that beautiful chest and leans against the door. "Tell me more."

Huh?

“More?” I ask.

He licks his lips. “Yes. I’m quite interested in your pleasure.”

Oh my.

“Okay,” I say as I sway on my feet.

He reaches out and grabs my shoulder, steadying me.

“We good?” I ask.

“I am not sure about you,” he replies.

“All righty then. As long as we’re clear.”

I give him a thumbs-up and attempt to wink.

Then, I take a step backward, and the stoop starts to spin.

The last thing I remember is floating through the air like a bird.

Whee.



Chapter twenty-five

Isley

I wake with a start on top of something warm and hard.

Opening one eye, I'm greeted with a patch of dark hair. My gaze travels up until it meets a square jaw, covered with dark brown stubble with a few streaks of gray.

Oh crap.

I carefully disengage from his hold and come up to my elbows.

I wipe my mouth and look down.

Dear Lord, did I drool on him?

I did.

Grabbing the first thing I can reach, I take the hem of the tank I'm wearing and wipe the evidence away.

Confused, I sit up on my knees and look down. I'm wearing a man's tank top, which is five sizes too big, and a

pair of boxer shorts. Sort of. They slipped right off my hips as soon as I sat up.

I was wearing a dress last night. Wasn't I?

Noticing a bottle of water on the side table, I lean up over his head and grab it. I'm so parched that I drink the entire thing in one gulp.

That's better.

Looking across the room, I see my dress hanging over one of the barstools at the kitchen island. I swing a leg off the couch, but before I can stand, a pair of large hands grips my hips.

“Going somewhere?”

His gravelly morning voice vibrates through me.

“Um, I was going to get dressed,” I whisper.

His eyes open, and he looks up at me. His hand slides from my hip to my stomach and just underneath the tank.

“Not yet,” he growls.

My eyes dart to the door that leads to the basement.

“Is Weston here?” I ask.

“Don't know,” he says as his hand moves further up until his fingertip grazes my nipple.

“What if he comes up here?” I ask as I arch into his touch.

“Don't care,” he says.

Sitting up, he brings his lips to my ear and sucks at my lobe.

I moan as the sensation of his callous hand on my breast and his warm breath at my ear causes my body to ignite.

I go limp, all thoughts of resisting leaving my mind.

He pivots his hips to sling his legs off the couch and braces them on the floor.

I feel so small in his arms, ultra-feminine. The way he looks at me, as if he could devour me, provokes my pulse to

race.

He pulls me into his lap, and I lock my arms around his shoulders. His mouth comes to the base of my throat, and I tip my head back to give him better access.

He kisses up my neck, across my jaw, to my lips.

I moan as he rolls his hips beneath me and his hard length rubs against my heated center.

I bear up, and the boxer shorts slide down my thighs. He helps me kick them off as my hands roam through the dark curls on his chest, my fingernails grazing lightly over his taut nipples.

He groans, and a ripple of pleasure rolls through me at the thought that my touch has the power to pull such a reaction from this large, all-consuming man.

I feed my hand lower until I reach the hem of his joggers. He lends me a hand, raising his hips so I can spring his erection free. Wrapping my fingers around the base, I begin to slowly glide my hand up to the top and back. Applying more and more pressure with each pass.

His eyes watch intently as I continue to pump. Increasing the pace until a bead of wetness spills out. My thumb swirls through it and coats the head. I lick my lips, but before I can take him in my mouth, he reaches to the end table for a condom and hands it to me.

Confused, I take the packet and look up at him.

“As much as I want that sexy mouth on me, I’ll be done before we even get started. Wrap me up and climb on, baby. I want you to ride me so I can feel you come on my cock,” he demands through gritted teeth.

Deciding that I can live with that, I do as instructed and tear open the condom and slide the latex over his hard, rigid skin.

I grip his shoulders and settle my knees on the couch, and he cups my ass in his hands and helps to lift me onto his cock.

I rotate my hips and slide his tip through the wetness at my entrance before I sink down. Taking him inch by inch until I've worked myself all the way down until I am seated on his thighs.

"Fuck," he groans through clenched teeth.

My eyes meet his, glazed over with desire.

"You're gonna be the death of me, aren't you?" he asks.

I just grin and lift up before coming back down on him hard.

Setting a steady pace, I writhe on top of him. With one hand still on my hip, he balances me as he helps to lift me up and pull me back down. His hips rise to meet mine each time. With his free hand, he palms one of my breasts and teases my nipple through the thin fabric of my tank. I arch back, and my hands go from his shoulders to his knees as I continue to bounce up and down faster and faster.

His name is a whimper on my lips as I feel my insides growing tight, and my legs begin to shake beneath me.

I'm teetering on the edge when his hand slides from my breast to between us, and his thumb begins to circle my clit. Then, as if he hit the start button on an engine, my body takes off. I cry out his name as I crest the wave of pleasure, and he holds me as I ride it all the way.

Before I can even open my eyes, he bears up, flips me, and places me on my knees. I rest my elbows on the arm of the couch, and he comes up and enters me from behind. I hold on as he takes his turn and rides me until his body stiffens. He pulls out and rips the condom off, and an unintelligible roar fills the air as thick ropes of hot cum spurt onto my backside.

He collapses on my back.

Both of us are completely spent and trying to catch our breath.

He recovers and leaves me bent over the arm of the couch to walk into the kitchen.

The view of his bare behind causes me to sigh out loud.

Returning with a warm, wet hand towel, he gently cleans my back, and I just lie here, limp.

It feels good to have someone tending to me.

Tossing the towel on the coffee table, he wraps an arm around my waist and falls to his back. We lie there silently, naked, twisted in each other arms, until we hear the sound of a truck coming up the drive.

Langford groans as he releases me. I jump to my feet and snatch my dress from the stool. He pulls his sweatpants on as I bolt into his bedroom.

I quickly dress and then sit on the bed and wait.

Fifteen minutes later, he opens the door and strolls in. His arms settle on the bed on either side of my hips, trapping me.

He plants a quick kiss on my lips.

“I’ve got to get to the meeting at the resort. Do you want to come with me, or do you want me to ask Weston to give you a ride home?”

“I’ll go with you,” I exclaim a little louder than I intended.

“Okay. We’ll grab some lunch afterward. Give me five.”

He stands and walks into the bathroom, stopping to look over his shoulder.

“Thank you for giving me hell.”



Chapter twenty-six

Langford

As we approach the entrance to Misty Mountain Ranch and Ski Area, I gape at the massive structure peeking above the tree line.

“It looks like a castle in the sky,” she utters.

“I modeled the lodge and hotel after Swiss chalets, using alpine-style architecture,” I explain.

We climb the winding road that leads to the hotel and park in front.

“How many rooms does the hotel offer?” she asks.

“It has a hundred seventy-five guest rooms and twenty suites. I plan to expand in the future. If I can drum up interest and investors, I’ll double the occupancy in the next ten years and add additional slope-side chalets that can be rented, so guests can just ski right out the door and down to the main lodge.”

“Wow, it’s really something. What’s up there?” She points to the glass structure at the top of the hotel.

“It’s a rooftop terrace with panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows for events. It will be a great place for weddings and parties with breathtaking mountain views. That’s where Garrett and Ansley’s wedding is taking place.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Ansley wanted a winter wedding, and she’ll get exactly what she wants. Three-hundred-sixty-degree view of the snow-topped mountains. It will be the first event we host the week before our grand opening. Garrett is renting out the entire resort to protect the privacy of his bride and his famous guests. He’ll have security to keep paparazzi and wedding crashers out.”

She closes her eyes.

“Isley?”

“Shh, I’m picturing Ansley walking down the aisle with snow falling all around her. Wow.”

She opens her eyes, and I continue to tell her about my dream.

“There are plans to build a little Swiss village up here with restaurants, bars, a spa, and gift shops. During the summer months, we’ll offer horseback riding, hiking and biking trails, and mountain climbing courses to make enough revenue to keep things up and running in the off-season. The idea is to blend two concepts, both the old and the new. Honoring the Appalachian and Balsam Ridge traditions but allowing for the comfort and luxury of a five-star ski resort. It’s far enough away from town not to infringe on the quaintness of the valley, but close enough to help pump in financial stability for the locals during the winter months.”

“That’s amazing,” she says.

“The ranch is going to be located in the back. It’ll have stables and a few rustic cabins, a dining hall, and outdoor recreation areas. The fields behind it will be used to grow organic fruits, vegetables, and herbs for the restaurants on the

property, and all our meats and dairy will be locally sourced from farms in the valley.”

“Langford, I had no idea. This is going to be huge for the local farmers,” she praises.

“That’s the idea.”

“You’re projected opening is next year?”

“It is. Barring any major incidents. The wildfire last fall set us back on getting the chairlifts in, and it takes for-fucking-ever to cut through red tape and get permits approved and engineers up here. I’ll start hiring and training more staff this December. I’ve already stolen some of the best ski and snowboard instructors out of Colorado, Morris is getting his certification, and I have a three-week trip planned at the beginning of November to see one of Garrett’s shows and meet with a recruiter and look at some up-and-coming talent.”

“You’re going away for three weeks a month before the election?”

I slide my eyes to her. “I hadn’t exactly planned to be running for mayor when those plans were made.”

“You might want to change those plans. It’s bad form to disappear during those critical weeks,” she says.

“I guess I’ll just have to have faith that I’ve done enough to convince the voters before then.”

She shakes her head. “I used to dream about opening a resort here when I was younger.”

“You did?”

“Yep. A tree-sort,” she says.

“What the hell is a tree-sort?” I ask.

“I wanted to create a resort of glam tree houses. I’m slightly obsessed with them. They’re fun and whimsical, and they help us to keep our imaginations alive. Who wants to be a grown-up when you can be a princess in a tower of a tree house? Each one was going to be fairy tale-themed. Hansel

and Gretel's cottage, Rapunzel's tower, Cinderella's castle, Peter Pan's ship, Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts isn't from a fairy tale."

"Whatever. You get the point."

"You should've done it. You could have started small with one or two and added more," I say.

She shrugs. "Daddy pointed out that you can't just use those without license agreements and it's a whole legal thing."

"Fucking red tape," I growl.

"Exactly."

"You could have made your own versions. A woodland cottage, a princess tower, an English castle, a pirate ship, and a massive stone school for magical creatures."

"Where were you when I was in my twenties?" she asks.

The contractor arrives and pulls in next to us.

"I'll take a walk around the grounds while you two talk shop," she says.

He and I go over the blueprints for the stables and the timeline for fencing the property.

When we finish, I go in search of her, and my phone rings.

"Hey, bud."

"Hey, Dad. Are you picking me up from Scouts, or am I going home with Uncle Graham?"

"I can come get you."

"Awesome. Can we go get cheeseburgers?"

"Did they not feed you?"

"Yeah, but that was before we went hiking. I burned all that up."

I chuckle. "All right, we'll get lunch."

"We'll be dismissed in forty-five minutes."

Shit, I promised to feed Isley.

“Bud, is it okay if I bring a friend with me?”

“Who?”

“You remember Isley? She’s friends with Taeli and Ansley.”

“The lady who’s running against you for mayor?”

“That’s her.”

“Cool.”

“Cool. We’ll see you soon.”

As I click off the line, I find her sitting on a swing, overlooking the valley. She is lost in thought as I approach and take hold of the ropes.

“Peaceful, isn’t it?” I ask.

She looks up at me as I give her a push, and she swings into the air.

“Very,” she howls.

I push her for ten minutes, enjoying her peals of laughter as she climbs higher and higher.

“We have to go. Tucker needs us to pick him up from Scouts.”

She looks over her shoulder. “We?”

“Yeah, I told him you were with me, and we are going to take you to get a cheeseburger.”

“I’m going to get fat, hanging out with you guys.”

I grab the swing and bring it to a halt. I bring my lips to her ear. “I’ll help you work off those extra calories.”

She melts into me and I bring my arms around her and lift her from the swing.

I lead us back to the truck, we get in and head back down the mountain and into town to the Scout pick up sight.

Tucker comes running as soon as he sees us.

He tosses his backpack in the bed of the truck. Then, he opens the back door, slides in behind me, and fastens his seat belt.

“Tuck, you remember Isley?”

“Duh, Dad. I saw her last night.”

“Can you say hello like a gentleman?” I ask.

“I’m sorry. Hi, Isley.”

“Hi, Tucker. How was Scouts?” she asks.

“It was cool. We hiked up Boone Peak and saw an entire herd of elk. We had to be still and quiet, but they walked real close to us.”

“Did you get any pictures?” Isley asks.

“No, ma’am. Our Scout leader doesn’t allow us to carry our phones.”

“That’s probably a good call. We use them too much.”

“Yeah, that’s what he says.”

The two of them chat all the way to the Cheesy Cow.

“Have you ever had a Cheesy Cow burger, Isley?” he asks.

“I have not.”

“You’re gonna thank us after this. They are *slap your momma* good.”

Isley giggles.

I cut my eyes to her. “Weston.”

Tucker hops out and runs to get us a table while I park the truck.

“He’s adorable,” Isley says as we walk through the parking lot.

“He gets less adorable and more exasperating every day,” I muse.

She laughs.

“Imagine your poor mother. Six ornery boys.”

I shake my head.

“I was easy, but Garrett and Weston.”

I let out a low whistle.

“I don’t know how she did it,” she says.

“She’s soft-spoken but don’t let that fool you. That woman is tougher than a

two-dollar steak. She ran our house with a gentle heart but an iron fist.”

I open the door and she walks in ahead of me. Tucker waves us over to a

booth in the back where he is seated with a chocolate milkshake already planted

in front of him.

“They have a new burger, Dad. It’s called The Hangover and it has bacon,

pepperoni, a fried egg, mozzarella, American cheese, hash browns, and pickles

on it,” Tucker informs.

“That sounds nasty. We must try it,” I suggest.

“Yay.”

Isley wrinkles her nose.

“Not me. That sounds gross.”

Tucker rolls his eyes and looks at me.

“Girls. They’re no fun. I’m gonna play us some music.”

He stands and sprints over to the jukebox that is against the wall by the door.

I cross my arms over my chest.

“Yeah. You need to loosen up and learn how to have a little fun,” I tell her.

“I have fun. All the time. Trucks loads of fun,” she says.

I lean over the table.

“Then tell me. What do you do for fun?”

“I take long bubble baths. I sleep in sometimes. I binge-watch funny television

shows while eating ice cream straight from the carton.”

“All things you do by yourself,” I say.

“Not true. Sometimes Brandee is with me.”

I raise an eyebrow at that.

“Not for the bubble baths. Get your mind out of the gutter Tuttle!”

I watch as the pink rises in her cheeks.

She’s fucking beautiful.

Tucker bounces back in the seat beside me and her eyes come to him.

“Alright. I’m in. Let’s see who can finish the dumpster fire of a cheeseburger

first.”

Tucker giggles.

“You’re on. Losers have to buy the winner an ice cream cone.”

“If you can eat ice cream after this, I buy you one,” she agrees.

She’s definitely not a wallflower.

I flag the waitress down and order us all The Hangover.

Tucker is the only one who finishes, and Isley was right. It’s fucking gross, but

I enjoyed watching her eat every bite.

The woman is magnificent.

“I win,” Tucker exclaims.

“Ice cream it is, but I’m afraid I’m going to need a break first. How about I buy you one at the craft show this afternoon?” Islay asks.

“Sure,” he agrees.

“Craft show?”

Her eyes come to me.

“Yes, the Balsam Ridge Fall Arts and Craft Show at the fairgrounds. Speaking of which, we need to go. I have to meet Brandee in an hour, we have a table to set up,” she says as she stands.

“You have a table at a craft show?” Tucker asks.

“Yep. I will be out there shaking hands and handing out campaign information. Aren’t you guys going?” she asks.

“My campaign managers failed to tell me my presence was required at a craft show today,” I grumble.

She grins triumphantly.

“But don’t worry. We’ll be there. You owe Tucker a cone, after all.”



After dropping Isley off, I call Mom and ask her why I wasn’t told about today.

“Oh please, I know you better than to suggest you spend an afternoon at a craft show. You’d have said no” she scoffs.

“Well, now I have to go,” I gripe.

“Wonderful. Your father and I will see you there,” she chimes.

We swing by the house and Weston decides to accompany us just to give me shit the entire drive.

The parking lot is packed and as much as I hate to admit it, this is the perfect place to get out and connect with voters. We park and pay a small fee to enter. Tucker runs off when he sees

friends from school and Weston, and I walk the aisles until we find Isley and Brandee at a table.

“You made it,” Isley bellows.

“I just came to see you gorgeous ladies,” Weston says.

“This isn’t a bar. You’re not here to pick up women,” I tell him.

“Says you, I can admire a beautiful woman anywhere,” he snaps then looks at the girls, “this is why he’s still single.”

Brandee rolls her eyes.

“I’m going to get a beverage.”

She walks off leaving the three of us.

Weston looks down at the at the array of promotional offerings they have laid out.

He picks up one of the ball caps with *Vote for Paysour* embroidered on the front and pulls it on his head.

“We gotta get you some cool stuff to pass out brother. Beer koozies, buttons, maybe one of those cool fans that plug into your phone. They’d come in handy when you’re camping or fishing.”

He snatches one of the pamphlets with a photograph of Isley. She’s at the local animal shelter, kneeling, surrounded by puppies that are licking her face. It’s the cutest damn thing I’ve ever seen.

“Nice,” Weston mutters.

“She doesn’t play fair,” I quip.

“I don’t play fair? You have a billboard. A billboard of your face. That’s hardly fair,” she scoffs.

“What does my face have to do with it?” I ask.

She grimaces.

“Never mind. Why are you dressed like that?”

I look down at my clothing.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“We’re here for a public appearance. Are flannel and boots your normal office attire?” she asks.

“Being as the mountain is my office, yes. Besides my ass doesn’t look as good in a skirt as yours does.”

She opens her mouth to give me a lashing when Zemry, the town’s unofficial grump and owner of the antique store on main street approaches.

“Hi, Zemry,” I greet.

“Langford. I’ve got a bone to pick with you,” he says.

“You do? Well, lay it on me, old man.”

“You planning on cutting down all the trees over there on the back side of my house?” he asks.

“No, Sir. We’re just clearing part of the area so we can plant gardens,” I explain.

“Those damn bulldozers have been hacking away for days now. There won’t be a tree standing when they’re through,” he sputters.

“Now Zemry, I’m just clearing enough space so we can plant and provide enough food for the resort.”

“I don’t care about that place. I want you to leave those woods alone,” he demands.

“That’s small thinking Zemry. The resort is going to bring a lot of winter revenue to the valley and it’s very responsible for Langford to plant crops. Think of the number of jobs he’ll be creating?” Isley interjects.

“You saying I’m small-minded, Isley?” he asks.

“No sir. I said that’s small thinking. I want this valley to start thinking about the future. The possibilities,” she insists.

“I want you politicians to start thinking about the people who have always been here and not just the people you hope to entice to visit. Us small minds built this valley with our own hands and feet. What we want matters,” he grumbles.

“Of course, it does. I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just that Langford is doing the town a great service by opening the ski resort, and he’s trying to make it as self-sustainable as possible so that everything is provided in and through the people and companies located here in Balsam Ridge. Which keeps the revenue here. Not sending it out to buy food or resources from large companies that have no roots in the valley. It’s admirable,” she explains.

Zemry’s eyes come to me.

“You promise you won’t cut more than you have to?”

“You have my word.”

He extends his hand.

“A man’s word is his greatest asset, Son. Don’t give it unless you aim to keep it.”

I clasp his hand in mine.

“Yes, Sir.”

He frowns at Isley and stomps off.

“He’s pleasant. I hope the rest of the voters aren’t as ornery,” she quips.

“Don’t worry just keep everything simple and speak slowly so the small minds around here can comprehend and you’ll be fine,” I say.

“That was taken out of context, and you know it,” she barks.

“Yeah. I know.”

“You could have said something,” she accuses.

“Now what fun would that have been? I liked watching you squirm. Besides watching you defend me was hot as hell.”

She cuts her eyes to me, and I swear if looks could kill I’d be six feet under.

“You’re an asshole.”

I chuckle.

“Isley, all you need to do is drop the bravado and learn to talk to them like they’re your neighbor, your banker, your child’s teacher. Talk to them like you love Balsam Ridge.”

“I do love Balsam Ridge,” she insists.

“I know you do. So, show everyone, like you did Zemry just now and you’ll win them over.”

“I’m confused. Who do you want to win this competition?” Weston asks me.

“The best man,” I answer.

“That’s definitely you, sweetheart,” he tells Isley.

A couple wander over to the table and introduce themselves and Isley engages them in conversation.

Weston and I watch as she laughs and chats animatedly with them.

“Your opponent is a spitfire and you’re gonna have to up your game, big man. Turn that Tuttle charm into votes. Not that’s she’s doing herself any favors defending you. How did that happen?” he asks.

“I think she likes me.”

“I think you’re right. God help her,” he quips.



Chapter twenty-seven

Isley

I fasten the diamond studs in my ears, grab my clutch, and do one more twirl in the mirror.

Tonight is the gala at the town hall, and I feel like Cinderella in my new gown.

The A-line champagne-colored satin gown has a one-shoulder, form-fitted bodice with a full ruffled skirt, which has a slit from the floor to the top of my right thigh, and it's just shy of scandalous.

My hair is long and loose with the ends curled to give it a dramatic, vintage Hollywood bombshell effect. My eyes are smoky, and my lips are red.

I kept my accessories simple with minimal jewelry and one of my mother's gold beaded clutches.

I slip into the matching stilettos and walk to the living room, where my mother stands, fiddling with a strand of pearls.

“Oh, Isley, you look stunning,” she says.

“Thanks, Mom. You look beautiful yourself.”

She clasps a white gold watch around her wrist and then looks at the time. “Goodness. We need to go. You fetch your father, and I’ll pull the car around.”

“Okay.” I hand her my clutch and go in search of him.

I find him in their bedroom, and he’s dressed to go to the gala, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking down at his shoes.

He’s a handsome sight in his tuxedo. I remember seeing him dressed in his Sunday best many times, growing up. I was so proud to be his daughter. To sit beside him in the pew at church.

I’m still proud.

“Here, Daddy, let me help you with those,” I say as I enter.

He looks up at me, confused, and I stoop down and start to tie the shiny black oxford shoes, chatting him up to distract him from the fact that I am doing it.

“Isley, what if I can’t remember anyone’s name?” he asks.

“Don’t worry, Daddy. I’ll remember for you,” I reassure him.

I finish up and stand.

“You’re a vision. The stars are going to be jealous of how brightly you shine tonight, sweetheart.”

“You’re quite the Dapper Dan yourself. Mom’s going to have to beat the ladies off you.”

He chuckles.

“You two are the only ladies I need,” he says as he stands and offers me his elbow.

We stop in the foyer, and I arm the security system. Mom collects us, and we head into town.



It's a clear but chilly fall evening. The days are slowly growing shorter, and the leaves on the trees have begun to turn vibrant shades of orange, red, and yellow.

It's my favorite time of year in the Tennessee mountains.

Mom pulls the car up to the entrance of town hall so Daddy and I can step out of the warmth of the car and right inside.

I wait for him to open my door and allow him to help me from the backseat, and he leads me up the concrete stairs to the double doors.

Sara-Beth and Leona are in the foyer, greeting guests as they arrive and passing out *Vote for Tuttle* pins.

Dang it, why didn't I think of that?

"Isley, you look stunning," Sara-Beth greets me with a warm embrace.

Her gaze falls on my escort, and her eyes soften.

"Hello, Asa," she says.

"Sara, it's been a long time. Too long," Daddy returns affectionately.

"We saw Sara-Beth at the diner the other day, remember?" I remind him.

Daddy nods. "Oh, yes, that's right."

"You have a lovely daughter. We just adore her," Sara-Beth tells him.

His eyes come to me. "I know I do. She's a treasure."

He leans down and kisses my temple.

"Don't make me cry, Daddy. I'll mess up my makeup before the speeches."

We wait for Mom to join us, and the three of us walk inside in search of the table with our name cards. They take a seat and fall into conversation with Councilman Bryon Neely and his wife, Cecilia.

“I’m going to do a walkabout,” I whisper in Mom’s ear before excusing myself.

Taking a glass of champagne from a tray as a server passes, I make my way around the room, stopping to greet guests and friends and searching for Brandee among the faces.

Opening my clutch, I find my phone to send her a text when I notice she already sent one.

Brandee: Langford’s people are handing out promo items at the door. I’m running to the office to grab some of yours. Be right back.

That’s my girl.

I hear a low whistle and turn to see Langford standing in the corner with a glass of whiskey in hand.

“That’s not fair at all, Miss Paysour.”

“What’s that, Mr. Tuttle?”

“You, in that dress.”

I do a slow turn.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

“Nobody’s going to pay a damn bit of attention to me when we’re on that stage.”

Oh, yes, they will.

He is a sight to behold in a classic tuxedo. Perfectly tailored to fit the man. His hair and newly grown beard are freshly trimmed, and I have to resist the impulse to wrap myself in his warmth.

“All’s fair in love and war,” I quip.

He laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“I was just thinking how this campaign has turned out to be a lot more fun than I anticipated.”

The band begins to play a slow jazz song.

“Do you dance?” I ask.

“Not very well.”

“Why do men always say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

I reach my hand out. “Come on. Dance with me. I’ll lead.”

We set our glasses on one of the high tables that frame the room, and he takes my hand and leads me through the sea of people on the dance floor by the stage.

I place my arms into position and lock my frame. Then, I guide him around the floor. When the music changes to a slow instrumental, he pulls me closer. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and lay my head against his chest.

“You smell good,” he murmurs in my hair.

Before long, we have captured the attention of the crowd, and they’re gathered at the edge of the floor.

“They’re watching and critiquing my dance skills,” he says.

“No, they’re not. They’re fascinated that we’re dancing together. We’re on opposite teams, remember?”

There’s a tap on my shoulder, and I look up to see Daddy standing to my right.

“May I cut in?” he asks Langford.

He inclines his head and releases me into my father’s arms.



Chapter twenty-eight

Langford

Mom and Leona lead Tucker and me around the room, introducing us to every person we encounter. Most are familiar faces that I've known since childhood.

Through the haze of idle chitchat and firm handshakes, I watch Isley from across the room, warmly greeting everyone who approaches her. She talks animatedly and laughs easily, giving each individual her full attention.

They are mesmerized by her. Like moths to a flame.

The cocktail hour comes to a close, and everyone takes their seat as dinner is served.

Tuck and I make eye contact as the pitiful plates of fancy food are placed in front of us, wordlessly agreeing that we'll be making a pit stop for real food on the way home.

When the dinner plates have been collected and the coffee and dessert carts are rolled out, Ansley makes her way onto the stage to the microphone and garners everyone's attention.

“Good evening, everyone. On behalf of the Balsam Ridge Chamber of Commerce, I’d like to thank you all for joining us this evening. I hope you’ve all enjoyed your meals, and if you haven’t yet, make sure you get a slice or two of the chocolate cake, provided by Miss Robin’s bakery. We’ve reached that point in the evening where we’d like to invite our guests of honor to say a few words.

“Langford Tuttle was born and raised here in Balsam Ridge. He is a loving son, father, and hardworking businessman who has always strived to give back to our community with his time and his money. So, without further ado, please help me welcome your candidate for mayor, Langford Tuttle.”

I join her onstage, kiss her cheek, and take the microphone.

“Thank you for that incredible, if not slightly embellished, introduction. It helps that the emcee is marrying my brother,” I say, and the crowd laughs.

I clear my throat as I tug at the collar of my dress shirt.

I fucking hate tuxedos. They’re suffocating.

“I’m not the best at this kind of thing, and I don’t have any notes, so I hope I don’t embarrass you, Mom and Pop. I’m just a man who lives and works beside all of you, and I have the privilege of having a unique point of view when it comes to the needs of this community. If elected, I want to be involved with our Chamber of Commerce to promote valley tourism and help assist our business owners in achieving their goals. I plan to have an open line of communication with our elected state officials to ensure that Balsam Ridge is considered for the various available sources of funding needed to help maintain and improve our water and sewer systems, our roads, and the parks and recreation areas. I’ll make myself available to assist all town department heads with concerns and issues in their areas of responsibility. My office will work directly with Valley Fire and Rescue to help ensure that there is sufficient manpower and resources to protect our citizens, their homes, and the majestic mountain forestry.”

I pause as a whisper spreads across the room.

“Look, I don’t have any experience in politics, and I’m no public speaker, but I do have experience in helping people and in running a profitable business. So, if you want your next mayor to bring new development that brings more job opportunities to the valley—higher-paying jobs, jobs that last year-round so we don’t have to rely on the summer season to get us by—it’s time for us to focus on growth, and I’m the man for that job. Thank you.”

I exit the stage to applause, and Ansley returns to the mic.

“And now, I’d like to introduce Isley Paysour, who was also born and raised here in Balsam Ridge. She left for a few years, obtained her master’s degree in social work, and held a position in the mayor’s office in the city of New Orleans. We are fortunate to have her return to us with those experiences under her belt. So, without further ado, please help me welcome your other candidate for mayor, Isley Paysour.”

Isley’s father stands and assists her to her feet. She kisses his cheek before making her way up the steps to the stage. She and Ansley embrace, and she takes her turn at the microphone.

She takes a deep breath and releases it before focusing on the crowd.

“Hello, everyone. It’s a pleasure to be here with you tonight. Our town is no doubt a great place to live and raise a family. It has a reputation for being very friendly, and many volunteers come together to meet the needs of our impoverished, disabled, seniors and youth. I want to build on that by creating an infrastructure that addresses and provides solutions for the problems faced by everyone in our community, especially those with the greatest need. I care about inclusivity for all classes and making Balsam Ridge a safe haven. I want our children to know that we support them and their basic human rights. That we support female and minority-owned businesses. I’ll be committed to securing services to aid the elderly, the disabled, and the single parents in our community, and I stand in support of people of all races and religions.

“I want everyone to know we can be a small town, steeped in a rich history, that cares about and honors its traditions but still cares about the things that affect you today. All of them. Every single one. And I’d like to be able to ensure that your tax money is used to propel us forward with positive changes for the future, like breaking ground on a new community health center and raising funds for the arts and leadership programs at the middle and high schools. Do you know there are grants and nonprofit organizations we can approach to help with those things? To help with the expansion and maintenance that the schools clearly need? I have the background and the connections this town needs.

“And, yes, my opponent makes some great points. Growth is essential. I want to bring sustainable development to Balsam Ridge. Development that adds to the value of our community while preserving our forests and mountains, not lining the pockets of developers that want to tear the mountain down to cram more temporary housing into the landscape. We need a health center, a natural history museum, a greenway, a community garden, and a theater. All those things bring jobs and income, and they don’t decimate the environment. I’d be honored to work with you in these areas if you elect me as your next mayor.”

The crowd erupts in applause.

Well, damn.

Asa takes her hand and helps her from the stage, and Ansley appears once again.

“Wow. I don’t know about all of you, but I think my decision just got harder. Langford and Isley, you both gave us a lot to think about until November. Everyone, please join me in another round of applause for our mayoral candidates.”

She steps back until the clapping subsides.

“I’ll let you all get back to your dessert and drinks. Thank you again on behalf of all your Chamber of Commerce members.”



Chapter twenty-nine

Isley

All the tension leaves my body after my speech, and I'm able to enjoy a cup of coffee and a slice of cake. The rest of the evening consists of dancing and schmoozing the public for donations. I take on the dancing while leaving the convincing to Brandee.

I'm taking a spin on the dance floor with Mayor Gentry when I hear my mother's panicked voice calling for me.

"Excuse me, Mayor," I say as I go to her.

"What's the matter, Mom?"

Her face has lost all color, and her eyes are too watery.

"Have you seen your father?"

"Not in a while. Why?"

"I went to the restroom, and when I returned, I couldn't find him anywhere!" she cries.

“It’s okay, Mom. Stay calm. I’m sure he’s just in the restroom himself,” I assure her.

Langford is standing across the room, and his eyes meet mine. He must see the panic on my face because he excuses himself and heads our way.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

“My dad’s missing, and we need to find him,” I say.

He looks confused by my urgency.

“Please, Langford. Can you check the men’s room?”

“Sure,” he says before walking to the door. He returns a few moments later and shakes his head.

“Oh no, he must have left,” Mom mumbles.

I turn to her and take her hand.

“Does he have the keys to your car?” I ask.

“No. I have the keys.”

“Then, he couldn’t have gone far. You stay calm and remain here in case he returns, and I’ll go look for him.”

She nods, but I can see the fear in her eyes.

A hand rests on the small of my back, and I glance over my shoulder to see Langford’s concerned expression.

“I need to go look for him,” I whisper.

“I’ll come with you,” he says.

I look around the room tentatively. “I don’t want to cause a scene.”

He looks over my head and waves his mother over.

“Mom, I need to help Isley look for something. If anyone starts to miss us, will you discreetly run interference until we return?” he asks.

She looks from him to Mom to me, and she takes Mom’s hand from mine. “Of course. Come, Evelyn. Let’s check out the desserts, shall we?”

She doesn't ask for another detail before leading Mom off in the direction of the table full of an array of confections.

"Let's go," Langford says, and his hand remains on my back as he guides us to the exit.

Once we are out on the sidewalk, he turns me to face him.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"He's been struggling with memory loss, and he's been having a hard time the last few months. He probably got confused and wandered off in the cold. We have to find him."

He reaches into his jacket and retrieves his phone. Tapping the screen, he brings it to his ear.

"Corbin, are you on tonight? Good. I need your help. Asa Paysour has wandered off from town hall. He could be confused and lost. Isley and I are going to look for him, but with it being dark and the temperature dropping fast, we might need some help."

There is a pause, and then he continues, "I'm not sure, but from what I'm gathering on my own, I think he might be having some cognitive issues."

He looks to me in question, and I nod my head once before looking away.

"Perfect. We'll search the main roads all the way to his house in my truck. Corbin, can we keep this on the down-low for now?"

Another pause, and I turn to meet his eyes again. Grateful that he is acting to protect my father's privacy.

"Thanks, brother."

He clicks off.

"Come on. My truck's parked over here."

He quickly leads me across the parking lot to his pickup, and we load in.

"Corbin and a few of the other guys from Valley Fire and Rescue are going to search the woods behind town hall."

“We should be searching there. He could hurt himself if he stumbled in there,” I cry.

He slides his eyes to me as he turns the key, and his truck rumbles to life.

“Are you going to trample around in the forest, in the pitch-black, in that gown and those heels?” he asks.

“Yes!”

For my daddy, I’d run barefoot in the snow through the wilderness.

He shakes his head.

“Trust Corbin and his team. They have the equipment and know what they’re doing. It’s their job to find people in trouble.”

He’s right. Getting myself in a situation isn’t going to help right now.

We pull out of the parking lot and onto Main Street. Langford drives slowly as we both scour the sidewalks and parking lots of every business on the route toward my parents’ home.

No sign of my father.

When we make it to the house, I jump out and run up to the porch while Langford makes a lap around the property. The door is locked, and the security system is still armed, so I know he hasn’t attempted to enter.

I run inside and kick off my stilettos, stuff my feet into a pair of shearling boots, and grab my puffer jacket. I pull it on over my gown, and as I stop to rearm the system, I look down at a small framed photo of our family on the table in the foyer. What I’d give to go back to that day. The last family Christmas gathering the year before Heath left for college. Dad is looking lovingly at Mom while we surround them. Life was so simple then.

Why was I in such a hurry to grow up?

The system flashes, followed by three loud beeps to let me know the alarm is set.

I hurry out the door and down the steps. Langford meets me at the back of his truck.

“No sign of him inside. You?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “He isn’t anywhere out here. I checked the out building and the detached garage.”

I look up, and my eyes scan the land behind the house.

Where did you go, Daddy?

“Do you think he would wander into the crops?”

He considers the question.

“What exactly are we dealing with here, Isley?”

I want to tell him it’s none of his business, that I don’t need his help, and send him on his way, but the truth is that I’m terrified and I don’t know what to do.

“He has Alzheimer’s,” I whisper, wishing I could snatch the words out of the air between us. Saying them out loud to someone other than my family makes it real.

He walks to me and reaches around to open the passenger door. “It’s freezing. Get in.”

I let him help me inside the cab of the truck and then watch as he rounds the hood and slides in behind the wheel.

He adjusts the temperature on the dashboard, and a blast of warm air streams across us. I raise my hands to the vent in front of me.

“How far along?”

I don’t look over to him as I answer, “Stage three, they think. The symptoms were subtle at first. He struggled with remembering dates, like our birthdays or his and Mom’s anniversary. Then, it was people. Ones he’d known his entire life. He knew who they were, but wouldn’t be able to call them by their name. A little forgetfulness at sixty-five is normal, so I brushed it off. The truth is, I was so preoccupied

with Mom's treatments that I didn't have the mental focus to see what was happening. The employees at the wood mill tried to tell me. I thought the board was just wanting to force him out, so I encouraged him to retire early and sell the mill. That helped ... for a while."

"And now?"

I finally look at him through the tears that are now streaming down my cheeks.

"The episodes got worse and more frequent this summer. I made him go to Knoxville to see a neurologist, and they gave us the news. It's progressed so fast. He has periods of time when he's absolutely fine, sharp as a tack, my same smart, witty father, but then he has episodes that scare the shit out of me. When he looks at me like he doesn't recognize me. I thought we had more time. I thought ..."

A warm, large, and callous hand covers mine. I look down, and I slowly turn mine so that our fingers can interlock.

The relief of sharing this with him is overwhelming.

"It's so cold and dark out. He has to be frightened," I whisper.

"We'll find him," he assures me.



Chapter thirty

Isley

We drive from one end of the valley to the other, checking side roads and parking lots.

Every second that ticks inflames my fear.

Langford doesn't say much, and he doesn't have to—just having his silent strength beside me is enough.

An hour and a half later, his phone finally rings.

“Hey, Cor. Yes. Will meet you at his house.” He clicks off the line, and his eyes come to me. “They got him.”

I let out a relieved wail and throw myself into his side. His right arm comes around me, holding me close, while he steers with the other.

My tears soak the arm of his jacket.

When we arrive back at my house, the fire chief's truck is sitting in the drive.

I leap out and run to them. I try the handle of the passenger door, but it's locked.

Corbin exits at his side and comes around to meet me just as Langford makes it to my side.

“Wait, Isley,” Corbin calls.

“Unlock the door,” I demand.

“We found him wandering around in the woods about a mile from town hall. He was freezing and disoriented, and he couldn't tell us how he had gotten there but kept insisting he wasn't lost. When we asked where he was trying to get to, he was able to give us this address.”

I nod.

“I just want you to be prepared.”

“Thank you. You can let him out now.”

He hits a button on his key fob and the lock releases. I take a calming breath and open the door.

“Hi, Daddy. Are you okay?” I ask.

“Who are you? Why are you holding me prisoner?”



Corbin and Langford help me coax him from the truck and inside the house.

He walks around from room to room and back again.

I take off my coat and set it on the kitchen island. Then, I walk to the foyer and grab the family photograph and return.

When he paces back into the kitchen, I step in front of him. He tries to dodge me, but I block him from entering the living room.

“Who am I?” I ask.

“I don't know who you are. I want to go to my office,” he says.

“I know you do, but can we talk first?”

He doesn't reply.

I hold the frame up in front of me. "Look at this picture," I say.

"No."

He throws his arm out and knocks it out of my hand.

"Where are my keys?" he asks.

I pick up the picture and sweep away the broken glass with my boot.

"I have them, and I'll give them to you as soon as you look at this."

He focuses on the photograph.

"What is this picture of?" I ask.

"It's my family in front of the Christmas tree."

"And who am I?" I ask.

"I don't know who you are," he shouts.

"Look at the picture again. Who is this?" I ask, pointing to him in the photo.

"That's me."

"And who's this?" I ask.

"My wife, Evelyn."

"And this guy?"

"My son Everette."

I nod.

"And this person. Who is this?"

"My daughter."

I lower the photo. "And who am I?" I ask.

He takes two steps and reaches for the picture. I let him take it from my fingers.

"Who am I?" I plead with him.

His eyes flit from the photo and up to me and back. “Isley?”

I nod.

Tears begin falling down his cheeks, dropping on the photo.

“You’re my baby girl, Isley,” he cries.

“That’s right, Daddy.”

“You’re my baby,” he repeats.

I walk into his chest and wrap my arms around him. “I’m your baby.”

“How could I forget my favorite girl in the whole wide world?” he says as he returns my hug.

“It’s okay. It’s late, and you’re tired—that’s all,” I lie.

“Oh, baby girl. That’s not it, is it? I’m getting worse. What happens when I don’t recognize anyone anymore?”

The fear in his voice breaks me. I cling tighter to him, wishing with all my heart that my embrace could hold his mind and memories here safely with us.

“I’ll still know who you are. As long as one of us remembers, then we’ll be okay,” I assure him.

“Isley?”

Daddy lets me go, and I look over at Langford. He and Corbin have been silently waiting in the doorway.

“We need to get back to your mom.”

“Where is Evelyn?” Daddy asks.

“She’s still in town at the gala.”

“I just left her there, all alone?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No, she’s not alone, but I bet she’s looking for us.”

Langford walks to us, and Daddy watches intently as he places a hand on my back.

“Why don’t you two stay here in the warmth? Corbin and I’ll go to town hall and pick her up.”

“I think that’s a good plan,” Daddy says.

I follow the two of them outside.

“Mom has her car,” I inform them.

“Yeah, I think it’s best if I drive her. Corbin can follow us in her car,” Langford says.

“Okay. Please give my apologies to everyone.”

“I’ll tell them you weren’t feeling well and regret that you had to leave abruptly.”

“Don’t say it like that. I don’t want them to think I came down with explosive diarrhea or something.”

He chuckles. “What would you prefer? Uncontrollable vomiting? Heart palpitations?”

“A migraine should be sufficient.”

“Migraine. Got it.”



We change from our party attire, Daddy into a pair of blue-and-white striped pajamas and me into a pair of sweatpants and a long-sleeved shirt.

I build a fire in the fireplace and make us a cup of cocoa.

He joins me on the living room floor with a stack of old photo albums from the bookshelf in their bedroom. Sitting on the floor in front of the hearth, he and I begin to flip through the books.

Mom recorded every second of our lives, growing up. She always had a camera in our faces. Daddy would buy her a new album every Christmas, each one a different color, and she’d spend the next year filling it. The last page was always of our Christmas morning. Then, she’d label it with the dates and place it on the shelf.

It used to drive my brothers and me nuts, but she would tell us that, someday, we would appreciate having them.

She was right.

We're laughing and reminiscing over a trip we took to Dollywood when I was eight when the back door opens, and Mom walks in, followed by Langford.

She wipes at her cheeks and forces a smile before she makes it to us.

"What are you two up to?" she asks.

Daddy looks up and answers, "Taking a walk down memory lane."

He extends a hand, and she takes it, sitting down beside him. She lays her head on his shoulder, and they thumb through the pages together.

"I'll be right back. Mom, would you like a mug of cocoa?" I ask as I stand.

"That'd be lovely," she replies.

I leave them and join Langford in the kitchen.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, he seems to be himself again."

He cups the back of my head and bends so that we are eye to eye.

"What about you? Are you okay?" he asks.

I whimper, and he pulls me into his arms.

I'm not sure how long we stand there, but when we finally separate, I feel stronger.



Chapter thirty-one

Langford

“Not those,” Tucker says.

“What’s wrong with them?” I ask.

We stopped by the local florist to pick up flowers for Isley. He’s been worried about her ever since the night of the gala.

Mom and Pop took him home with them, but I picked him up after Corbin and I got Evelyn home safely.

I explained to him what had happened as we drove home. He didn’t really understand what Alzheimer’s was, and I was shit at explaining it, so he went home and did his own research. Then, he decided we needed to do something special for her.

“They’re plain old red roses,” he says.

“I thought women liked red roses.”

“Does Isley seem like a *plain old red rose* kind of lady? Where’s your imagination, Dad?”

“Fine. You pick something,” I suggest.

He takes the basket from me and walks around the shop, confidently plucking stems from several containers. Once he has it stuffed to the brim, he heads to the counter.

“Oh, what do we have here?” the clerk, Ginny, asks as she unloads the array of vibrant fall-colored blooms—bright yellow, peach, deep purple, and a few blush hues.

“They’re flowers to cheer up our lady friend,” Tucker says.

“You picked the best ones to do just that. These are dahlias, and they’re symbolic of strength, dignity, and sophistication and considered very positive and uplifting.”

Tucker looks back at me and beams.

“You have some great colors that will make a beautiful arrangement. Would you like them in a vase or wrapped in paper and placed in a box with a bow?”

“What do you think, Dad?”

“I think she’ll want to display them on her desk, so we should probably get the vase.”

He turns back. “We’ll take one of your prettiest vases, please.”

Ginny invites him behind the counter to help her arrange the flowers, and she suggests adding a few zinnia stems and a couple of small sunflowers to finish it.

The result is gorgeous, and I have to admit, my son was right; red roses are boring next to his creation.

I pay for the flowers, and Tucker holds them as we drive out to Isley’s office.

“Is that her truck?” Tucker asks as I pull next to the green machine.

“Yep. It was her grandpa’s, and she loves the old thing.”

“That’s cool! She’s an old farm girl, just like Grandma and Leona. I bet she can even drive a tractor.”

Visions of Isley in a pair of short shorts; a red-and-white gingham shirt, tied at the navel; and a cowgirl hat, sitting astride a John Deere flash through my mind.

Damn.



Isley and Brandee are both in the office, seated at their desks, phones to their ears, when we walk inside. Isley looks up, smiles, and holds up a finger to let us know she'll be off in just a minute.

Brandee's call ends first, and she turns to us.

"Did you come to spy on us?" she asks.

"No, ma'am. We brought Isley flowers," Tucker replies.

She narrows her eyes at him as he stands there with the massive flower arrangement in his hands.

"Are you sure? Because you look like a spy to me."

Tucker looks down at himself. "No, I don't. Spies wear camouflage or a suit, like James Bond, not blue jeans and a henley."

"That's exactly what a spy would say."

"You can trust me. I'm a Boy Scout."

"I don't know. If I were your dad and trying to get information, I'd send my adorable son in here, too, but if you really are a Boy Scout, I guess I'll have to believe you."

He giggles. "You're crazy," he says.

She sighs. "Unfortunately, I get that from a lot of men," she quips.

Isley's call ends, and she stands.

"Hey, guys," she greets.

Tucker rounds the desks and holds the vase out to her.

"What's this?"

“Dad and I knew you were having a hard time, and we bought you some flowers to cheer you up.”

She takes the offering and brings it to her nose and inhales. “These are lovely. How did you know I love dahlias?”

Tucker smiles. “I just guessed. I picked them because they are pretty, just like you.”

She melts at his declaration.

He has better game than his old man.

“Thank you, Tucker. They’re perfect, and they do make me feel so much better.”

She bends and kisses him on the cheek.

Brandee turns to me.

“Smooth,” I say.

She nods.

“Yep. I think he’s got a little bit of his uncle Weston in him. He’s gonna be a heartbreaker when he gets older.”

“Can we take you two to lunch?” I ask.

“I’m in,” Brandee shouts.

“Me too,” Isley agrees.

They grab their coats and bags, and they each take one of Tucker’s elbows and let him escort them to my truck.

“I’m the one paying. Don’t I get any love?” I ask.

Isley glances over her shoulder and mouths, *Maybe later.*



Chapter thirty-two

Isley

I run into Jena at the coffee shop, and we decide to take our to-go cups and sit at one of the new patio tables. It's a warm Saturday morning. We won't have many more of these. Soon, it'll be snowing in the valley.

"Can I tell you something and you not judge me?" I ask.

"Sure. You can tell me anything," Jena says.

"I like him."

"Who?" she asks.

"Him," I emphasize.

Her eyes go wide. "Langford?"

"Yes, that's him," I admit.

She smiles. "That's great!"

"Shh."

I look around to see if we've drawn any attention from the other outdoor patrons.

"No. No, it's not great. It's very un-great. I really, really like him, and he's ..."

"Hot, bossy, rugged, sex on legs?" she finishes.

"My opponent, who I was never supposed to get involved with," I correct her.

"So what? I don't see the problem here. It's not like you're sovereigns of enemy nations. Your families don't like each other, but neither did Romeo's and Juliet's, and that turned out fine."

"You do know they both ended up dead in the end, right?"

She gasps, "What?"

"They committed suicide."

"Romeo and Juliet killed themselves?"

"Yep."

"Ugh, thanks for that spoiler alert. Why do people think that book is so romantic? Glad I never read it."

"Play."

"Huh?"

"It's a play. A tragedy, written by William Shakespeare. Never mind."

"Whatever. The point is, there's nothing wrong with you and Langford getting together."

"I can't. I ... it's a bad idea," I state.

She waves me off. "Calm down before you hyperventilate. I think you need a girls' night with facials, fuzzy socks, and cheap rosé. We'll get you sorted in no time. I'm calling Erin," she says as she grabs her phone from her bag.

"No, don't do that," I whisper-shout as I try to snatch the phone from her hand.

“Hey, Erin. I need to call a crisis summit. Isley is having a meltdown over a boy.”

My mouth falls open, and I stare in horror as she rallies the troops.

“You know it. A girl with a new crush needs her besties. We’ll meet you there.”

She stands as she clicks off the line. She pulls her bag onto her shoulder and places her sunglasses on her face.

“Come on, chica. Let’s go. The friend phone tree has been activated.”



Erin and Jena are like girl-gang ninjas.

By the time we make it to Erin’s house, Taeli, Ansley, Brandee, and Maxi are already there, the wine is open, and they’re all in pajamas, except for Maxi.

“Follow me,” Erin says as we enter the house.

I walk with her and Jena to her spare bedroom.

“There are some girls’ night pajamas in the top drawer.”

“You have spare pajamas?” I ask.

“Believe it or not, a lot of emergency pajama parties have been called in our circle. You bitches’ love lives are a hot mess.”

“I feel silly, changing into pajamas at ten in the morning,” I say as Jena fishes out a set in my size.

“Yeah, but if we don’t start the pajama party part now, we’ll be just a bunch of women drinking wine at ten in the morning.”

“That makes sense.”

Does it?

We quickly change and join them in the living room.

“Okay, facials or sorting Isley’s relationship first?” Erin asks.

“I vote relationship first. If we wait until after we’ve had facials, we’ll be too many bottles of wine in,” Ansley says.

Erin points at her. “Good call.”

All their eyes come to me as I’m taking a sip from my glass.

I swallow quickly. “Oh, so ... okay, do I just start talking?”

“That’s how it generally works. We can’t help you sort through it if we don’t know what’s going on,” Erin insists.

I take a deep breath and let it all out. I tell them about the amazing sex, about him taking me to Misty Mountain, lunch with Tucker, the even more amazing sex, about Daddy’s diagnosis and how he helped me when he went missing from Town Hall, and about him and Tucker bringing me flowers.

Once I spew it all over them, Erin looks at them all. “Okay, who wants to go first?”

“I’ll go,” Taeli says. “Langford is a good man. He’s a bit gruff sometimes, and he says the word *fuck* a lot, but he’d give you the shirt off his back. I’ve seen it.”

“Next,” Erin calls out.

“He’s a single dad, and if there’s anything that can attest to what a wonderful man he is, it’s the fact that Tucker is such an awesome kid,” Ansley says.

“Okay, and, Maxi?”

“He might grumble about it, but he didn’t hesitate to let Weston move in when he lost his house. And he’s been there for a year now, and he still hasn’t killed him, so you know he has the patience of a saint.”

“Good one,” Erin says, then points to Brandee.

“I think he’s an asshat. But I have awful taste in men, so I’d be more worried if I did like him.”

“Jena?”

“I already gave her my best Romeo and Juliet speech.”

“That leaves me. You had me at amazing sex. I can forgive a lot of grumpy, grumbly, and asshat behavior if I’m getting regular orgasms. Plus, Sara-Beth raised him, and Sara-Beth Tuttle don’t raise no punks.”

She pauses.

“Anyone have anything to add?”

They all shake their heads.

“Did that help?” she asks me.

“Not really,” I say.

“Shit, I thought that was a good effort. We probably chose to do things in the wrong order. Let’s get drunk and do facials, and we’ll try this again.”



Chapter thirty-three

Isley

Daddy had another episode yesterday. It was a bad one, and I had to stay at home and help Mom. They're coming more frequently now; the confusion is accompanied by fear, and he can get aggressive. He always comes to himself eventually, but the day is going to come when he isn't able to find his way back.

I spent the morning on the phone with doctors and my brothers, discussing the best way to proceed with his care, going forward.

The one thing I know for sure is that I don't want to ship him off to a facility.

This is his home, and he's going to stay here. I don't understand how they can think that moving him away from everything familiar is a good idea.

I do agree that Mom can't care for him alone though. So, I've made a difficult decision, but it's the only one I can see.

I walk into the mayor's office at town hall.

“Hi, Isley,” his secretary greets.

“Hi, Nina. Is he in today?” I ask.

“He is. One sec.”

She picks up the phone, taps a button, and announces my arrival.

“Go on back,” she says.

I walk to his door and peek in.

“This isn’t a bad time, is it? I know I don’t have an appointment.”

He stands from his desk and beckons me. “It’s never a bad time to see you, Isley. Come on in.”

I take a seat on the chair in front of his desk.

“What can I do for you today?”

I remove the folder from my satchel and hand it to him.

He opens it, and his eyes scan the document inside.

It’s a withdrawal form.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“I am. I’m sure you’ve heard about my father’s diagnosis. The disease is progressing, and it’s becoming more than my mother can tend to, so I’ve made the decision to stay at home and care for him rather than have him placed in the care of a full-time facility. I’m afraid that I wouldn’t be able to give this office the time and focus that it and the people of Balsam Ridge deserve.”

I get the practiced speech out without breaking down.

“I’m sorry, Mayor Gentry,” I say.

He looks up from the paper to me.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Isley. You moving back here and caring so much about the valley? I know how proud your father and mother are. Besides, I’m sure Langford will do a good job.”

“Yeah, he has a good heart and good intentions—even if he is a little misguided on some issues,” I say.

“It’s too bad, you know.”

“What is?” I ask.

“You guys have been neck and neck this entire time. Both are full of great ideas. Seriously, this thing could have gone either way when put to a vote. It’s too bad you can’t both win. Imagine the good you could do if you joined forces.”

“That’s not how it works.”

He looks back down at his desk. “No, I suppose it’s not.”

“Trust him,” I say.

He looks back at me.

“Langford. Trust him. He’ll do what’s right for the people of Balsam Ridge.”

He nods his head and stands. Then, he extends his hand, and I place mine in it.

“Good luck with whatever the future holds for you, Isley Paysour.”

“Thank you, Mayor. I hope you enjoy your much-deserved retirement.”



My next stop is Brandee’s house.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks.

“I’m sure.”

“Well, poo. I guess I’m gonna have to get a real job now.”

“Sorry,” I say.

“It’s fine. I’ll just have to find myself a rich man if I plan to live my best life as a lady of leisure.”

I plop down on the couch beside her. “I still have the doctor’s number if you want it.”

She lays her head on my shoulder. “You’re the bestest best friend.”

“I know.”

“I’m surprised your parents were cool with you dropping out,” she muses.

“I haven’t told them yet.”

“Oh snap. You’d better. Your mom has already called me four times today to remind me to bring buttons to the debate this evening.”

“Ugh, I know. I was hoping I could just hide out here and deal with it all tomorrow.”

She shakes her head. “No can do, sister. This is the first place they’d go to look for you. I’m not facing the wrath of Evelyn Paysour for you.”

I huff. “You’re the worstest best friend,” I grumble.

“You knew how this relationship worked from the beginning,” she says.

“Fine, I’ll go home and tell them.”

“What about Langford? I bet he was thrilled. The only way he was going to beat you was for you to drop out.”

“Um ...”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t give him a heads-up either.”

“I made the decision on the fly, and I haven’t had time to discuss it with anyone. And seeing as you’re the most important person in my life, I chose to tell you first.”

“Still not letting you hide out here.”

Crap.



Chapter thirty-four

Langford

Evelyn leads me into the Paysour home.

I received a call from Asa last night, requesting that I come by to see them today and asking that I not mention it to Isley.

She leads me to the living room, where Asa is seated, his reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose as he reads the newspaper.

“Hello, Langford. Have a seat, son,” he says as he folds the paper and sets it to the side.

I take a seat on the edge of the recliner, facing him.

“Would you like a beverage, Langford? Coffee, tea, lemonade?” Evelyn asks.

“Water would be nice.”

“Coming right up. And you, dear?” she asks Asa.

“I’d love a refill.”

She takes the mug from his hand.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

She smiles and pats his cheek.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I called you out here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I had a nice, long talk with your father last night. He came by to check in on us.”

“What? Really?”

“I know. It was a surprise and long overdue. It’s strange how you don’t understand life until you’re on the other side of it, looking back. All those years of fightin’ and fussin’ over nothing. Even dragging you boys into it. It was stupid. I let my anger and pride keep me from reconciling with my best friend, and now, I can’t get those years back. It’s a damn shame how petty grown men can act. Anyway, I brought you here to discuss my daughter.”

Evelyn returns with our beverages and takes a seat on the piano bench across the room.

“What about Isley?” I ask.

“I might be old and growing senile, but I’m not too far gone enough not to see what’s been growing between the two of you.”

“We’re ...”

He raises his hand to stop what I’m about to say.

“I know it’s new, and you’re going to say it’s not serious and all that other crap, but the truth of the matter is, I don’t have the luxury of waiting for you two to figure things out. I need to say what I have to say while I’m still able to say it. So, just sit there and listen.”

I close my mouth and sit back.

“I don’t have to tell you that my little girl is something special. She has a big heart. A heart for service. She spent years working for nonprofits and vying for positions in a man’s world just so she could make a difference, but it’s a cutthroat endeavor. She’s become accustomed to the rejection

and having doors slammed shut in her face, but when it comes to matters of the heart, she tends to be the one to shut the door first. I want you to know that, going in. She might, at some point, try to shut the door on you.”

“Because she’s scared it will be slammed on her?” I surmise.

“Something like that.”

“Okay.”

“That other boy wasn’t man enough to stand by her side through the hard shit. He didn’t deserve her, but I recognize your father in you. You’re a different kind of man. The kind I want for her. A man who I can trust to put her first and protect her when I can’t anymore.”

He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a velvet box.

“This was my mother’s ring. My father gave it to her a hundred years ago. Isley has always loved it, so I’ve been saving it to give to the man who came to me and asked for her hand one day. But it seems I’ve run out of someday. I want you to know that this ring exists, and if or when the day comes that you have need of such an item, Evelyn will have it tucked safely away for you. So, again, I thank you for coming and indulging me. I wanted to look you in the eye and tell you that you have my blessing if you choose to make my daughter your wife someday because I won’t get to walk her down the aisle and place her hand in yours, like every father should get to do.”

“Thank you for that,” I choke out.

He stands, and I stand with him and offer him my hand. He ignores it and pulls me into an embrace.

“That’s my favorite girl in the whole wide world, and I expect you to protect her and treat her accordingly,” he mutters.

“Yes, sir.”

Evelyn walks to us, and she, too, envelops me in a welcoming hug. Then, she walks me out.

“Thank you, Langford. We’ll see you this evening at the debate.”

She waves as I get in the truck.



Weston rides with me to the convention center, where Isley and I are scheduled to debate.

I tap my hand against the steering wheel as we sit at a traffic light.

“Are you nervous, bro?” Weston asks.

“I’m pulling out,” I say.

His face draws up. “What? Didn’t Pop have the talk with you? Your swimmers are probably too old and exhausted to make it to the prize anyway, but if you want to be sure, you should use a condom.”

I reach over and smack the back of his head. “Pulling out of the mayoral race, dipshit.”

“Oh. Why?” he asks.

“Because Isley’s the better man for the job. She always has been.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

I blow out a breath. “Yep.”

He laughs.

We pull into the lot, and I park the truck, then we rush inside. The room is packed. It seems everyone in Balsam Ridge came out tonight to see us spar.

I make my way to the stage and the microphone.

I tap it to make sure it’s live, and when the squeal gets everyone’s attention, a hush falls over the crowd.

“Hello, everyone. I know you’re all here for the debate, but I have something I want to say before it gets started. I was going to come up here and give you all my best spiel about how Balsam Ridge needs to be pulled into the future and give you the game plan I have for that. Talk fast and feed you all a lot of big, fancy words, like *revenue* and *demographics*. Convince you that I’m smarter than you are when it comes to those things, so you believe that you need me. But I’m not.

“I’m a man with a vision. A man who is smart enough to know when to let go of control. A man who does want what’s best for this valley, the place I love and call home. Isley Paysour is what’s best. She’s smart, driven, meticulous, and organized, and we would be fortunate to have her as a gatekeeper in this community. She doesn’t intend to pull us into the future, but rather gently escort us with wisdom, discernment, and firm leadership. I trust her, and so should all of you. Therefore, I withdraw my mayoral bid and place my full support behind Miss Paysour. Balsam Ridge couldn’t ask for better.”

With that, I turn and walk off the stage.

Mayor Gentry is standing in the crowd, and I approach him.

“Mayor, I’m sorry I didn’t give you a heads-up.”

He takes my hand in his and gives it a shake. “Me too. I have no idea what we’ll do now,” he says.

“Isley will make a fine mayor,” I assure him.

“I agree, but she withdrew from the race earlier today.”

She did what?

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“As the day is long. She showed up at my office with a typed resignation letter. That’s why she’s not here.”

“What did you do with it?” I ask.

“Nothing yet. I was going to turn it over to the County Election Commissions tomorrow.”

“Can you sit on it another day?” I ask.

“I reckon it could get lost on my desk for a bit,” he says.

“Thanks. I’ll be in touch,” I say.

He gives me a conspiratorial grin and pats my shoulder. I push past him and the rest of the crowd and hurry to my truck.

Weston runs after me.

“Hey, where are we going?” he asks as he hops in.

“To find my girl.”



Chapter thirty-five

Isley

“Isley, sweetheart, we’re gonna be late for the debate,” Mom calls.

I’ve been sitting in my bedroom all afternoon, rehearsing what I plan to say to them.

Giving myself one last pep talk in the mirror, I steel myself and walk out to meet them.

They are standing in the foyer, dressed and ready.

Mom takes one look at me in my lounge pants and hoodie and frowns. “What are you wearing?”

“I’m not going to the debate. I dropped out of the race this morning,” I announce.

“You what?” Mom gasps.

“It was for the best.”

Daddy’s brows furrow. “I don’t understand.”

“I know, and I’m going to explain it. Come join me in the kitchen. I’ll make us some tea.”

I put a kettle on the stove, grab three mugs from the cupboard, and add tea bags from the small tin beside the toaster oven.

The three of us take a seat at the island, and I explain the decision I made and why.

They listen in silence, and when the kettle whistles, I walk to fetch it and give them time to process.

As I fill the cups, Daddy begins to speak. “Do you have any idea how proud I am to be your father? You’re beautiful and smart and funny and loyal and honest and interesting, and every day with you has been an adventure. This town would be so lucky to have you at its reins.”

“I wish I were stronger, but it’s too much.”

“Are you kidding me, kiddo? You’re the strongest person I know.”

“Hardly.”

“Do you know what makes the mighty oak so strong?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“People think it’s the roots that run deep in the ground or its large, foreboding frame, but the truth is that it’s flexible. When storms blow in and the rain and the wind come bearing down, it shoulders that weight, and it bends, but it doesn’t break. The key to being strong is being able to bend. You’ve had to bend so much in your short life. Giving up your goals and dreams to come here when your mother and I needed you, and we’re grateful, but your time is done. I get to be the daddy one last time and tell you to get on with your life. Your mother and I are moving to Phoenix to be near your brother,” he informs me.

“What? No, Daddy. This is your home,” I protest.

He looks around the living room with tears in his eyes. “And now, it’s yours. Being a caregiver is a heavy burden to

carry. You did it with grace for years while your mother was ill and I was too much of a wreck to do it, but this town is going to be counting on you now. That responsibility, along with chasing your own happiness, doesn't need to be placed on the back burner while you tend to me."

"You're not a burden, Daddy. You could never be a burden. I want to be the one who cares for you," I explain.

He takes my hands in his. "Your mother and I have made this decision together. She has been wanting to spend more time with the grandkids, and I'd like to get to know them more before I forget who they are too. Everette and Leah have a mother-in-law suite in the basement, and there is a top-notch memory care facility near their home for when the time comes. That time will be sooner rather than later, I'm afraid."

"But—"

"No buts. We'll be just a plane ride away, and you can come see us anytime."

"I don't want to lose you before you're gone," I cry.

"There are some things that are just out of our hands. God's going to let me know when my time is up, but until then, it's up to me how I want to spend the time I have left."

He leans in and kisses the top of my head, like he did when I was a little girl.

"It's time to lay down your mantle, baby. You're off duty now."



The doorbell chimes, and I come down the hall just as Mom opens the door.

"Sara-Beth? Leona? What are you guys doing here?" Mom asks.

"We heard you could use some help with packing up a few things," Sara-Beth says as she hands Mom a pie.

Mom stares down at the pastry. "I ..."

“Rivalry is fine in your twenties and thirties. It adds a little spice to your life. But at our age? It’s just silly. We’ve reached the stage in life where we need one another more than we need to hang on to our pride,” Sara-Beth explains.

“That’s true, and besides, I’m fairly sure your kids are falling in love. Time for you two to bury the hatchet so they don’t use you as an excuse to fight it,” Leona says as she breezes past Mom and into the kitchen.

“Hi, Isley,” she greets me.

“Hi.”

“Point me toward the plates,” she requests.

I point to the cabinet above the microwave, and she opens it and pulls four down.

“Bygones?” Sara-Beth asks Mom.

“Bygones.”

Mom sets the pie on the island, and Leona cuts us each a slice.

They fill us in on what happened at the convention center.

“He said all that?” I ask.

“He sure did. I’ve never been prouder to have one of my sons quit before,” Sara-Beth exclaims.

“We slipped out before he even made it off the stage so we could come share the news.”

“I’ve already withdrawn too. I’m not sure what will happen now.”

“It’ll all work out how it’s supposed to. If not, then I’m sure Ralph will stay on as interim until they find a new candidate and a special election can be called,” Leona assures.

I hate that I’ve caused such a mess.

The door chimes again.

“Now, who on earth could that be?” Mom asks.

“I’ll find out,” I say.

Leaving them to chat, I go to the door to greet our visitor.

Langford and Weston are standing on the front stoop.

“What are you two doing here?” I ask.

“Better question: what are you doing here?” Langford asks.

“I live here.”

“You’re supposed to be arguing with me at the convention center.”

“As opposed to arguing with you right now?”

He scowls.

“You withdrew, so it’s a moot point,” I say.

“I withdrew so you would be elected.”

“You think I needed you to withdraw in order to win?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It kinda was.”

“Dude, this is so much better than a debate,” Weston quips.

“Shut up, West,” Langford growls. Then, he points at me. “You’re not quitting.”

“I already did. I submitted the paperwork. You’re the one who can’t quit.”

“Mayor Gentry hasn’t filed it yet. He buried it. One phone call, and he’ll shred it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

I sprint down the steps to him, and he lifts me in his arms and spins me.

“See, everything always works out just like it’s supposed to.”

We look up to see that Mom, Leona, and Sara-Beth are standing in the doorway.

“Come on, boys. We’re having celebratory pie,” Sara-Beth says.



Chapter thirty-six

Isley

I close the blinds and turn off the lights. I grab my purse and keys and head out of the office when my phone dings.

Langford: Miss me?

Me: Not a bit.

He's been in Colorado for two weeks on his recruiting mission, and needless to say, I do miss him.

I've been spending most of my days shadowing Mayor Gentry in anticipation of the election, which will take place in three weeks, and helping Mom and Dad sort and pack.

We decided to sell the house, and I'm moving in with Brandee.

It's too big for me, and depending on when Daddy needs to move into full-time care, they will need the funds. They'll officially be moving to Arizona the first week of January, which gives us time to do a few general repairs and spruce up

the house before it goes on the market. Plus, they want to be here for my swearing-in.

When he doesn't reply, I drop my phone in my purse. As I go to lock the door, I notice the flash of headlights pulling into the parking lot.

I turn around to see the familiar black truck.

Langford?

He throws the truck in park and hops out, slamming the door behind him.

I sling the office door open and toss my things onto the floor. Then, I take off running and launch myself at him. He catches me just as I hit his chest, and his massive arms crush me to him as his mouth finds mine.

Sliding his hands from my waist and settling them on the curve of my ass, he lifts me from my feet and begins to walk us deeper into the darkened office. His mouth continues to assault mine as we make it to my desk. Sitting me on the edge, he feels around until he finds the lamp and clicks it on.

"Miss me?" he asks as I nibble at his earlobe.

"Not in the least," I mutter.

"Liar," he says as he bends me back until my elbows rest on the desk behind me.

His hands travel up my sides, tugging my blouse loose from the hem of my skirt as they go. I watch as he impatiently fumbles with the buttons, as if his fingers can't move fast enough. Once he has it undone and it falls open, he unclasps my bra immediately. My breasts spring free, and he buries his face in them.

"Fuck, I've been dreaming about these tits all week," he mumbles as he begins to palm one while taking the other into his mouth.

I arch my back and close my eyes as he kneads and squeezes, sending tingles down my spine and straight to my core.

After he's had his fill of my breasts, he starts to trail kisses down my stomach, and his tongue dips into my belly button, causing my hips to twitch.

I watch him as his hands make their way up my calves and between my thighs, spreading them wide for his viewing pleasure. I bear up as he does, so my skirt slides to my waist. He growls low as he takes the back of his hand and runs his knuckles over the front of my black lace panties, and I jump as he grazes my clit.

Grinning at my reaction, he slides a finger under the lace and glides it through my wetness before pumping it inside of me.

"Oh God. Yes," I cry.

"You're so ready for me," he says as he adds another finger.

"I've been wet since you called me. I thought you'd never get here," I tell him.

At my admission, he loses control, withdraws his fingers, and yanks my panties down my legs before dropping to his knees.

I close my eyes and throw my head back as he begins to fuck me with his mouth. I thread my fingers into his hair and start swirling my hips, riding his tongue.

The man is a master at bringing me to the brink of insanity.

Here I am, nearly naked, as he devours me on my desk at my campaign office.

Who am I?

He feeds his hands under me so he can lift my hips and pull me to him. He nips at my clit with his teeth, and that's all I need to explode. My body quakes with release from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. He continues to lap at me wildly until he drinks every drop of pleasure and I go limp in his hold.

My eyes flutter open when his hands leave my hips, and they focus just as he drops his jeans to the floor and steps out

of them before grabbing my waist and dragging me forward. He plucks me up and leads me to the armchair in front of my desk. Knowing what he wants, I climb on my knees and brace myself against the back of the chair. The cool leather is a welcome relief to my aching breasts. He pulls my hips into the air, hiking my skirt back up, and his fingers find their way back to my opening. He uses his finger and thumb to work me up into a frenzy once again before guiding the tip of his erection in. His arms land on either side of mine, and he slams into me.

I scream his name as he drives deep into me. Filling me, stretching me, and claiming me.

“Oh, that’s it, Isley. Say my name again,” he commands.

I’m so lost in the feeling of him thrusting into me that all I can do is moan.

Suddenly, he steps back, and his cock slides out of me. I voice my protest as he palms one of my asscheeks.

He gives it a quick smack before he leans over me and repeats his order into my ear. “Say my name again.”

I look over my shoulder at him, defiance in my glare.

He smirks and rears back, striking my other cheek, and I groan as the delicious sting radiates across my skin.

“Say it,” he demands.

“Langford,” I whisper.

He gives me another quick smack, and I moan.

“Louder,” he growls.

“Langford,” I wail.

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

Gliding his hand soothingly over my ass, he bends and plants a gentle kiss there as my reward.

Then, his breath is back at my ear. I’m trembling as I feel his heat and the rise and fall of his chest against my back and the leather of the chair, slick with sweat, against my tight

nipples. The sound of our heavy breaths mingles with the sound of the rain outside the window.

He sucks my earlobe into his mouth, and his teeth sink in.

A shiver runs down my spine.

“You like that?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“What else do you like?”

“I’d like you inside of me now,” I pant my request.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” he asks as he slides his hand between my legs again. “Oh, yes, you’re dripping,” he tells me what I already know.

“Langford, please.”

My plea dies on my lips as he thrusts into me once more.

Finally.

I bear up to give him plenty of access, and he takes the opportunity to bring his hands around and cup my breasts as he pumps into me.

The wind howls through the window and across our sweat-slicked skin, and gooseflesh crawls up my back and intensifies the mounting wave of pleasure bubbling to the surface.

I arch up and rock back into him. I can feel the warmth spreading down my spine to my core. Langford releases one of my breasts, and his hand finds my clit. His palm presses into me with the perfect pressure my body needs to let go, and I slump against the top of the chair as my legs quake from the orgasm shooting through me.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” I chant as the euphoria rushes over my limbs.

He continues to pump in and out until his knees buckle, and he releases into me with a groan. Spent, he falls against my back, and we just lie there until our heart rates come down. Then, he kisses my neck and stands.

I get to my feet, a little shaky on my heels, and turn to face him.

He wraps me in his arms and kisses me gently. “Damn, it’s good to be home,” he says.

I twine my arms around his neck and raise an eyebrow. “Really? I couldn’t tell.”

Those damn dimples appear, and his eyes crinkle with amusement.

“Marry me,” he says, and I freeze.

“What did you say?”

“Marry me. While your dad can still be there and give you away.”

“Are you serious? You want to marry me?”

“With everything in me. I want to marry you, put babies in you, and grow old with you.”

I burst into tears, and he pulls me into his neck and holds me.

“Is that a yes?” he asks.

Unable to speak, I nod against him.

“Finally. Let’s go pick Tuck up from my parents’ and get some food. I’m fucking starving.” He pulls back and grins.

“Is that your way of asking me to dinner?” I ask.

He answers me with a quick, hard kiss. “It’s your fault I’m starving.”

“Okay, caveman, let’s get dressed and go.”



epilogue

Isley

Six Weeks Later

It's swearing-in day, but most importantly, it's my wedding day.

Mayor Gentry agreed to do one last duty as mayor of Balsam Ridge before passing the baton to me.

I'm wearing the gown my mother wore when she was a bride and carrying a bouquet of dahlias, and my daddy is walking me down the makeshift aisle. My brothers and their families flew in, and they line the walkway along with Langford's brothers, our parents, and all our friends.

Brandee is standing at the altar with Langford and Tucker, and Daddy proudly places my hand in Langford's before taking a seat beside my mother.

It's perfect. Everyone I love is here to witness it, and that's all that truly matters.

After the ceremony, we move to a room where Sara-Beth, Mom, and Leona have prepared a small reception with cake and champagne.

The bigger party will happen tonight, after I'm sworn in.

Mom snaps a thousand pictures as we hold the knife and cut the cake together, and neither of us complains. She's just storing up memories for us to share with our kids one day.

"I have a surprise for you," he whispers in my ear.

"Oh, really? What's that?" I ask.

"I had one of the finished suites at the ski resort done up for our honeymoon night."

"You did?"

"Yep, I couldn't let fucking Garrett be the first to christen it. Besides, I get to sleep with the mayor tonight. That's badass, and it deserves something special."

Langford

"Here's to our big brother and his new bride," Garrett says as we all take a shot.

"I still can't believe you were the first one to say *I do*. How the hell did that happen?" Graham asks.

How the hell did that happen?

"A sassy little blonde came barreling into my life and grabbed me by the balls and didn't let go," I say.

"Yep. Now, they are securely tucked in her purse, only to be brought back out when she wants to play with them," Weston says.

"I can't wait for some woman to come along and fuck up your world," I tell him.

Anna comes over with a sleeping Michaela in her arms. “I just wanted to say congratulations, Langford. I’m going to get this one home.”

I give her a quick hug and thank her for coming.

“I’ll walk you out. I have a key for you,” Weston says.

“Okay, I’m just going to tell Isley good-bye. Meet you up front.”

“What key?” Corbin asks.

“A key to my office. Mom said that the life insurance money is running low and Anna was looking for a job with flexible hours so she could be at home with the baby as much as possible. I need some help out at the hemp farm. Especially now that they’ve broken ground on my house. So, I hired her. She starts Monday.”

He takes one more shot and then leaves.

“When did he become so thoughtful?” Garrett asks.

“Living with me was bound to fucking rub off on him,” I say.

And we all have a good laugh.

The End

acknowledgments

Wow, here we are, the last book written in 2022. It's been quite a rollercoaster of a year, hasn't it? I know that I for one am looking forward to the fresh start that the new year always brings. It's strange how that works. Every day offers us a chance to begin again yet we need the change of the date on the calendar to remind us to make the effort.

2022 wasn't all bad. Not by a long shot. I wrote five books. Published four of them. I signed contracts to have the Poplar Falls series translated into Hebrew, Danish, Spanish, Italian and Brazilian Portuguese. Rustic Hearts was a number one international Best Seller. The entire Poplar Falls series was completed in audio and all of them will be released in the next few weeks. If you haven't given them a listen yet, Joe Arden and his team at Blue Nose Audio, Inc did an amazing job! Podium Publishing is also releasing the first three books of the Balsam Ridge series in audio before spring. Speaking of the Balsam Ridge series, it received three orange best seller banners this year, and that is all due to you guys. The best readers on the planet. You continually support and inspire me. Even in the darkest of times. The English language does not have words adequate enough to convey how grateful I am to all of you.

At the end of the mess that was 2020, I said 2021 will be so much better. Then my mother got sick. At the end of 2021, I said 2022 has to be so much better. Then my sister got sick. At the end of 2022, I'm not declaring anything but that I'm thankful to still be standing and I'm blessed beyond measure to be able to continue writing stories that offer love wrapped in hope and healing. Whatever this year has in store, I will face it joyfully and with a greater respect for the passing of time. I hope you all do the same.

Autumn Gantz, as always, thank you for pushing me to dig deep and finish this book and for all your help along the way. You

are a magnificent publicist and a true friend.

Jovana Shirley, man, this was another rough one. Thank you for helping me get it right and still being my friend at the end. I promise to do better next year. Commas are still the devil.

Sommer Stein, every book I say you aren't going to be able to top this cover, and every time you prove me wrong. I can't wait to see what we do together in the future. Thank you for your creativity and artist eye.

Regina Wamba, all I can say is wow. You're skills are masterful.

And as always, last but not least, a big *thank you* to my poor, neglected, amazing, and patient husband, David. I love you infinitely. You are my own personal book boyfriend come to life. How lucky am I?

*SMITTEN IN LAKE MISTLETOE
PREVIEW*

Smitten
in Lake
Mistletoe



A M B E R K E L L Y



Prologue

Hannah

Four Years Ago

As I stand in front of the antique pedestal mirror in my suite, a tear escapes my eye as I take in the sight of me in my gown.

“Oh, stop it. You’re gonna cause us both to ruin our makeup!” my mother scolds as she fastens the string of pearls around my neck.

Then, she wraps her arms around my shoulders from behind and lays her head on my shoulder.

Our eyes meet in the mirror.

“You’re stunning, Hannah.”

I smile at her as her lips quiver.

“Don’t you start too,” I cry.

The door opens, and Maria, my wedding planner, steps into the room, followed by my four bridesmaids.

They are a vision of beauty in their wine-hued dresses.

“Wow, you look stunning! Are you ready to head to the chapel?” Maria asks.

I turn around and nod. “Ready!”

She leads us out of the room, down the elevator, and across the lobby of the hotel. Everyone milling around stops what they are doing and watches us as we make our way to the revolving door. Shouts of congratulations and the sound of whistling fill the air.

The limousine is waiting for us when we make it outside, and the driver is standing on the curb. He outstretches his hand and helps the girls, one by one, into the car, then Mom and me.

Once inside, my maid of honor, April, pops the cork on the bottle of champagne that was chilling in a bucket of ice. Mom holds the flutes as she pours us each a glass and carefully hands them out.

“To my beautiful best friend on her big day. I hope it is as magical as you imagined,” April says as she raises her flute in the air.

We all lean in and clink our glasses before sitting back and relishing our pre-wedding cocktail.

The driver takes his time in getting us to the chapel just before the doors are closed to the sanctuary. The girls file out and get into line while Maria’s assistant hands out their bouquets.

Mom takes the arm of one of the groomsmen to be lead to her seat while I’m ushered into a small office off the side of the doors to wait for my father to come and escort me down the aisle.

“Okay, here is your bouquet and a handkerchief to tuck around the handle, just in case,” Maria says before closing the door and leaving me to myself.

I take deep breaths and enjoy my last few moments as Hannah Whitmar. Tonight, when I lay my head down on my pillow, I will be Mrs. Bryan Cope.

A thrill shoots through me as I look at my finger where he will be placing my wedding band in a few short moments.

I watch the clock sitting on the bookcase behind the pastor's desk. Ten minutes past five. The ceremony was supposed to start at five, so there must have been some late guests straggling in. I begin to pace nervously when the door swings open, and my father, Gordon Whitmar, stands on the threshold, looking especially dapper in his custom Ralph Lauren tuxedo.

"Oh, Hannah," he gasps. His voice a mixture of pride and ... grief?

"Hi. Daddy. Are you ready to give me away?" I ask as he takes me in.

His eyes fill with tears, and I walk to him and wrap my arms around his neck.

"It's okay. I'm not really going anywhere," I whisper.

He holds me tightly for a few beats, and then he takes a step back.

"Bryan's not here, baby," he says, and his face begins to turn red with anger.

I'm annoyed for a split second, and then I'm hit with worry.

"He's not? He must have gotten stuck in traffic, or he has a flat tire or something. I'll call him," I say as I start to look around the room. "Oh no, my phone is back at the hotel. Do you have yours?" I ask him frantically.

He brings his eyes to mine. "No, sweetheart, you don't understand. I've already spoken with him. He's not coming."

It takes a few seconds for me to process the words.

"What do you mean, he's not coming?"

He drops his head and clutches the back of his neck. “He said he’s sorry, but he just can’t get married. Not today.”

“Not today?” I repeat.

He looks up, and I can see the pain in his eyes.

“Not ever.”

That’s when I lose control of my legs, and he has to rush forward to catch me as my mother, friends, and Maria come rushing in behind him.

In that moment, I feel so many emotions—confusion, anger, humiliation, and deep, soul-crushing heartbreak.

Mom runs over and takes me from my father’s arms and into hers. “It’s okay, Hannah. Everything is going to be okay,” she assures me.

“Get me out of here,” I howl into her hair.

At my cry, Maria immediately moves into action and starts clearing a path, using her body to shield me from everyone’s faces. She leads us out to the limousine. As soon as I see the bewildered look on the driver’s face when he exits the car to greet us, I melt into a puddle again.

“This way. We’ll take the car,” Maria’s assistant says as she waves us toward the parking lot.

The four of us hurry to her small silver Toyota Camry, and Mom and I duck into the backseat.

How did this happen? This went from the best day of my life to the worst day of my life in a matter of twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes.

I turn and look at the chapel as we back out of the space.

My happily ever after is in there.

The doors swing open, and a confused wave of my friends and family begins to file out. Mortification swallows me as my father commands their attention while we screech out into traffic and race out of sight.

Thank God for Maria and her assistant.

My guardian angels.



Chapter One

Hannah

Present

“Hannah, over here!”

My eyes scan the sea of faces at baggage claim to find Aunt Trixie and Uncle Bob.

She is standing with a sign in her hands that reads, *Welcome to Lake Mistletoe.*

I clutch the handle of my suitcase and make my way to them.

She greets me with a warm hug, and Uncle Bob kisses my cheek and takes the suitcase from my hand.

“How was your flight?” Aunt Trixie asks as the sliding glass doors open and a blast of icy air hits my face.

“It was good. I got a little work done, so I can put the laptop away and enjoy the next few weeks.”

“Wonderful.”

We cross the busy pickup lanes at Boise Airport to the parking deck and stop at a red Chevrolet Tahoe. Uncle Bob loads my bag into the cargo area, and I climb into the backseat and buckle up.

“The drive in takes about two and a half hours. Are you hungry? We could stop at the Black Bear Diner in Twin Falls for lunch. They have the best pot roast, aside from your aunt Trixie’s,” Uncle Bob asks.

“Two and a half hours? You guys made a five-hour round trip to pick me up from the airport? That’s crazy. I could have flown into Hailey.”

Uncle Bob snorts. “Those plane tickets are a fortune this time of year. Taking advantage of all the vacationers at Sun Valley. It’s highway robbery.”

“You should have at least let me rent a car and saved yourselves the trip.”

Aunt Trixie turns and looks at me over her shoulder. “Oh, we didn’t mind. We enjoy road-tripping together. Besides, Bob loves any excuse to stop at Black Bear for pot roast. Don’t let him fool you. He likes it better than mine,” she says before playfully swatting at his shoulder.

A deep, rumbling chuckle fills the cab, and I smile at the two of them. They are adorable and the only couple I know who have won at the game of love. My parents divorced when I was in middle school. My mother never remarried. My father did. Twice, and wife number three doesn’t look to be hanging around much longer.

Every rule has to have an exception, I guess.

Aunt Trixie turns the radio to a station playing Christmas music, and I settle in and enjoy the drive through the beautiful snow-covered roads that weave in and out of the mountains.

It’s such a welcome contrast to the Las Vegas desert.

We stop for lunch, and as promised, the pot roast is *melt in your mouth* delicious.

By the time we are pulling into the gates of Lake Mistletoe, the sun has set, and horizon is sprinkled with bright stars. It's another sight I rarely get to enjoy. The lights and sounds of the Strip usually drown out the beauty of the night sky, and I have to venture toward Red Rocks for stargazing, which, in all honesty, I don't make time to do nearly often enough.

Work. That's what I live for, and I'm very good at what I do. The company I work for has been voted the best event planning service in Las Vegas for four years running. I'm not saying that I'm the reason for the success, but I did start working for them four years ago.

I began as an assistant coordinator and worked my way up to one of the most requested wedding planners in the city, and boy, does Las Vegas host an insane amount of weddings each year. It's the number one destination wedding location in the United States with an average of one hundred twenty thousand ceremonies per year. That's more than twenty-three hundred weddings per week.

I'm a pro at managing grumpy grooms, high emotions, meddling family members, day-of-ceremony chaos, and any unforeseen problems that might occur for the frazzled bride-to-be, and I have been working my tail off, trying to climb my way to the top.

Needless to say, your girl is exhausted.

So, for the first time since I started this gig, I'm taking a much-needed break. December is the slowest month for nuptials, and after what was a record-breaking year for spring and summer weddings, I cleared my calendar, much to my boss's dismay, and packed my bags to spend the holidays with my family. I haven't done this in years.

My cousin Norah and her husband, Sammy's, November wedding was my last one of the year. She wanted a true Vegas experience, complete with an Elvis impersonator serenading the couple as they embarked on their first dance. So, I booked

a beautiful, rustic ceremony for them at The Glass Garden. It's gorgeous and, most importantly, a climate-controlled outdoor venue right on the Las Vegas Strip with a glass ceiling, so the night sky can twinkle down on the couple and their guests.

It wasn't my usual luxe, over-the-top event, but it was romantic and intimate, and the reception was so much fun.

The entire family flew in for the wedding and then spent a week celebrating in Vegas. I hooked them all up with the best tickets in town and showed them the highlights of Sin City. In return, my cousin Keller's girlfriend, Willa, offered me a complimentary four-week stay at the inn she owns in Lake Mistletoe as a thank-you.

Aunt Trixie has worked at the Gingerbread Inn—once owned by her best friend, Wilhemina, before her granddaughter, Willa, inherited it last year—since we were children. She used to send my mother and me pictures and postcards, and I always wanted to visit, but we never did.

So, I'm taking Willa up on her offer, and here I am, finally ready to get my holly and jolly on in Lake Mistletoe.



“Thank you for letting me stay through the holidays,” I tell Willa as she hands me the keys.

“We're happy to have you. Besides, I was so impressed with the job you did on Norah's wedding that I intend to pick your brain for ideas for the Gingerbread Inn's new event venue while you're here, so it was kind of a selfish offer.”

I wrap my fingers around the brass key ring and smile. “New event venue? How exciting.”

“Yeah, I have this grand vision of hosting weddings, holiday balls, corporate galas, and even sweet-sixteen parties and proms in Grammy's garden. After seeing the chapel where Norah and Sammy said *I do*, I was inspired to create the same type of space here,” she gushes.

“Well, I’m at your disposal. Pick away.”

She smiles. “I promise it won’t be like work. I want you to rest and rejuvenate, but I’d welcome your professional opinion on a few details.”

I need this vacation. The wedding season completely depleted me this year. I’m ready to relax and soak up some downtime with family and newfound friends, but the thought of talking shop doesn’t bother me in the least.

“You’re in room 205. It’s on the second floor to the left. Dinner is served at six, and I think I caught a whiff of our chef, Alice’s, famous apple dumplings baking earlier, so you are in for a treat. They’re Keller’s favorite,” Willa informs.

My mouth waters. Dinners usually consist of takeout for one from one of the restaurants in the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino that houses the office of Perfect Princess Event and Concierge Services.

“I can’t wait. Uncle Bob raves about Alice’s and Trixie’s home cooking. Where is Keller anyway? Aunt Trixie said he would be here.”

“He is. He and his friend are outside somewhere. I conned them into doing some maintenance work for me today.”

“Conned, huh?”

She grins. “More like I very politely asked Keller, and he conned Bran.”

Uncle Bob comes bounding down the hall with my suitcase, and Willa asks him to take it to my room.

A petite woman rounds the corner from the office.

“Wait,” she calls.

“Hannah, this is Annette. She works here at the inn,” Willa introduces her.

“Hi,” I greet.

“It’s nice to meet you. Trixie told me you were coming, but I had you marked for arriving on Saturday.”

“Yeah, my Friday afternoon wedding canceled because the groom ran off with one of the bridesmaids, so I flew in a day early. I hope that’s okay?”

She gasps. “That’s awful.”

I nod. “It happens more often than you’d think.”

“Well, we’re happy to have you here an extra day. I’ll just move some things around.” She starts typing on the keyboard.

“I’m sorry to cause trouble.”

She waves me off. “No trouble at all. I’ll put you in room 310 since the Jenkins just vacated 205, and it still needs a good cleaning. I’ll move the Georges to that room for their stay.”

“Thank goodness I have you to keep me straight, Annette,” Willa says.

She takes the key I have and switches it for the new key. “You’ll love it. It has a much better view of the lake, and it’s so quiet on the third floor. Plus, all the bathrooms up there have already been upgraded.”

“An upgrade? Lucky me.”

“The tree and ornaments for your room will be delivered tomorrow,” Annette states.

“Tree?”

“Yes. We have a big tree down here by the fireplace, and we all trim it together, but each guest room gets its own miniature tree, and we supply a wooden trunk of ornaments, so you can decorate it yourself. We also deliver fresh-baked gingerbread cookies every night at turndown service. If you want milk or cocoa though, you have to come down to the living room and mingle with everyone,” she adds.

Willa leans in and whispers, “That one is Trixie’s rule. She wants everyone to feel like a part of the family.”

“That’s quite festive. Thank you both,” I say.

“You’re welcome. You’re going to have the best time here,” Willa assures me.

I make my way up the staircase behind Uncle Bob. The inn is so quaint. With its warm tones and comfy decor, it is the opposite of the opulence of the resort hotel where I spend most of my days off in a bikini, sipping cocktails in a cabana by the pool.

I'm not complaining. There are worse ways to spend time than lounging at a luxury resort. I have a great life, but lately, I've been stuck in a rut. Every day is the same. Booze, gambling, glitz, and glamour. Dapper men throwing spa days and shopping sprees at their young paramours, so they can spend their days and nights in a dark room, full of sunglasses-wearing, cigar-smoking high rollers. That, and the frat boys losing their money either at the slot machines or the strip club and expelling the rot-gut liquor, which they consumed during a seventy-two-hour drink-a-thon, into the potted plants by the pool as I try to relax.

Hopefully, this time off will be just the reset I need.

He plops the suitcase on the big king-size four-poster bed. "There you go. I'll let you get settled in."

"Thank you, Uncle Bob."

I shut the door behind him and turn to take a good look at my home away from home. The bed looks cozy. There is a little sitting area to the left with a chaise lounge and a side table placed in front of an Amish electric fireplace. A small desk is tucked in the far corner with Gingerbread Inn letterhead and a variety of colored pens. The nightstand to the right of the bed holds a rustic, tall bronze lamp with a holly-print lampshade. Two bottles of water and an ice bucket sit beside the television that is perched upon a beautifully carved live-edge stand.

That must be Keller's handiwork.

My cousin is the owner of Keller Harris Design Studio. He makes custom hand-carved furniture, and he is a master craftsman.

I unpack my suitcase and hang my clothes in the mini walk-in closet.

I carry my toiletries into the attached bathroom. It has a small glassed shower and a large claw-foot bathtub. A basket wrapped in cellophane rests on a stool next to the tub.

The notecard reads, *Hello from our staff. We hope you have a holly, jolly, and relaxing stay. Please enjoy this gift and our sincere gratitude for choosing to spend your holidays with us.*

I remove the twist tie, and a whiff of mint and spices escapes. The content of the basket includes a soy gingerbread candle, a mistletoe bath bomb, peppermint lip balm, a lavender body lotion, a bath pillow, a robe, and a pair of memory foam slippers.

How thoughtful. I should totally make these for the bridal suites at the hotel.

Deciding that a long, hot soak is exactly what I need after a day of travel, I turn the water on and let the tub fill while I undress and pull my hair into a topknot.

I place the terry-cloth robe on the bed, grab my phone, and pull up my meditation app. Then, I return to drop the bath bomb into the water and watch as it fizzes and fills the room with a peaceful aroma of cinnamon. I use the provided matches to light the candle and place it on the stool along with one of the bottles of water.

Once the tub is full, I turn off the faucets, pop my earbuds in, and hit play on my iPhone. The sound of a babbling brook fills my ears as I sink into the warm depths.

I close my eyes and let the tranquil water ease my achy, travel-fatigued muscles.

Bliss.

This is definitely what I needed.

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About the author



Amber Kelly is a romance author that calls North Carolina home. She has been a avid reader from a young age and you could always find her with her nose in a book completely enthralled in an adventure. With the support of her husband and family, in 2018, she decided to finally give a voice to the stories in her head and her debut novel, *Both of Me* was born. You can connect with Amber on Facebook at [facebook.com/AuthorAmberKelly](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorAmberKelly), on IG @authoramberkelly, on Twitter @AuthorAmberKell or via her website www.authoramberkelly.com